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“EVERYTHING LOOKS DIFFERENT UP CLOSE”  
PERCEPTION IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *ORYX AND CRAKE*  
AND *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD*

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Jennifer Nessel Cassidy

August 2013

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### Abstract

In the first two books of her MaddAdam series (a projected trilogy), Margaret Atwood explores a series of events from three very different perspectives. A close reading of the two texts suggests that the specific focalizers chosen, and their very different ways of perceiving the world around them, are central issues in the novels. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood establishes the apocalypse as a problem of dystopian vision through the book's deeply flawed focalizer. In *The Year of the Flood* two alternative visions are offered in order to rehabilitate the perceptual problems of the first text. In the three chapters of this paper, I will explore the devices used to establish each focalizer's specific vision, the ways in which each focalizer views apocalypse, and the relationship of each focalizer to the utopian perspective that appears poised to redeem dystopia and apocalypse.

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## Introduction

This analysis centers on the first two books of Margaret Atwood's MaddAdam trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). The third book of the trilogy has yet to be published (September 2013). Both novels take place in a post-apocalyptic future, and both novels include flashbacks to the dystopian society that existed before the apocalypse. The first text, *Oryx and Crake*, is told from the perspective of Snowman, who believes himself to be the only survivor of a worldwide pandemic. Snowman's story consists of two narratives: his struggle for survival in the post-apocalyptic world, and the story of his life before the apocalypse, when he was called Jimmy. Jimmy lives inside the Compounds, where the elite members of his society are employed by powerful corporations to come up with increasingly ambitious scientific breakthroughs for the corporations to sell. The rest of society lives in the "pleeblands," the lawless environment outside the Compounds, where life is less luxurious and more difficult. Jimmy suffers through an isolated childhood, watching the increasingly vicious fights between his work-obsessed father and his unhappy mother. Jimmy's mother eventually abandons the family. When Jimmy is a teenager, he meets the enigmatic Glenn, and the two of them become friends. They spend their time largely unsupervised, watching pornography and executions on the Internet, or playing violent video games. The two are separated when Glenn goes off to a highly competitive college to study science, while Jimmy goes to a lesser school to study advertising. They are reunited as

adults when Glenn, the head of an ambitious scientific project, hires Jimmy to advertise his new product. It is when he goes to work for Glenn, now calling himself Crake, that Jimmy becomes involved with Crake's girlfriend Oryx. Oryx is a former sex worker and both men are in love with her, though her own feelings remain ambiguous throughout the text. She also plays a role in Crake's project, distributing his product around the world. Crake's invention is a pill that supposedly prevents pregnancy and protects the user against sexually transmitted diseases. Unbeknownst to Jimmy and Oryx, however, the pill contains a virulent disease; the distribution of the pill causes a worldwide pandemic that wipes out the vast majority of the human race. The other half of Crake's plan involves a race of genetically modified "new humans," called the Crakers, whom Snowman is responsible for after the apocalypse. Crake intends for these new humans to take the place of humankind, creating a sustainable utopian future. The book ends with Snowman encountering a group of human survivors and deciding whether to approach them as friends or as a potential threat to the Crakers.

*The Year of the Flood* presents a different perspective, telling the story of the apocalypse and the post-apocalypse from two new viewpoints. Toby and Ren, the protagonists of the story, live in the pleeblands. Both are members of the God's Gardeners, a religious cult that emphasizes living sustainably and in harmony with nature, ideals at odds with the values of the larger dystopian society. Toby becomes a leader of the religion, called an Eve, and learns that the Gardeners are gathering information about the corrupt actions of the corporations and the scientists who work for them. The God's Gardeners are both a religion and a resistance movement. The religion

also predicts the apocalypse, preparing its members for a coming “Waterless Flood” that will destroy most of humanity. Toby survives the Waterless Flood by barricading herself in a high-end spa. Ren spends her childhood with the Gardeners, but returns to the Compounds when she is thirteen. She attends high school with Jimmy and Glenn, and becomes involved in a romantic relationship with Jimmy, though the relationship does not work out. After she is forced to drop out of college for financial reasons, Ren ends up as a dancer and prostitute at a high-end club in the pleeblands called Scales and Tails. She survives the apocalypse because she is locked inside a “clean room” in the club, having suffered a rip in the bodysuit designed to protect her from contracting a disease in the course of her work. Ren is eventually rescued from the clean room, called the “Sticky Zone,” by her friend Amanda. The two of them are later kidnapped and repeatedly raped by a gang of criminals who have also survived the apocalypse. Ren escapes and is reunited with Toby at the day spa. The two of them leave the spa to rescue Amanda, and encounter a larger group of Gardeners who have survived the apocalypse. Ren and Toby succeed in rescuing Amanda and taking the criminals prisoner. During the course of the rescue, they encounter an injured and incoherent Snowman, who has decided to murder the surviving humans before they can attack the Crakers. Ren prevents Snowman from killing anyone, and the book ends with the Crakers approaching the surviving group of humans.

In these two texts, Margaret Atwood embarks on a project of envisioning dystopia, apocalypse, and utopia. Together, the two texts offer three different views of the same events, establishing perception as a central issue for the series. In *Oryx and*

*Crake*, Atwood poses a problem: she presents apocalypse as a crisis of perception, specifically, of dystopian perception. The embodiment of this flawed perception is Snowman/Jimmy; Jimmy's limited view of the world is directly linked to his inability to prevent Crake from unleashing his pandemic. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood presents two alternatives to the dystopian perspective embodied by Snowman/Jimmy: she introduces Toby and the God's Gardeners, whose view of the world is set up in direct opposition to Snowman/Jimmy's dystopian view, and Ren, whose hopeful optimism represents a utopian perspective. *The Year of the Flood* serves to propose a potential solution to the problem posed by *Oryx and Crake*: the crisis precipitated by Snowman's dystopian vision begins to be rehabilitated by Toby and Ren's alternative, less flawed, visions.

In Chapter One, which treats the three focalizers in Atwood's novels, I will demonstrate that each focalizer offers a different view of the world, and that these views are directly related to each focalizer's experience of dystopia, apocalypse, and utopia. Snowman/Jimmy embraces his dystopian society and adopts its view of the world. His society and its worldview are dystopian because they reflect a possible future whose values are at odds with the values of the implied reader: the society encourages innovation and progress without ever acknowledging the costs of either. This blindness is evident in Snowman/Jimmy's perspective. He is obsessed with consumption and his own comfort, and is unwilling to engage with the consequences of his lifestyle. He insulates himself both physically, with his life inside the walls of the Compounds, and psychologically, with his refusal to address or engage with the rampant problems in his



society. Snowman/Jimmy's focalization reflects this faulty circumscription; the flaws that quickly become evident in his narration draw attention to the incomplete nature of his constructed narrative about the world. Snowman/Jimmy is associated with a flawed, dystopian perspective; he simply refuses to see important aspects of his world. Toby's perspective is established in direct opposition to Snowman/Jimmy's view. Her narration contains much of the same imagery as Snowman/Jimmy's narration, but her view of the world is very different. Toby sees the world from outside both the mental and physical walls that insulate Snowman/Jimmy: she lives outside of the Compounds, and she is associated with the God's Gardeners, a group whose values are a reaction against their consumption-obsessed society. Where Snowman actively constructs a limited (and thus flawed) view of his world, Toby relentlessly engages her world with a critical eye. She sees more than Snowman does, and she sees more critically than Snowman does. Toby's perspective is not utopian—it is too critical and pragmatic to embody a hopeful view of the future—so I will refer to it as anti-dystopian, placing it in direct opposition to Snowman's dystopian view. Ren, the other focalizer introduced in *The Year of the Flood*, differs from both Snowman/Jimmy and Toby in her view of the world. Ren moves in both worlds, spending her childhood with the God's Gardeners and her adolescence inside the Compounds. In engaging with both sets of values, Ren sees the world from her own optimistic, hopeful perspective. Ren's capacity to see the best in both the world and the people around her marks her as a utopian character. Her central, integrative view offers a way forward from dystopia and apocalypse.

In Chapter Two, I will address the idea of apocalypse and discuss how each focalizer experiences it differently. The apocalyptic event in the text, Crake's worldwide pandemic, demonstrates (in spectacular fashion) the unsustainability of the dystopian viewpoint, even as it underscores the divergent perceptions available in the two texts. Because Snowman/Jimmy ignores the realities that underlie his dystopian society, he is totally unprepared for the fact of the apocalypse; he shuts it out, responding only to its immediate impact on him, and not to its broader implications for the human race as a whole. The apocalypse appears to force a reconsideration of Jimmy's flawed view of the world, especially his inaccurate assessment of Crake, but in truth, Snowman's perspective is plagued by the same flaws that exist in Jimmy's perspective. Snowman/Jimmy is so thoroughly grounded in his dystopian view that not even apocalypse can make him recognize the extent of his self-deception. Toby and Ren, on the other hand, cope much better with the fact of the apocalypse. Toby, due to her position on the fringes of Jimmy's dystopian society, sees that the society is unsustainable long before the apocalypse actually occurs. In addition, her association with the God's Gardeners means that she is exposed to the Gardener notion of the Waterless Flood, so her worldview has room in it for an apocalyptic event. The pandemic, therefore, does not force Toby to reconsider her perspective; she views the apocalypse with the same rational scrutiny she applies to other aspects of her world. Ren is also exposed to the idea of the Waterless Flood during her time with the Gardeners, so she is able to maintain her existing perspective during and after the apocalypse. Ren reacts to the apocalypse with her usual optimism, seeing a way

forward when the other focalizers cannot. Ren's sense of hope, present even in horrifying circumstances, sets her apart and marks her viewpoint as utopian.

In Chapter Three, I will address some general trends regarding utopia in terms of the perspectives of the three focalizers. Because the final book in the trilogy has not yet been released, it is impossible to speak with authority on the way in which the series will be concluded, but it is possible to identify some threads in the first two texts that may point toward a notion of utopia. It becomes clear over the course of the first two novels, for example, that Snowman/Jimmy is too closely associated with a dystopian perspective to have utopian potential. The flaws in his perception make it impossible for him to envision a future, and his deteriorating health at the end of *The Year of the Flood* seems to suggest that he is not meant to survive to help construct a better world. Toby, in contrast, has much to offer in a potential future, though it is not until she reunites with Ren that she begins to see utopian possibilities. The change in her language at this point suggests that she does possess utopian potential. Ren's hopeful perspective identifies her as the embodiment of a utopian view in the text; she never has any trouble envisioning a future, and her optimistic assessments of the world and the people around her are supported by events in the text. At the end of *The Year of the Flood*, it is Ren's hopeful, utopian view that is emphasized over Snowman's dystopian one: the second text successfully poses a potential solution for the crisis of perception established in *Oryx and Crake*. Over the course of the two novels, Atwood's dystopia reveals both a scathing critique of our current society and a range of potential ways forward, both for the protagonists of her books and for us.

## Chapter One—Focalization: Who Sees, and How?

Atwood's focalizers are key to understanding the two novels and how they function. A careful study of the devices that create each focalizer's perspective can help to establish why Atwood chose these particular protagonists and what they indicate in terms of different visions of apocalypse and utopia. Atwood begins with a focalizer who is flawed because of his sheltered position in his society. Snowman/Jimmy suffers from a fractured and limited vision, best displayed by the character's frequent questions about, and revisions and corrections of, his narration. These devices reveal a perspective that is unstable, self-deluding, and narrow. In the second book of the series Atwood introduces two new focalizers who begin to recuperate Snowman/Jimmy's flawed visions. Toby is set up as a clear contrast to Snowman/Jimmy through the use of imagery that appears in both texts. Questions, dramatic irony, and the straightforward presentation of Toby's story similarly place her in opposition to Snowman/Jimmy, creating a perspective that is reliable, rational, and linear. The only flaw in Toby's focalization is that she lacks confidence in her own perceptions, frequently expressing doubt where it is unnecessary. This does not make her less trustworthy as a focalizer, but it does point to a potential problem in her vision of utopia (an issue I will return to at the end of this paper). The other focalizer presented in *The Year of the Flood*, Ren, is differentiated from both previous focalizers in a variety of ways. She is the only focalizer who speaks in the first

person, and the temporal construction of her story differs from the other two. Her use of the first person, her optimistic interpretations of the words of others, and the juxtaposition between childlike syntax and sexual imagery in her language all combine to create a focalizer who offers a middle way between Snowman and Toby. Ren's central perspective, spanning both Snowman's dystopian world and Toby's anti-dystopian one, presents a possible path forward.

### Snowman/Jimmy: The Man Who Shuts Things Out

Snowman begins the first novel as the narrator/focalizer, relating the events of his life after the apocalypse. As the book continues, the chapters (containing multiple sections) alternate between present tense, indicating that Snowman is both narrating and focalizing, and past tense, indicating that Snowman is narrating, but that his younger self, Jimmy, is focalizing. The book contains two narratives, located at different points in time, unfolding side by side, each in roughly chronological order. The chapters of the novel alternate between these two narratives until the end of the text, when the alternation becomes more frequent and the two stories reach the same temporal moment. In an attempt to maintain clarity, I will use the name Snowman when I refer to sections focalized through him or when he interjects in sections focalized through Jimmy (indicated by the use of present tense), and I will use the name Jimmy when I refer to sections obviously focalized by Jimmy (which occur in past tense). The lines between the two are often blurred, but I will try to stay consistent. The first narrative, Snowman's struggle to survive after the apocalypse, takes place in an eternal present, that is, events

are concurrent with the narrating instant. The second narrative is an extended analepsis, defined by Gérard Genette as, “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” (40). In this analepsis, focalized through Jimmy, Snowman begins with his childhood and works his way up to the narrating instant. These chapters are set in a time frame largely prior to the apocalypse and concern Jimmy’s unwitting role in bringing it about. It is important to distinguish between the narrator (always Snowman) and the focalizer (either Snowman or Jimmy) because, as Genette points out, “The narrator almost always ‘knows’ more than the hero, even if he himself is the hero, and therefore for the narrator focalization through the hero is a restriction of field just as artificial in the first person as in the third” (194). This restriction of field is important; it is through Jimmy’s eyes that we get a sense of the skewed value system that reigns in Atwood’s dystopia, and Snowman’s sense of this system after the apocalypse is less useful for this purpose. Snowman’s revised view of his world cannot express its true horrors in the way that Jimmy’s view, embedded entirely in past moments, can. In both narrations the focalization is internal, though Snowman refers to both himself and Jimmy in the third person rather than first. The use of the third person creates some distance between the implied reader and Snowman, and between Snowman and Jimmy, that would not exist had the focalizers’ thoughts and feelings been presented in the first person. This space is important to Atwood’s project with these focalizers. As Seymour Chatman points out, “Access to a character’s consciousness is the standard entree to his point of view, the usual and quickest means by which we come to identify with him. Learning his thoughts insures an intimate connection” (157). Despite

presenting Snowman as the narrator/focalizer of the text, Atwood does not create an “intimate connection” between him and the implied reader. She subverts the “usual and quickest means” to create identification with a character by presenting his thoughts in the third person instead of the first. In addition, she reinforces Snowman’s rejection of himself as Jimmy with the same technique; Snowman disavows Jimmy’s experience of the world because he believes that Jimmy is blind and foolish leading up to the apocalypse, but he fails to recognize that he still possesses many of the same flaws. Snowman and Jimmy, despite the fracture in identity caused by the apocalypse, are more alike than Snowman realizes; the flaws in their focalization are relatively continuous. Because Snowman and Jimmy are both unstable in their focalization, the distance between the two of them and between Snowman and the implied reader is necessary to allow their flaws in perception to become evident. The distance I refer to here is the impression, created by the use of the third person, that despite being granted access to Snowman/Jimmy’s consciousness, the implied reader still views the character from an outside perspective. This outside perspective prevents the kind of identification that Chatman refers to; when Ren is introduced in the next book as a focalizer using the first person (seen from an inside perspective), Chatman’s “intimate connection” is created. Thus the use of the third person allows space for the recognition that Snowman/Jimmy may be presenting a flawed narrative. The two focalizers betray their unreliability despite themselves; as Genette points out, “Narrative always says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says” (198). It is never explicitly stated in the text that Jimmy and Snowman have serious flaws as focalizers, but the text “makes known” their

instability, self-delusion, and limited vision through the repeated use of interrogatives, revisions, and parenthetical corrections.

One of the reasons that Snowman and Jimmy make for flawed focalizers is that their memories of events—the only sources of information in the text—are potentially inaccurate. This inaccuracy is emphasized through their use of (and responses to) questions. Both Snowman and Jimmy work hard to construct narratives about their lives that exclude uncomfortable truths; this tendency makes it impossible for them to view their histories accurately. A good example occurs when Snowman reminisces about the live-in nanny he had as a child: “When she was there, she’d always remember his birthday; she’d make a cake, or maybe she’d buy one, but anyway there it would be, a genuine cake, with icing and candles—*isn’t that true?*” (*Oryx and Crake* 50). This statement, instead of establishing a fact of Snowman/Jimmy’s childhood, does the opposite: it undermines both the actual events related and Snowman’s memory of them. The first part of the statement is innocuous enough, asserting only that Jimmy’s nanny always remembered his birthday. The next section offers multiple possibilities for how this occurred, offering that she made a cake, or possibly bought one. The uncertainty introduced by the multiple options infects the first part of the sentence, undermining the fact that she ‘always’ remembered his birthday; if he cannot remember the way in which she remembered his birthday, perhaps his memory that she always did so is also flawed. Finally, the second half of the sentence (after the semicolon), which dismisses the proliferation of options as unimportant and asserts the truth of the “genuine” cake, falls apart as soon as it reaches the closing question mark. Snowman’s plaintive question of



“isn’t that true?” negates the certainty of “always,” and foregrounds the proliferation of options dismissed by “but anyway.” The sudden question undermines the entire recollection and indicates that perhaps Snowman asserts the truth of his memories too freely; he begins the statement confidently but grows increasingly uncertain of its validity as he digs into the details. This suggests that many things that he believes to be true could change or disintegrate entirely under scrutiny. Questions serve to challenge Snowman/Jimmy’s constructed narrative, calling attention to the flaws and exclusions in it. This is evident as Snowman narrates Jimmy’s adolescence:

Several years passed. They must have passed, thinks Snowman: he can’t actually remember much about them...Did he have zits, was that it? He can’t remember having any; though, as he recalls, the faces of his rivals were covered in them. (OC 59)

Here, another interrogative calls attention to a gap in his memory, and his supplied answer is telling. Snowman asserts that he doesn’t remember having any zits as a teenager, but he does recall his rivals being covered in them. This is a lightly humorous way to suggest that Snowman constructs narratives that are self-serving. While Snowman believes that he has overcome Jimmy’s flaws in perception, questions and answers reveal that he continues to lie to himself about his past. Snowman and Jimmy reveal the same limitations in their focalization: they both cling to constructed versions of their narrations that leave out a great deal.

In addition to internal interrogatives, or questions asked of himself, Snowman also deals with external interrogatives, questions provided by the hallucinated voices that hound him throughout the text. These questions often emphasize something that Snowman does not particularly want to face, serving the purpose of goading the character

into revelations he would rather avoid. This scrutiny threatens Snowman/Jimmy's constructed narrative, emphasizing its gaps and flaws. When Snowman contemplates returning to the "Paradise Dome," for example, he has an internal debate about returning to a location that was the site of Oryx's and Crake's deaths and the source of the global pandemic:

*But you don't want to go back there, do you?* a soft voice whispers.

"Not particularly."

*Because?*

"Because nothing."

*Go on, say it.*

"I forget."

*No, you don't. You've forgotten nothing.*

"I'm a sick man," he pleads. "I'm dying of scurvy! Go away!" (OC 152)

Snowman does not want to return there because the most traumatizing events of his life occurred in the dome. He tries to stay away from the dome in memory, in addition to being reluctant to make the physical journey there. Snowman/Jimmy conflates physical and mental space (a flaw in perspective that persists when Jimmy views the apocalypse). When Snowman's hallucination presses him to acknowledge his trauma, he falls back on a series of evasions, claiming there is nothing to tell, then claiming he has forgotten what happened there, and finally diverting the question entirely by claiming he is ill and dying. The fact that a hallucination is required to goad Snowman into honesty illustrates that he is not as different from Jimmy as he believes he is; the interrogatives undermine his attempts to construct a better, more sanitized version of his narrative. He would prefer to continue to ignore the parts of his past that make him look the worst, but the questions asked by the voices he hears continue to emphasize precisely those aspects of his life, underscoring the instability of his constructed history. Jimmy evinces the same impulse;

he reacts similarly when faced with questions he would prefer not to address. Crake reveals to Jimmy that Crake's father was murdered for discovering that one of the major medical corporations had embedded diseases in their vitamins to ensure a steady flow of customers. He attempts to link this revelation with the disappearance of Jimmy's mother:

Finally Crake said, 'How come your mother took off the way she did?'  
'I don't know,' said Jimmy. 'A lot of reasons. I don't want to talk about it.'

'I bet your dad was in on something like that. Some scam like the HelthWyzer one. I bet she found out.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Jimmy. 'I think she got involved with some God's Gardeners-type outfit. Some bunch of wackos. Anyway. My dad wouldn't have...'

'I bet she knew they were starting to know she knew.'

'I'm really tired,' said Jimmy. He yawned, and suddenly it was true. 'I think I'll turn in.' (OC 213)

Crake's speculation touches on an aspect of Jimmy's life that he tries very hard not to consider, so he does not react well to his friend's suggestion. He, like his later alter ego Snowman, provides a series of evasions to try to shut down the conversation, from stating that he does not want to discuss it, to offering an alternative explanation for his mother's disappearance, to claiming that he is tired, at which point he actually becomes tired. His desire to avoid the implications of Crake's suggestion is so strong that he creates a physical reaction to extricate himself from the situation. This parallels Snowman's spurious claims that he is a sick man who is dying of scurvy; both incarnations of the character attempt to shut out difficult truths by any means necessary. Snowman/Jimmy purposely limits his perspective to avoid engaging with difficult or uncomfortable information. One consequence of this rejection of information that this conversation reveals is Jimmy's focus on the personal rather than the political. Crake tries to make a

point about the widespread corruption in the Compound system, but Jimmy's responses show that he only sees the implications of Crake's point that relate to his parents; he is totally absorbed in how Crake's point reflects on them. Jimmy fails to recognize that the personal issues in his family are related to larger societal problems. His refusal to engage with his society—to see how events fit together to create a wider perspective—creates a major flaw in his focalization. Snowman and Jimmy inadvertently reveal the limitations of their focalization to the implied reader through asking and answering problematic questions. Other aspects of Snowman/Jimmy's language also betray him.

Another technique that reveals the unstable nature of Snowman's narrative is his habit of introducing revisions and parenthetical corrections into the text. This calls further attention to the instability of Snowman/Jimmy's carefully crafted narrative—if it must constantly be revised and corrected, it cannot be considered an objective report of events. The revisions and corrections also underscore Jimmy's self-deception and the extent to which Snowman has not yet overcome its legacy. Many of these corrections are minor, but the number of times they occur in the text emphasizes the technique. For example, in describing the Craker children and their swimming, Snowman says, "they're unwary; unlike Snowman, who won't dip a toe in there even at night, when the sun can't get at him. Revision: especially at night" (*OC* 6). This automatic overture to revision is hardly vital to the story, but it does reveal the pattern many of these revisions take: Snowman introduces an idea—here, the notion that he won't go swimming even at night, when he is unlikely to get sunburned—and then corrects his statement to something less flattering to himself—in this case, he especially won't go swimming at night, presumably because he

is frightened. A few pages later, Snowman finds it necessary to correct himself again: “‘Now I’m alone,’ he says out loud. ‘All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea.’ One more scrap from the burning scrapbook in his head. Revision: seashore” (OC 10). Here, he quotes from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” making a connection between himself, surrounded by the remains of the human race, and the ancient mariner, surrounded by the dead men on his ship. Snowman conflates his life with fiction, overlooking the obvious differences between his situation and the Mariner’s, and blurring the lines between entertainment and his lived experience. When Snowman then corrects himself to more accurately reflect that he is standing on the seashore and is not actually at sea, the prosaic revision severs the link between Snowman and the ancient mariner. Once again, his narrative is revised to reveal a less flattering truth: that Snowman’s journey is hardly epic, and that he has perhaps not yet earned the right to be redeemed. These first two instances call attention to Snowman’s self-deception, his desire to rehabilitate himself through the telling of his story. Further revisions illustrate the extent to which Snowman remains unable to be honest with himself. He is interrupted by one of his auditory hallucinations, and it takes him a moment to place the voice:

*Oh, nice abs!* comes the whisper, interrupting him. *Honey, just lie back.* Who is it? Some tart he once bought. Revision, professional sex skills expert. A trapeze artist, rubber spine, spangles glued onto her like the scales of a fish. (OC 11)

Snowman begins by identifying the voice as belonging to a “tart,” but then shies away from the tawdry implications of this term and replaces it with “professional sex skills expert.” This revision is intended to obscure, rather than clarify reality, but in this case, the revision only serves to emphasize the hollow quality of the euphemism, drawing more

attention to the unpleasant reality of the situation. The implication is that Snowman wants to obfuscate the unsavory aspects of his sexual history; he still refuses to engage with the darker aspects of his past. Snowman tries to shut out the harsher implications of his experiences, but through his revisions he betrays himself.

Snowman also inserts parenthetical corrections into the text, both when he is the focalizer and when the story is seen through Jimmy's eyes. Jimmy describes the fraught relationship between his parents and wonders whether his father was having an affair with his laboratory assistant, Ramona. He decides that his father was not having an affair because, "his father (or so he believes) was too awkward and bad at lying to have become involved in full-fledged treachery and betrayal without Jimmy's mother noticing" (*OC* 66). Jimmy focalizes for much of this sentence, but the present tense in the parenthetical seems to indicate that Snowman comments there. Interestingly, he does not use this interjection to correct Jimmy's view of the situation, but to emphasize that he continues to maintain what may be a flawed perception of his father. The present tense shows that Snowman still holds this belief, and its position in the sentence calls the accuracy of the belief into question. The factual nature of the statement is disrupted by the emphasis on Snowman's belief in his father's incompetence at lying. This statement, in combination with other statements that Jimmy/Snowman makes about his father, suggests that Jimmy/Snowman refuses to engage with potentially uncomfortable truths about his parents. Another parenthetical is inserted on the following page, where Snowman takes over from Jimmy as focalizer and muses over this potential affair:

Not that Snowman passes judgment. He knows how these things go, or used to go. He's a grown-up now, with much worse things on his conscience. So who is he to blame them? (He blames them.) (*OC* 67)

Here, both a question and a parenthetical serve to betray Snowman. He insists that he does not pass judgment, and admits that he has done much worse things than his father and Ramona did. He goes on to state that he is in no position to blame them, and ends with a rhetorical question emphasizing the hypocrisy of being angry. The parenthetical, however, undermines his pretense to maturity, showing that despite his claims to the contrary, he does pass judgment on his father and Ramona. The parenthetical is in the present tense, suggesting that even after the destruction of humanity, Snowman continues to hold this grudge. It is not a flattering admission, and it emphasizes how tightly Snowman still clings to the simplistic lines between good and bad established in his childhood; he is angry at the same people now that he was angry with when he was a child. He clings to the same limited vision of reality that he had when he was younger. He is not, as he claims, “a grown-up now.” His resentment toward his father returns in another parenthetical correction later in the text, focalized through Jimmy. Jimmy faces the news that his father and Ramona, now married, are trying to have a baby and are considering using some of the new technologies available to customize the child. He thinks to himself, “they’d load this hypothetical wonderkid up with their bloated expectations until the poor tyke burst under the strain. Jimmy didn’t envy him. (He envied him.)” (*OC* 250). Here, both the assertion and the correction occur in past tense, suggesting that this entire statement is focalized through Jimmy. This makes sense, as the destruction of humanity has eliminated the need for Jimmy to feel envious of his hypothetical sibling. Regardless, this statement is similar to the corrections that are typically focalized through Snowman. In an attempt to minimize the effect of this

unwelcome news, Jimmy tries to distance himself from it, emphasizing the negative aspects of the situation in the form of “bloated expectations.” He then insists that he doesn’t care about the child, that he doesn’t feel jealousy at the love and attention this hypothetical baby will receive. His parenthetical correction exposes his vast need for affection and his desire to return to childhood, to once again be at the center of a family unit. The correction also exposes his attempt at self-deception; Jimmy simultaneously insists on his lack of jealousy and admits that he feels envy. These parenthetical corrections call attention to themselves with their blending of the two timelines and their emphasis on Jimmy/Snowman’s self-deception. This trait remains constant even as the focalization changes. The corrections reflect a tension at the heart of the narrative between what the two focalizers try not to know and what they nevertheless know to be true. Jimmy and Snowman both exist in a liminal space where they simultaneously recognize and reject unflattering truths, and the parenthetical corrections in the text reflect this fact. The corrections make it difficult for Snowman/Jimmy to maintain his constructed view of reality; they function to draw attention to flaws in his narration. In fact, these corrections are explicitly emphasized in the text. Snowman discusses why he always refers to his childhood friend Glenn by his later name, Crake:

Snowman has trouble thinking of Crake as Glenn, so thoroughly has Crake’s later persona blotted out his earlier one. The Crake side of him must have been there from the beginning, thinks Snowman: there was never any real Glenn, *Glenn* was only a disguise. So in Snowman’s reruns of the story, Crake is never Glenn, and never *Glenn-alias-Crake* or *Crake/Glenn*, or *Glenn, later Crake*. He is always just Crake, pure and simple.

Anyway, *Crake* saves time, thinks Snowman. Why hyphenate, why parenthesize, unless absolutely necessary? (*OC* 71)

This passage encapsulates many of the problems that appear in both narrations. The



notion of memory being flawed is presented in the first line, where Snowman mentions how “thoroughly has Crake’s later persona blotted out his earlier one.” Snowman can only see Glenn through the lens of his actions as Crake, suggesting that any recollection of him is likely skewed by hindsight. In much the same way, Snowman’s reconstruction of his history can only be viewed through the lens of Crake’s apocalypse; his view is constrained by that event. Snowman also refers to his “reruns of the story,” a phrase that indicates a multiplicity of stories instead of a single story, proliferating options instead of clear fact. The use of the word “reruns” also points to a blurring of the lines between mass media and real life—a flaw in perspective that will influence Snowman’s view of the apocalypse. The last line of this section calls attention to the parenthetical corrections scattered throughout the text. Snowman refuses to hyphenate or parenthesize about Crake’s name, insisting that these techniques should be saved for when they are “absolutely necessary.” That designation draws attention to the places where Snowman does choose to parenthesize, and insists that they are absolutely necessary. Once again, the final question in this statement emphasizes the aspects of his narrative that Snowman/Jimmy tries to shut out. The parenthetical corrections reveal elements of Snowman’s and Jimmy’s perspectives that are vital to understanding each character’s position as focalizer. Snowman and Jimmy both suffer from flawed self-deception, simultaneously presenting more flattering versions of themselves and undermining those versions. This simultaneous knowing and not knowing calls into question the stability of the narrative for the reader, and emphasizes the ambiguous nature of its two focalizers.

## Toby: Skeptic and Pragmatist

From the first chapter of *The Year of the Flood*, Toby is associated with Snowman/Jimmy through overlapping imagery and is set forth as a contrasting character. Her stance in the text as a narrator/focalizer is very similar to Snowman's. Toby relates two narratives: one taking place in the narrating instant, and the other set before the apocalypse and working up to the narrative present. She speaks in the present tense for sections after the apocalypse and in the past tense for her analeptic sections, though she shifts entirely to present tense when her past narrative reaches the present and the two narratives merge. She refers to both her present and her past self in the third person, and her focalization shifts between present Toby and past Toby. Her accounts of the past and the present, however, do not contain the same elements that make Snowman's story so ambiguous. Her sections include imagery borrowed from *Oryx and Crake*, questions (used very differently), linear presentation, and dramatic irony. These elements combine to create a perspective that is reliable, straightforward, and rational, sometimes to a fault. Toby represents the opposite end of the spectrum from Snowman and Jimmy, providing a rigorously critical narrative. Snowman and Toby are clearly set up as foils for each other, and Toby's narration begins to recuperate the willful self-deception of Snowman's focalization.

Toby's first section is tied to the first section of *Oryx and Crake* through repeated imagery. She and Snowman see the same things, but they see them differently, suggesting that perception is very much at issue in these two novels. The sections open at the same time: "In the early morning, Toby climbs up to the rooftop to watch the sunrise" (*The*

*Year of the Flood* 3), while “Snowman wakes before dawn” (*OC* 3). Both characters speak of the same towers: Toby says that, “the abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef—bleached and colourless, devoid of life” (*YF* 3) and Snowman says of the sunrise that “the offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it” (*OC* 3). Both focalizers speak of traffic noise, Snowman musing that, “the shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic” (*OC* 3), while Toby says of the birds that, “their small voices are clear and sharp, nails on glass: there’s no longer any sound of traffic to drown them out” (*YF* 3). Both characters reference reefs and birdsong in their comparisons. The images from the opening chapters of both books are the same, but the voices of the focalizers are decidedly different. Toby sees more than Snowman does, and she also sees the world more critically than he does.

While Snowman’s opening chapter repeatedly draws attention to his flawed memory, Toby’s chapter lacks similar mitigating language. Toby’s chapters make use of questions, but they are very different questions from Snowman/Jimmy’s and they have a different effect, stabilizing a sense of Toby’s perspective rather than destabilizing it. Whereas in Snowman’s case, questions are used to call attention to aspects of his past that he would prefer not to address, in Toby’s case, questions are used to illustrate the rigorous rationality with which she approaches the world. Her past tense sections include very few questions, and none that undermine the accuracy of her memories. Her present tense sections include more questions, but they tend to be action-based rather than speculative. For example, in her first chapter Toby identifies the forest nearby as a source

of danger, wondering, “But what kind of danger? She can’t imagine” (*YF* 5). The question is a practical one, related to her continued survival, and her answer demonstrates an unwillingness to speculate without additional information, preferring to leave the question unanswered until she knows more. Even questions in her past tense sections that carry potentially painful implications are addressed rationally instead of evaded or ignored. Toby remembers her father teaching her how to shoot when she was young and she wonders, “Had he wanted a son? Perhaps. What he’d said was that everyone needed to know how to shoot” (*YF* 24). She opens with a question wondering whether her father would have preferred a son, but she doesn’t evince any sort of emotional pain. Her answer to the question indicates that she doesn’t have enough information to say for certain. There is no way for her to answer the question definitively, so she moves on to what she can say for sure, which is what he told her about the situation. Unlike Snowman/Jimmy, Toby addresses the question directly, as best she can, and provides whatever certainty is within her power to provide. She engages critically with her past instead of shutting out painful aspects of it. Inconvenient questions are not required to reveal her motivations; her reasoning is clear and explicit. Questioning, then, serves a different purpose for Toby than it does for Snowman; whereas in Snowman’s narrative, questions are an indication that something is being hidden or denied, in Toby’s narrative, questions are used to interrogate her own approach to the world, including her memories and beliefs.

When Toby speaks about memory or belief, the effect is different from when Snowman speaks about memory or belief. While Snowman’s statements about what he

remembers are used to emphasize the fact that his memories may be inaccurate, Toby's statements about memory (and about belief) serve to establish her as someone whose memories are not at issue. Toby is rigorously critical of what she remembers and what she believes, so she can relate her past without the extensive commentary that characterizes Snowman's narrative. When Toby does call into question the accuracy of her memories, she does so in a way that, paradoxically, only reinforces their clarity. She recalls collecting honey from the God's Gardeners' hives, saying that,

in her memory the whole experience is one of unblemished happiness. She knows she's deceiving herself about that, but she prefers to deceive herself. She desperately needs to believe such pure joy is still possible. (YF 96)

Toby's self-deception is a volitional act, done out of a desire to retain hope in post-apocalypse isolation. She knows and accepts that the memory is inaccurate, and shares that information before relating it. This contrasts with Snowman's narration, in which he exists in a simultaneous state of knowing and not knowing. Toby clearly differentiates between truth and self-deception. Her act of deception builds confidence instead of eroding it because it serves a specific purpose and is admitted to even before the memory is related. Toby's interrogations of belief serve a similar purpose, stabilizing rather than undermining her narrative, and establishing her clear self-awareness. At one point, Toby considers whether or not she still holds a specific belief of the God's Gardeners:

*Vultures are our friends, the Gardeners used to teach. They purify the earth. They are God's necessary dark angels of bodily dissolution. Imagine how terrible it would be if there were no death!*

Do I still believe this? Toby wonders.  
Everything is different up close. (YF 4)

Having survived Crake's pandemic—the only one of the focalizers to have done so

outside of a sealed environment—she questions whether or not she can still take the same redemptive view of death that the Gardeners espouse. Instead of answering with a yes or a no, she remains uncertain, still going through the process of critically engaging with her beliefs. She avoids a direct answer, preferring instead to simply point out that “everything looks different up close.” Toby is uncertain about her narrative because of the skepticism required by her critical perspective, but her uncertainty is unwarranted because of her clear-eyed view of the world. In contrast, Snowman/Jimmy is certain about his narrative, but this certainty is unwarranted because it comes from a lack of engagement with his world. The things that Toby asserts about herself or about other people are supported by the text; indeed, even many of the things that she expresses doubt about are known to be true by the implied reader. Where Snowman and Jimmy err on the side of asserting truth too freely, Toby errs on the side of caution, unnecessarily discounting things that are true. Because Toby is committed to viewing the world as empirically as possible, her focalization does not create the kind of ambiguity that results from Snowman’s flawed focalization. Toby is honest with herself so the reader is given no textual reason to distrust her speech, except in situations where she questions her own sanity.

Toby’s sections contain several instances of dramatic irony, which are used to make it clear that Toby is a more accurate focalizer than she realizes. Toby fears she is going mad at several points, but the implied reader knows she is not, as each of these situations has a practical explanation of which he is already aware. For example, Toby describes a bizarre scene:

At first there was nothing, but then at the far end of the field a strange procession appeared. It seemed to consist entirely of naked people, though one

man walking at the front had clothes on, and some sort of red hat and—could it be?—sunglasses. Behind him there were men and women and children, every known skin colour; as she focused, she could see that several of the naked people had blue abdomens. That was why she's decided it must have been a hallucination: the blueness. And the crystalline, otherworldly singing. (*YF* 164)

Toby assumes she is going mad from isolation because of the more outlandish aspects of the scene, but this procession is recognizable to the reader: it is Jimmy, in his Red Sox cap and sunglasses escorting the Crakers from the Paradise Dome to their new home near the ocean. Instead of indicating that she is having trouble distinguishing between illusion and reality, this moment shows that Toby is quick to interrogate her own perspective, which makes her a more trustworthy focalizer. Her emphasis on accuracy means that she can be relied upon to present a reliable narrative. Her description of the procession that she sees is detailed and precise, but she doubts herself, assuming that nothing so extraordinary could actually exist. Another example of this technique occurs when Toby ventures out into the meadow next to her shelter to collect maggots from a dead boar because she needs the fat they can provide. When she reaches the animal, she finds that it is covered in fern fronds and flowers, seemingly on purpose. She is unnerved by this: “Could the pigs have been having a funeral? Could they be bringing memorial bouquets? She finds this idea truly frightening... ‘You’re mad,’ she says out loud” (*YF* 328). In this case, again, there exists a practical explanation for what Toby assumes is a sign of madness. The reader knows that these animals are genetically modified and have human brain tissue, making them significantly smarter than typical pigs. It is entirely possible that they are mourning for the dead pig, though Toby doesn't know this fact. Again, a gap is created between the way Toby views a situation and the way the implied reader views

it. Toby's critical engagement with her world, and the resulting trustworthiness of her narrative, highlights the lack of engagement present in Snowman/Jimmy's narrative.

Toby's excessive distrust of her senses is again on display when she sees escaped criminals cross the meadow with Amanda and Ren in tow:

Then another man emerges from the shadows. He's leading a huge bird on a leash—no, on a rope—a bird with blue-green iridescent plumes like a peagret. But this bird has the head of a woman. I must be hallucinating again, thinks Toby. Because no matter what the gene splicers could do, they couldn't do this. The men and the bird-woman look real and solid enough, but then, hallucinations do. (*YF* 350)

In the previous chapter, Ren describes her panicked flight from Scales and Tails with Amanda, pointing out that she didn't have time to change out of her peagret costume before they left. This procession makes sense to the reader, but not to Toby. Toby's repeated application of skepticism in situations where the implied reader is in possession of the facts shows that she is cautious about accepting facts without critical assessment, which makes her quick to discount her own perceptions. Atwood takes pains to establish Toby as someone who reacts to the extraordinary with understandable skepticism, but who also has a clear and accurate vision of the world. When seeming hallucinations appear, Toby questions them instead of simply accepting them. These instances tell us more about Toby than about the world around her: her interpretations of the extraordinary aspects of her world stress her rigorous emphasis on empiricism rather than the madness she fears they reveal. The cumulative effect of this dramatic irony is to more firmly establish Toby's sanity even while she worries that she is going insane. At the same time, however, this tendency establishes one of Toby's flaws as a focalizer: excessive doubt. While Snowman is inaccurate because he relies too heavily upon his flawed memories,



Toby is unable to provide a wholly accurate picture of the world around her because she does not trust her own perceptions. She assumes she is mad, just as Snowman assumes he is sane. The two characters are juxtaposed, and used to represent two opposite ends of a spectrum in terms of focalization.

Toby's lucid state of mind contrasts with Snowman's deteriorating grasp on reality. This is best demonstrated through Toby's rational, linear thought process. Her straightforward presentation of information contrasts with Snowman/Jimmy's associative, fragmented, traumatized ways of thinking. Snowman engages with auditory hallucinations throughout his sections, at one point hearing them while he is conversing with the Crakers: "Please, not now, thinks Snowman. Not in company. In company, he can't answer back" (*OC* 161). His need to engage with these voices and his inability to simply ignore them are indicative of his state of mind, where reality and illusion seem to blur together. Like Snowman, Toby has auditory hallucinations, but she reacts to them quite differently:

Sometimes she hears voices—human voices, calling to her in pain. Or the voices of women, the women who used to work here, the anxious women who used to come, for rest and rejuvenation. Splashing in the pool, strolling on the lawns. All the pink voices, soothed and soothing. (*YF* 5)

Toby mentions hearing voices, but they do not make up any part of her narrative. The voices do not seem to haunt her, as they are rarely mentioned after this moment early in the text. Perhaps most importantly, Toby does not engage with these voices, instead seeking a practical explanation for them. She reassures herself that "isolation produces such effects," drawing a clear line between the rational and the hallucinatory (*YF* 15). Her language demonstrates a coherent process of thought. Toby's recognition of her need for

specific sources of nutrition can be read in conjunction with Snowman's similar realization, though the two moments unfold very differently. Snowman muses over his options, thinking that,

a pigeon feast would do him a world of good. Pigeons are fat, and fat is a carbohydrate. Or is it? He searches his mind for some lesson or long-lost chart that would tell him: he knew that stuff once, but it's no use, the file folders are empty.

'Bring home the bacon,' he says. He can almost smell it, that bacon, frying in a pan, with an egg, to be served up with toast and a cup of coffee...*Cream with that?* whispers a woman's voice. Some naughty, nameless waitress, out of a white-aprons-and-feather-dusters porno farce. He finds himself salivating.

Fat isn't a carbohydrate. Fat is a fat. He whacks his own forehead, lifts his shoulders, spreads his hands. 'So, wise guy,' he says. 'Next question?' (OC 151)

Snowman misidentifies fat as a carbohydrate and then loses his train of thought, becoming distracted by thoughts of a diner breakfast and a sexy waitress. He eventually circles back to his initial misidentification and corrects it. His thought process here reveals that he is easily distracted, quite often by thoughts of sex, and he is additionally plagued by gaps in his memory. His thinking is associative and messy rather than clear and linear; he is at the mercy of his thoughts instead of in control of them. Toby's thought process, by contrast, demonstrates both knowledge and rational thinking. After her garden is destroyed by pigeons, she realizes she needs another source of protein and fat:

Without lipids your body eats your fat and then your muscles, and the brain is pure fat and the heart is a muscle. You become a feedback loop, and then you fall over.

She'll have to resort to foraging. Go out into the meadow, the forest: find protein and lipids. The boar will be putrid by now, she can't eat that...ant larvae and eggs, or grubs of any kind, for starters. (YF 320)

Toby's thought process is clear and precise. She knows exactly what she needs, and has a good idea of where to find it. Her knowledge is easily accessible and she can put it to use

without becoming distracted or forgetting what she is doing. Despite her fear that isolation is causing her to go insane, Toby's mental state is much sharper than Snowman's because she is accustomed to engaging with her world and coping with its more difficult truths.

Snowman and Toby are also contrasted in terms of their emotions; Snowman gives in to all of his emotions and impulses, while Toby gives in to very few of hers. Toby is able to monitor her own feelings and adjust when her emotions appear to her to be excessive; she views her emotional reactions through the same critical lens she uses to evaluate other aspects of her world. In the days just after the apocalypse, for example, Toby ventures out of the spa and into the pleeblands to retrieve her father's old rifle. When she finds it still where she hid it, she is nearly overcome with relief: "Don't cry, she told herself. Just cut open the plastic, grab the rifle and the ammunition, and get out of here" (*YF* 23). She does not succumb to emotion because practical considerations must come first. This is a pattern in Toby's narrative, prioritizing the practical over the sentimental or emotional, which places her in opposition to Snowman's uncontrolled expressions of emotion. When Toby's father's business begins to fail, for example, she takes a clear-eyed view of her situation and ends her relationship with a fellow college student:

Once her family hit the downdraft, Toby knew she couldn't afford Stan. She also knew her days at college were numbered. So she'd cut off contact. She didn't even answer his reproachful text messages, because there was no future in it: he wanted a two-professionals marriage, and she was no longer in the running. Better to do the weeping sooner rather than later, she told herself. (*YF* 32)

When Toby realizes she cannot have the future she planned, she acts immediately and

decisively. She adapts to her new reality and moves on, erring on the side of excessive practicality rather than excessive sentimentality. Her direct, clear-eyed view of an unpleasant truth results in decisive action. She applies the same practicality to her post-apocalypse isolation. The experience has clearly affected her, but she does not allow it to overcome her:

Paralyzing rage can still take hold of her, it seems: impossible to know when it will strike. It begins as disbelief and ends in sorrow, but in between those two phases her whole body shakes with anger. Anger at whom, at what?...It's wrong to give so much time over to mourning, she tells herself. Mourning and brooding. There's nothing to be accomplished by it. (*YF* 96)

Toby is definitely marked by the trauma of the apocalypse and the hardships of being so isolated, but she doesn't allow herself to dwell on these feelings. Instead, she focuses on the practicalities of survival. She rejects "mourning and brooding" because it does not accomplish anything, because it has no practical value. Toby is able to monitor her responses and mitigate them as necessary. Snowman, by contrast, thinks very little about what he might accomplish, ignoring practicalities to indulge his feelings: "Or, instead of chess or a journal, he could focus on his living conditions. There's room for improvement in that department, a lot of room. More food sources, for one thing" (*OC* 42). He also considers finding a safer and more comfortable place to live, but gets distracted by a daydream of Oryx and stops worrying about improving his life. He does the bare minimum necessary for survival and spends the rest of his time at the mercy of his own thoughts. Toby purposely avoids the kind of obsession with the past and with her own situation that preoccupies Snowman. She finds herself thinking about Adam One's words concerning death:

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. Just remember, dear Friends: What am I living for and what am I dying for are the same question.

A question—Toby says to herself very firmly—that I will not ask myself just now. (*YF* 326)

She knows that pursuing such thoughts is unproductive, so she does not allow herself to do it. Snowman is not so disciplined. He rages against his situation just as Toby does, but he has fewer mental resources to keep himself in check:

‘I didn’t do it on purpose,’ he says, in the snivelling child’s voice he reverts to in this mood. ‘Things happened, I had no idea, it was out of my control! What could I have done? Just someone, anyone, listen to me please!’

What a bad performance. Even he isn’t convinced by it. But now he’s weeping again.

*It is important*, says the book in his head, *to ignore minor irritants, to avoid pointless repinings, and to turn one’s mental energies to immediate realities and to the tasks at hand*. He must have read that somewhere. Surely his own mind would never have come up with *pointless repinings*, not all by itself.

He wipes his face on a corner of the sheet. ‘Pointless repinings,’ he says out loud. (*OC* 46)

This episode unfolds much like Snowman’s other outbursts: he tries to find a way to avoid his feelings of guilt but can no longer lie to himself; he draws on the words of others, as he often does in emotionally charged moments; and he becomes distracted from his initial thought or feeling by a chain of associations or by specific words. Because Snowman refuses to engage with hard truths, he is not in control of his own thoughts or feelings; he is continually afraid of confronting uncomfortable information. Toby does face hard truths, so she is in control of both her psychological and emotional states. Snowman and Toby are in similarly difficult and isolated situations, but their reactions to these situations are very different. Toby tries to stay focused on practicalities, while Snowman gives himself up to the “mourning and brooding” that Toby rejects. The two

characters represent opposite ends of a spectrum: Snowman is mad, with his circular thought process, his excessive emotion, and his constant focus on sex. Toby occupies the other extreme, with her intense rationality, rejection of emotion, and almost total lack of sexual interest or desire. Their focalization, therefore, is in opposition, viewing similar experiences through distinctly different lenses. Toby starts from a similar vantage point as Snowman and begins to rehabilitate the flaws in his focalization through her more reliable perspective. Her language does not suffer from the same profusion of options and revisions present in Snowman's speech, and the devices in her speech confirm, rather than undermine, a stable perspective. This creates a sense that her narrative is less ambiguous and that she is someone who will present, if not an objective view, then one that is as clear as possible.

#### Ren: An Integrative Perspective

From her initial introduction in *The Year of the Flood*, Ren's position as a focalizer differs from the pattern set up by Snowman/Jimmy and Toby. Snowman/Jimmy and Toby both present narratives that are told in the third person and that alternate between a focalizer in the present and a focalizer in the past. Ren's narrative is in the first person and the temporal organization of her sections is somewhat more complicated. In her opening chapter, Ren narrates in present tense from the Sticky Zone. As her narrative continues, Ren alternates between telling the story of the night Crake's pandemic was unleashed and telling the story of her childhood. Present-day Ren is the narrator of all of her sections, but the focalization shifts. Because her sections are largely in the past tense,

it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint exactly who is seeing the events unfold. The sections dealing with the night of the pandemic are generally focalized by Ren from the night of the pandemic (with interjections from present-day Ren), while the sections about Ren's childhood are generally focalized through Ren as a child. Both narrations are in past tense, though when present-day Ren comments on some aspect of her past, she does so in present tense. The narrating instant is somewhat unclear; in the introductory section, it is a point at which she is trapped in the Sticky Zone, but when Ren narrates her release from the Sticky Zone, she does so in past tense. It is not until Ren meets up with Toby in Chapter 63 that her narration returns to the consistent use of present tense.

In addition, Ren speaks in the first person instead of the third person, a shift that emphasizes both her centrality as a focalizer and her fully integrated sense of self. In *Oryx and Crake*, as I discussed above, Atwood makes use of third person narration in order to undermine a sense of identification between Snowman and Jimmy, and the implied reader and Snowman. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood uses first person narration to create that sense of identification between the implied reader and Ren. Seymour Chatman's words are again relevant:

Access to a character's consciousness is the standard entree to his [sic] point of view, the usual and quickest means by which we come to identify with him [sic]. Learning his [sic] thoughts insures an intimate connection. (Chatman 157)

Whereas access to Snowman/Jimmy's consciousness creates distrust in the implied reader as the depth of Jimmy/Snowman's self-deception becomes evident, access to Ren's consciousness creates a sense of identification as Ren demonstrates repeatedly that she is completely sincere with herself, and by extension the implied reader. The use of the first

person serves another purpose: Ren is the only focalizer who does not speak of a divided or fractured self, and who thus has access to a unified “I.” Snowman delineates a clear break in his identity between his pre-apocalypse self, Jimmy, and his post-apocalypse self, Snowman. While Toby uses the same name throughout, her language is similar to Snowman’s when she discusses her profusion of selves. Every time she goes through a major life change, she speaks of a new self. Ren’s narrative is devoid of this language of fragmentation; she sees herself as one coherent self. Her identity is always cohesive and singular. In addition, Ren is the only character who is not troubled by actual madness or the fear of it. Snowman slowly goes mad, and Toby fears (though unnecessarily) for her sanity, but Ren always evinces an easy acceptance of her own clear mental state. This sets her apart from the other two focalizers in these two novels.

A good example of Ren’s cohesive sense of identity occurs when Ren is thirteen, and her mother decides to leave the God’s Gardeners and return to her life in the Compounds. Ren’s mother pretends that the two of them were kidnapped in order to deflect suspicion, and to keep Ren from telling the truth, she tells everyone that Ren is still traumatized from the experience. Though Ren considers the possibility that she might have been traumatized by her time with the God’s Gardeners, her language shows that her sense of self is unshaken:

Her story was that I’d been traumatized by being stuck in among the warped, brainwashing cult folk. I had no way of proving her wrong. Anyway, maybe I had been traumatized: I had nothing to compare myself with. (YF 213)

Ren’s first concern is that she cannot *prove* that her mother is wrong, suggesting that she knows Lucerne is incorrect, but cannot make this clear to others. Next, she considers the



possibility that she might be traumatized, concluding that there is no way of knowing, as she has nothing against which to measure herself. The fact that Ren cites an outside measure rather than an internal sense of trauma shows that she has not experienced any flaws or fragmentation in her sense of identity. Her language reveals that her sense of self is continuous. Unlike Jimmy, whose language reveals his fractured self, or Toby, whose doubt prevents her from claiming a unified “I,” Ren speaks from a position of clarity and coherence in terms of her selfhood.

Despite her position as the only focalizer with a unified identity, Ren betrays her lack of confidence in that self through her extensive quotation of the words of others. Her choice of which words to include and her optimistic readings of the words of others demonstrate her fundamentally hopeful perspective. In addition, Ren’s quotation illustrates her capacity to integrate the multiple value systems to which she is exposed. This sets her apart from Snowman; Ren uses quotation not to expose uncomfortable truths, but to underscore her tendency to emphasize the positive aspects of her varied experiences. Ren’s borrowed wisdom generally reflects one of two value systems: the anti-dystopian value system set forth by the God’s Gardeners (embodied in Toby), and the dystopian value system of the general society (embodied in Snowman/Jimmy). Despite her departure from the God’s Gardeners at the age of thirteen, Ren still makes use of some Gardener teachings to help her cope with her fear; she is locked in a room with no way to get out and a finite supply of food. She opens one of her chapters with these words:

Adam One used to say, If you can’t stop the waves, go sailing. Or else, What can’t be mended may still be tended. Or else, Without the light, no chance; without the dark, no dance. Which meant that even bad things did some good

because they were a challenge and you didn't always know what good effects they might have. (*YF* 279)

Ren chooses specific aspects of Gardener theology that will help her to view her situation in a positive light. Adam One emphasizes accepting one's situation instead of bemoaning it; like Toby, Ren tries to find a practical approach to her situation instead of mourning it. Whereas Snowman/Jimmy rejects reality and Toby approaches it with a critical eye, Ren simply accepts her situation and tries to make the best of it. She quotes the Gardeners again later in the text: "You create your own world by your inner attitude, the Gardeners used to say. And I didn't want to create the world out there: the world of the dead and dying" (*YF* 315). Ren selects another quotation that allows her to control her response to tragedy. She cannot do anything about the pandemic raging around her, but she can choose how she responds to it; her perspective is consistently hopeful. The words of the Gardeners, filtered through Ren, clarify their system of beliefs and reveal the extent to which Ren draws on their principles to support her optimistic perspective. Throughout the text, Ren borrows the words of others to make sense of her world. She draws on the words of the Gardeners, but she also draws on the words of people within the larger dystopian society against which the Gardeners react.

When Ren quotes the words of her boss at Scales and Tails, Mordis, she reveals both the extent to which she has internalized dystopian ideas and her capacity to maintain a positive point of view about her varied circumstances. In her first chapter, Ren describes Scales and Tails:

It was well run, though it was in a seedy area—all the clubs were. That was a matter of image, Mordis would say: seedy was good for business, because unless there's an edge—something lurid or tawdry, a whiff of sleaze—what separated our brand from the run-of-the-mill product the guy could get at home, with the

face cream and the white cotton panties? (*YF* 7)

Ren repeats the words of Mordis without comment, casually characterizing women, including herself, as a “product.” Mordis’ words reflect the values of his (and Jimmy’s) dystopian society, and Ren’s uncritical acceptance of this paradigm indicates the extent to which she has internalized some of the dystopian values prevalent in her world. At the same time, Ren emphasizes the aspects of Mordis’ comment that support her view of herself: specifically, Ren hears that the seedy aspects of her work are merely “a matter of image” instead of a fact. Ren does not view herself as sleazy; despite her work, she maintains a positive view of herself and her world. Ren elaborates on Mordis, saying, “he’d stand up for us if the clients got violent. ‘Nobody hurts my best girls,’ he’d say. It was a point of honour with him. Also he didn’t like waste: we were a valuable asset, he’d say. The cream of the crop” (*YF* 7). Again, Ren repeats these words without any sense of recognition that they might be demeaning. She offers that protecting “his” girls was a matter of honour with Mordis without recognizing the objectification inherent in the possessive pronoun. She also doesn’t recognize the contradiction between “a point of honour” and the next sentence, which lays bare the financial reasoning behind Mordis’ protection of “his” girls. Instead, Ren hears that she is valuable, and that she is safe because she will be protected. It would be easy to dismiss Ren’s hopeful perspective as foolish or naive, except that the text generally supports her view. Mordis, for example, despite his emphasis on the financial value of his girls, does keep Ren safe: in fact, he gives his life to save her. Ren has clearly internalized values from both the anti-dystopian

view of the Gardeners and the dystopian view of Mordis, but she filters those values through her own sense of optimism.

Ren's dual perspective is evident in her own language as well; her diction reveals a juxtaposition between sex and innocence. Ren's speech makes use of sexual language that reflects her highly sexualized context, but this language often occurs in conjunction with syntax or imagery that emphasizes the childlike aspects of Ren's perspective. This dichotomy emphasizes Ren's central, integrative position in the text; she both accepts and rejects the premises of the dystopian society around her. A good example of this juxtaposition occurs when Ren passes time in the Sticky Zone by painting her toenails:

Shiny new toes make you feel all fresh and sparkling: if someone wants to suck your toes, those toes should be worth sucking. While the polish was drying I went to the intercom camera in the room I shared with Starlite. It cheered me up to connect with my own things—my dresser, my Robodog, my costumes on their hangers. I could hardly wait to be back in my normal life. Not that it was normal exactly. But I was used to it. (*YF* 200)

Ren explains why she paints her nails, mentioning that she has to be prepared to have her toes sucked at all times. This statement emphasizes the availability of her body as a commodity; she maintains aspects of her appearance not for herself, but for her clients. Just after this, Ren refers to her "Robodog," a toy that she has on her dresser. The Robodog is the type of thing a child might be expected to have, so its inclusion just a few lines after Ren's reference to toe-sucking highlights the dichotomy in her language between sex and innocence. Additionally, Ren's statement that her job is not exactly normal conflicts with her casual attitude toward having her toes ready to be sucked; she has internalized some dystopian values but remains uncomfortable with the larger paradigm and her place in it. Later in the text, after Ren has been released from the Sticky

Zone, she and Amanda encounter a group of three boys they knew as children in the God's Gardeners. The five of them are forced to flee Scales and Tails, pursued by a group of criminals. When they finally find a safe place to spend the night, Ren muses,

I thought maybe we should have sex; it would have been a kind and generous thing to do. But everyone was too tired, and also we were shy with one another... We went to sleep in a pile, on top of one another, like puppies. (*YF* 340)

Ren suggests that they engage in sex as a kind of reward; the boys have been nice to her, so in return, she will do the "kind and generous" thing and have sex with them. She now characterizes sex as an exchange, a prize that can be won with positive behavior. She does not connect the act of sex with any particular liking for these boys, or with any sort of emotional feeling about them. It's simply a gift she can give, which clearly reflects the commodification mentality prevalent in her dystopian society. A few lines later, however, Ren describes the group sleeping in a pile, "like puppies." The imagery of puppies emphasizes her innocent, childlike side while her casual approach to sex emphasizes her sexualized context. Ren's language underscores the tension between the two different value systems to which she has been exposed. Ren further demonstrates the extent to which her job has affected her worldview when she uses sexual imagery. She is separated from her friends and meets up with Toby, at which point the two of them leave Toby's hideout to find Amanda and the group of boys. Ren says, "we walk through a shimmering meadow. There's a humming like a thousand tiny vibrators; huge pink butterflies float all around. The clover scent is very strong" (*YF* 374). The comparison Ren makes here—that the sound of insects is like "a thousand tiny vibrators"—is reflective of her life experience. Vibrators make a sound that she would be used to, so the simile is a natural

one for her, though perhaps not so for the implied reader. What emphasizes the skewed nature of the values that underlie this particular simile is that it is immediately followed by an example of Ren's childlike sincerity. As she and Toby cross the meadow, they see a group of genetically modified sheep:

I've never seen a live one before, only online. They stand there looking at us with their jaws moving sideways. 'Would they let me pat them?' I say. They're blue and pink and silver and purple; they look like candy, or sunny-day clouds. So cheerful and peaceful. (*YF* 374)

Her desire to touch the sheep and her use of the word "pat" both suggest a childlike view. Her comparison between the sheep and candy or sunny-day clouds also suggests innocence, especially used in such close proximity to her vibrator comparison. Ren's syntax is very different from Snowman's confused wordplay or from Toby's rigorously accurate language. Ren's innocent simplicity of speech is in opposition to the values she reveals when she casually uses sexual language.

Ren's use of euphemism when she talks about her job suggests that despite her casual approach to sex and sexual language, she has not fully accepted the premise that her sexuality should be considered an economic asset. She struggles to balance the two value systems in her life. Early in the text, she thinks about the people she knew in the Gardeners: "I wonder what they'd think of me—of what I ended up doing for a living" (*YF* 58). She goes on to imagine the various reactions of the Gardeners, but the question itself indicates that she is aware of two competing value systems. She fears that the Gardeners will be critical of her life choices, even though she claims to be comfortable with her work. She likes the camaraderie of her workplace and some aspects of the job: "I didn't like the other parts of the job that much, but I did like the trapeze dancing, because

nobody could touch you then. You were up in the air, like a butterfly” (YF 303). Ren dismisses “the other parts of the job,” using that general term to avoid being specific about the fact that she has to have sex with strangers. In other parts of the book, she refers to that aspect of her work as “plankwork,” and undressing clients is known as “peeling the shrimp” (YF 308). Unprotected sex, which clients will pay a great deal for, is called “membrane and bristle work” (YF 330). Like Snowman, Ren uses euphemisms to avoid dealing with the more tawdry aspects of her work. She never refers to what she does at Scales as sex, instead substituting terms that are intended to conceal its true nature. Ren’s unwillingness to speak explicitly about her job suggests that she doesn’t really believe that it is “a legitimate Corp with health benefits and a dental plan, so it wasn’t like being a prostitute” (YF 294). Ren’s sexual language suggests that she has accepted some aspects of her society’s skewed values, but her constant use of euphemisms about her job shows that she also recognizes real flaws in that value system. She tries to distance herself from the realities of her job with euphemisms, but her discomfort with her work demonstrates that, unlike Snowman, she is fully aware of the darker aspects of her life. Ren does not genuinely believe that her job is an economic activity like any other, and this rejection sets the stage for her development into a utopian character. Ren’s position as a focalizer—spanning two different aspects of her world that represent two very different value systems—affects her visions of apocalypse and utopia, and puts her in a unique position to begin to rehabilitate the flawed vision and values of Snowman/Jimmy.

Over the course of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood places her three focalizers on a continuum in terms of the ways in which they see the world.

Snowman/Jimmy is defined by his acceptance of his society's dystopian perspective, and the flaws in his perception are a result of his skewed values. His tendency toward self-deception, and the tenuous nature of his constructed view of the world, is evident in his constant questions, revisions, and parenthetical corrections. These limitations have consequences for his views of apocalypse and utopia. Snowman believes that he has changed since recognizing Jimmy's flaws in vision; nevertheless, his narration reveals that he is as self-deluded as ever. His view of the world is limited by his refusal to see the exploitation that underlies his comfortable lifestyle, and by his traumatized perception. Toby's narration begins to recuperate Snowman's problematic focalization. She sees many of the same things he sees, but her view of them is clear and rational. The imagery, use of questions, linear thought process, and dramatic irony that are present in her sections set her up as a contrasting figure to the muddled Snowman. Toby occupies the other end of the spectrum, limited not by the scope of her perspective, but by her excessive doubt. Ren, finally, is introduced as a middle figure, occupying the space between Snowman's madness and Toby's rejection of the extraordinary. Ren speaks in first person, the only one among the three of them with access to a coherent "I." Her position at the center of the two worlds represented by Snowman/Jimmy and Toby establishes her as an integrative character. Ren moves from a (very briefly) focalized character, not even named in *Oryx and Crake*, to the focalizer of her own story in *The Year of the Flood*. Her tendency to speak in the words of others eventually gives way to the use of her own voice, and as she finds a way to navigate the value systems she has been exposed to, her vision becomes increasingly utopian. As these three focalizers



envision apocalypse and utopia, the tendencies established by the devices that define them point to a greater understanding of Atwood's project; if apocalypse is a crisis of perception, then it is only through recuperating flawed perspectives that a truly utopian vision can be achieved.

## Chapter Two—Apocalypse: How is Crake’s Pandemic Conceptualized?

In the previous section, I delineated some of the differences between the three focalizers present in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. These differences in focalization are reflected and expanded as each of these characters experiences and responds to Crake’s pandemic. The notion of apocalypse is present throughout the novel, in a much broader sense than the literal pandemic that kills most of humanity. James Berger, in *After the End*, describes apocalypse as

catastrophes that resemble the imagined final ending, that can be interpreted as eschaton, as an end of something, a way of life or thinking. All preceding history seems to lead up to and set the stage for such events, and all that follows emerges out of that central cataclysm. Previous historical narratives are shattered; new understandings of the world are generated. (5)

This is an accurate description, both of Crake’s pandemic and of the events surrounding it that affect each character. In each narrative the stage is set, as the events that are chosen and shared are the ones that relate to the pandemic: Snowman tells the story of his association with Oryx and Crake and his failure to recognize or prevent the pandemic; Toby shares her time in the God’s Gardeners, the group that would later become MaddAdam and provide much of the scientific knowledge that made the pandemic possible; and Ren shares her association with both the Gardeners and with Jimmy and Glenn, providing an alternative perspective on the central events. At the same time, the pandemic is, especially in Jimmy’s case, accompanied by another, more personal tragedy

that is equally apocalyptic in his eyes. The events surrounding the pandemic bring about new understandings of the world for these characters. As Berger puts it, apocalypse

has an interpretive, explanatory function, which is, of course, its etymological sense: as revelation, unveiling, uncovering. The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end. (5)

Through each focalizer, the reader receives a different view of what has truly been lost as a result of Crake's actions. The pandemic itself and the associated events serve to clarify both the nature of the decadent, dystopian society in which these characters live and the personal cost to each of them at the moment of its destruction.

#### Jimmy/Snowman: Flawed Vision

During the apocalypse, Jimmy responds in a way that is consistent with his identified flaws as a focalizer: he refuses to recognize what is right in front of him.

Snowman reflects on a conversation with Crake in which he misses Crake's larger, underlying point, and he says that,

he can't describe himself, the way he'd been. Not unmarked—events had marked him, he'd had his own scars, his dark emotions. Ignorant, perhaps. Unformed, inchoate. There had been something willed about it though, his ignorance. Or not willed, exactly: structured. He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out. (*OC* 184)

This statement continues the pattern of Snowman's thoughts betraying him. He begins by saying that he cannot describe himself, and then goes on to try. He uses and rejects a number of adjectives, creating a proliferation of options that tend to obscure, rather than clarify, his point. He begins by describing what he is not, with "not unmarked." He goes on to cycle through ignorant, unformed, and inchoate, and then returns to ignorant in a

statement defining the quality of his ignorance. There, again, he shuffles through options, admitting that his ignorance was “willed” before rejecting that adjective and settling on structured. The entire statement circles around a recognition of Jimmy’s flaws in perception, but has trouble engaging directly with those flaws. This verbal tic indicates how traumatic Snowman finds his own failures of perception:

Language, if it cannot *inscribe* trauma, can *circumscribe* it. Thus, trauma, even while resisting and shattering language nevertheless continues to generate a variety of discourses that spiral around it. (Berger 202)

Snowman’s discourse continually circles uncomfortable topics, including his own flaws, but never engages them directly. His speech reflects the difficulties he experiences when he tries to view the world around him or examine his own perception; both Jimmy and Snowman limit their view by shutting things out. This is especially evident during the pandemic, when Jimmy both literally and figuratively “shuts things out.” When the plague initially hits, Jimmy is locked inside the Paradise dome with three of the MaddAdam scientists. One of the first things he does is isolate himself:

He went back to the monitor room and told the three staff that he’d talked with CorpSeCorps Security for the Compound—a lie—and they were in no immediate danger here; also a lie, he suspected. He added that he’d heard from Crake, whose orders were that they should all go back to their rooms and get some sleep, because they would need their energy in the days to come. They seemed relieved, and happy to comply.

Jimmy accompanied them to the airlock and coded them into the corridor that led to their sleeping quarters. He watched their backs as they walked in front of him; he saw them as already dead. He was sorry about that, but he couldn’t take chances. They were three to his one: if they became hysterical, if they tried to break out of the complex or let their friends into it, he wouldn’t be able to control them. Once they were out of sight he locked them out, and himself in. Nobody in the inner bubble now but himself and the Crakers. (OC 327)

Jimmy’s description of his own vision here reveals his flaws in perception. As he watches

the scientists walk away, he “saw them as already dead.” Jimmy creates a flawed narrative so that he can justify his own actions; he suspects that the scientists will be exposed to the disease when they leave the dome, but his selfish speculation about potential future conflict causes him to lock them out anyway. His actions reveal a physical manifestation of his psychological tendencies: just as he shuts out difficult truths, he shuts out the scientists and everyone else, placing a physical barrier between himself and the pandemic. When Crake and Oryx return to the Compound, he opens the door for them only to witness Crake’s murder of Oryx. Jimmy responds by shooting Crake. It’s a key moment in the text, and I will address the importance of it in a moment. In the aftermath of that tragedy, however, Jimmy responds in the same way that he responded to the initial outbreak: he physically shuts out the trauma. He explains:

After he’d shot Crake, he’d recoded the inner door, sealed it shut. Crake and Oryx lay intertwined in the airlock; he couldn’t bear to touch them, so he’d left them where they were...He went back to his room and drank some Scotch and then some more, as much as it took to conk himself out. What woke him up was the buzzer from the outer door: White Sedge and Black Rhino, trying to get back in. The others too, no doubt. Jimmy ignored them. (*OC* 338)

Jimmy conflates physical and mental space here, trying to shut out psychological trauma by locking Crake and Oryx in the airlock. He physically separates himself from both the pandemic and the deaths of Oryx and Crake by sealing the doors of the inner dome. He also figuratively shuts out both events by drinking enough to pass out, striving for a state in which he does not have to face reality. When others return to the dome and attempt to enter, he ignores them because he has already mentally classified them as dead, so he remains locked in the bubble by himself. Once again he is inside a walled space, both spatially and psychologically. He continues to strive for oblivion, for a state of not-

knowing, as the apocalypse continues. He,

smoked up Crake's stash of skunkweed in no time flat; he managed to miss about three days of horror that way. He rationed the booze at first, but soon he was getting through quite a pile of it. He needed to be fried just to face the news, he needed to be feeling not much. (OC 343)

He shuts out reality by keeping himself in a drugged or drunken state much of the time, able to face the news only through a chemical haze of indifference. It is not until the Crakers begin to run out of food that Jimmy considers leaving the dome. When he does, he exits in his new role as Snowman, leading the Crakers to their new home: "In the dawn light he punched in the door code for the last time and opened up the bubble, and led the Crakers out of Paradise" (OC 351). He physically exits the dome, but his psychological habit of creating walled spaces persists; mentally, he cannot leave the dome—and the events that took place there—behind. On the way back to the dome after the apocalypse, Snowman thinks about where he might find supplies and becomes distracted:

Crake's emergency storeroom. Crake's wonderful plan. Crake's cutting-edge ideas. Crake, King of the Crakery, because Crake is still there, still in possession, still the ruler of his own domain, however dark that bubble of light has now become. Darker than dark, and some of that darkness is Snowman's. He helped with it.

'Let's not go there,' says Snowman.

*Sweetie, you're already there. You've never left.* (OC 333-4)

Psychological space and physical space are conflated in this statement, as they frequently are in Snowman/Jimmy's focalization. Snowman thinks about the emergency storeroom in the bubble of the Paradise Dome, which leads back to more general thoughts about the dome. He describes Paradise as a "bubble of light" that is now dark because of Crake's actions and his own. He admonishes himself not to "go there" psychologically, using the

term in its figurative, rather than literal, sense, but the voice that responds to him plays on the literal meaning, suggesting that mentally, he never actually left the dome. Again, he tries to shut out a difficult memory, and an external voice has to goad him into facing the truth. He circles the dome and its tragedies constantly in his head, unable to let go because he hasn't dealt with the deaths of Oryx and Crake. His shattered, fragmented state as Snowman is directly traceable back to his last, traumatic moments as Jimmy.

While watching Crake's pandemic unfold is certainly traumatic for Jimmy, it is the personal tragedy that he suffers that affects him most deeply. Apocalypse must, as we recall from the beginning of this section, "clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end," and the moment that does that for Jimmy is the loss of Oryx and Crake. Structurally, this moment is emphasized, as it appears at the climax of the book. It is the moment that has been foreshadowed since the start of the text. Snowman says of it,

now comes the part that Snowman has replayed in his head time after time. *If only* haunts him. But *if only* what? What could he have said or done differently? What change would have altered the course of events? In the big picture, nothing. In the small picture, so much. (OC 318)

Here, the questions that he asks himself push him to acknowledge that he played a role in a worldwide disaster, but he rejects that responsibility, focusing instead on the "small picture." Snowman continues his refusal to engage with the broad consequences of his actions, just as he does in the focalization section. This statement sets up the "small picture" as the locus for change, and therefore as the locus for Snowman's regrets. He maintains that he could have done nothing to change the course of the pandemic, but the deaths of Oryx and Crake may have been preventable, and it is this that keeps him

spiraling back to this moment in his history. It is not until after their deaths that he can begin to grapple with the truth of his relationships with them. When Snowman finally returns to the Paradise Dome, he finds their remains where he left them:

Here's Snowman, thick as a brick, dunderhead, frivol, and dupe, water running down his face, giant fist clenching his heart, staring down at his one true love and his best friend in all the world. (*OC* 335)

Snowman's characterizations here of Oryx and Crake as, respectively, "his one true love" and "his best friend in all the world" are deeply problematic. The text actively works against these descriptions, so that Snowman's view of them here underscores the still flawed nature of the story he tells himself. Jimmy's fatal confrontation with Crake prompted him to begin to rectify his terrible misreading of his previous life, but that process, as demonstrated here, is far from complete; Snowman's perception of his past, and of his present, remains flawed. Snowman exemplifies the phenomenon Berger describes when he says that, "it might be possible for someone to remember but not remember, to tell the story of a traumatic event and yet fail to acknowledge its effects" (27). Snowman's insistence on knowing and not knowing, his ability to shut out painful truths while simultaneously admitting them, is a key component in his view of the apocalypse. Snowman reveals the trauma he experiences at the deaths of his friends in his fractured, circular discourse, but he also shuts out the larger consequences of Crake's actions. His own words about the apocalypse clearly illustrate this:

How could he exist in this clean, dry, monotonous, ordinary room, gobbling caramel soycorn and zucchini cheese puffs and addling his brain on spirituous liquors and brooding on the total fiasco that was his personal life, while the entire human race was kakkng out?

The worst of it was that those people out there—the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death—did not really touch him. Crake used to say that *Homo sapiens sapiens* was not hard-wired to individuate other people in numbers above two



hundred, the size of the primal tribe, and Jimmy would reduce that number to two. (OC 343)

Jimmy's primary concerns as the human race is, as he says, "kakking out" are whether or not Oryx loved him, why Crake killed her, and why he has remained alive. These three central questions repeat themselves over and over again throughout the text. They are symptoms pointing back to the unresolved source of Snowman's fractured self. It is, after all, the potentially painful truths about Oryx and Crake that Snowman works so hard to shut out, and not the fact of mankind's near extinction. The structure of Snowman's narrative reveals the emphasis he places on his personal tragedy:

Everything after the end, in order to gain, or borrow, meaning, must point back, lead back to that time; and everything before that beginning (seen as the 'beginning of the end') reconfigures itself into prologue and premonition. (Berger xi)

Everything after the apocalypse, for Snowman, points back to the deaths of Oryx and Crake. His hallucinations, his fractured language, and his physical journey back to the dome all hinge on Snowman's loss of his friends. In his retelling of his time as Jimmy, Snowman's memories emphasize his relationships with Oryx and Crake. Their deaths, rather than the pandemic, are the traumatic center of Snowman's narrative. The larger catastrophe, in fact, barely figures in Snowman's fractured thinking. He mentions his loneliness and isolation as, he believes, the last man alive, but he feels that isolation as the loss of his friends, and not as the loss of the rest of society. He mourns his tribe of two and little else. This is hardly surprising, however, when his social history is taken into account.

Over the course of the text, Jimmy reveals a long history of consuming depictions of genuine human suffering as entertainment, and this affects the way in which he responds to the apocalypse. He tries to explain away his lack of empathy for humanity as it goes extinct, arguing that “he was in shock. That must have been why he couldn’t take it in” (*OC* 342). Based on his previous personality flaws as revealed through his focalization, however, his insistence that shock “must have been” responsible for his reaction to Crake’s pandemic is not convincing. Jimmy’s pattern as a focalizer indicates that he is prone to revise history in his own favor, and that he is very capable of engaging with human suffering without any sense of empathy. Jimmy and Crake spend much of their time as teenagers playing games or consuming Internet media that specifically contextualize both human and animal suffering as entertainment. Jimmy lists some of the things he and Crake would watch, including, “animal snuff sites...live coverage of executions in Asia...electrocutions and lethal injections...the eating of live animals and birds...Or they would watch porn shows. There were a lot of those” (*OC* 84-85). Many of these porn sites included underage, unwilling participants, which does not generally affect Jimmy’s enjoyment of them. During those years, which Crake later calls “definitive times,” Jimmy becomes accustomed to suffering as entertainment (*OC* 300). He also learns to conflate sex with violence, and to be insensitive about both. Years later, he and Crake watch large-scale riots unfold over a new coffee bean that “threw the small growers out of business and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty” (*OC* 179). There are numerous casualties on both sides of the dispute, but when Crake tries to have a broader discussion about the ethics involved, Jimmy responds by

saying, “Let’s change channels” (*OC* 179). With this response, Jimmy again conflates media and real life, treating a human tragedy like a television show, and again rejects the consequences of his dystopian world by simply refusing to engage. Because of his sheltered position inside the Compounds, Jimmy has the luxury of turning away from the struggles of other people; he can simply watch something else. He again rejects an opportunity to understand the larger political realities in his dystopia, choosing instead to reduce violent clashes to the level of a television program that has ceased to be entertaining. When Jimmy leaves his Compound and sees poverty for the first time, he says that he saw “real tramps, real beggar women, just as in the old DVD musicals: Jimmy kept expecting them to kick up their battered bootsoles, break into song” (*OC* 288). His disconnect with the world outside his walled spaces is so great that his only frame of reference for it is old movies. The same is true of the pandemic unleashed by Crake. The way that Snowman talks about the pandemic suggests that he struggles to differentiate it from the executions and pornography that he and Crake consumed as entertainment when they were teenagers. Snowman says that in retrospect,

what happened then was a slow-motion sequence. It was porn with the sound muted, it was brainfrizz without the ads. It was melodrama so overdone that he and Crake would have laughed their heads off at it, if they’d been fourteen and watching it on DVD. (*OC* 326)

A lifetime of treating human suffering as entertainment has left Jimmy unable to frame a response to the wholesale destruction of the human race that is not tied to his sense of melodrama. He is incapable of experiencing it as anything other than the Internet distractions of his childhood. He says of the situation that, “the whole thing seemed like a movie” (*OC* 342). The sense of unreality is clear, as is Jimmy’s total inability to feel

connected to the rest of humanity. Even as he watches mankind go extinct, he doesn't feel sadness: "One of the privately run Web sites showed a map, with lit-up points on it for each place that was still communicating via satellite. Jimmy watched with fascination as the points of light blinked out" (*OC* 342). His dominant emotion is interest rather than horror. His long history of experiencing real suffering as a form of distraction or entertainment causes him to experience the apocalypse in the same way: as something unreal. As the news feeds begin to disappear, his conflation of reality and entertainment becomes clearer. He says, "Finally there was nothing more to watch, except old movies on DVD" (*OC* 344). When the real human suffering goes off the air because everyone is dead, he substitutes fictional narratives. The placement of "the apocalypse" and "old movies on DVD" in the same category of "something to watch" demonstrates that Jimmy cannot recognize the fundamental differences between the two.

Jimmy's (and to an extent, Snowman's) refusal to genuinely engage with the world around him—obvious in his flawed focalization—results in a reaction to the apocalypse that is walled in, focused on his personal trauma, and dismissive of the general trauma. The extinction of humanity is primarily painful because it represents the loss of Oryx and Crake, and not because Jimmy recognizes its broader consequences. Jimmy's long history of desensitization to violence and human degradation plays a role in terms of how capable he is of responding to Crake's pandemic in a way that coincides with the values of the implied author of the text. Jimmy lacks empathy, and thus presents a skewed vision of the central tragedy of the book, which encompasses both the deaths of Oryx and Crake and the destruction of human society. In the next two sections, I will

discuss how Toby and Ren react differently to the apocalypse in *The Year of the Flood*, and how their potentially less flawed reactions begin to recuperate the fractures still present in Snowman's narrative.

### Toby: A Broad View

Toby's reaction to the apocalypse is decidedly different from Snowman/Jimmy's reaction for a variety of reasons. Toby has a framework for understanding the apocalypse, as a key component of the God's Gardeners' theology was the coming "Waterless Flood," an event that would wipe out much of humanity. Because of her history with the Gardeners, Toby is prepared for the pandemic. In keeping with her clear, rational focalization, she views it as a practical problem and reacts with concrete action, refusing to be overcome by emotion. Toby is also the only one of the three focalizers to experience the pandemic from an exposed position; Jimmy locks himself into the Paradise Dome and Ren is trapped in the Sticky Zone, but Toby ventures out into the world and sees the effects of the pandemic up close. These factors combine to create a much broader view of apocalypse than the other focalizers are capable of providing; Toby continues to see more, and to see more critically, than Snowman/Jimmy does. It is only in Toby's narrative that the implied reader gets a sense of the impact of the pandemic on the larger population.

Toby's time with the Gardeners does a great deal to prepare her for the coming tragedy, both physically and mentally. Outside the walls of the Compounds, it is much easier for Toby to see the underlying problems in her dystopian society, so she is better

prepared for the apocalypse when it arrives. In addition, Adam One emphasizes concrete steps for surviving the Waterless Flood, and for thriving in a post-apocalyptic environment. Toby describes the Gardener beliefs regarding the Waterless Flood:

A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats. As for the flotation devices in which they would ride out this flood, they themselves would be their own Arks, stored with their own collections of inner animals, or at least the names of those animals. Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth. Or something like that. (*YF* 47)

Toby, as her comment at the end of this description indicates, isn't sure she believes in this aspect of Gardener theology. She engages critically with the Gardeners' beliefs just as she does with all other aspects of her world, but she still takes some of the practical steps the Gardeners advocate. Later in the text, Toby is forced to flee the rooftop garden where the Gardeners live, and she ends up working at a spa. She describes her actions there: "After a cautious pause, she began stashing away a few supplies—building her own private Ararat. She wasn't sure she believed in the Waterless Flood...but she believed in it enough to take the rudimentary precautions" (*YF* 265). Toby's uncertainty about her beliefs does not prevent her from taking practical steps—steps that end up saving her life when the apocalypse arrives. This is perfectly in keeping with the Gardeners' view of their own religion; as Adam One says, "In some religions, faith precedes action. In ours, action precedes faith" (*YF* 168). Practical concerns are paramount for the Gardeners, which serves Toby well during the pandemic. Because of her Ararat and her work in the spa garden, she is physically prepared for the Waterless Flood and its aftereffects; she has a consistent food supply. Even when her garden is

destroyed, however, Toby's training allows her to cope; she ventures out into the meadow next to the spa and collects maggots, which she refers to as "land shrimp," from a dead boar there. The Gardeners emphasize the importance of living off the land:

She's up on the roof, cooking her daily portion of land shrimp in the cool of the morning. Don't scorn the lowly table of Saint Euell, says the voice of Adam One. The Lord provides, and sometimes what He provides is land shrimp, says Zeb. Rich in lipids, a good source of protein. How do you think bears get so fat? (YF 349)

Unlike Snowman, Toby has the resources to thrive without access to a supermarket; her religious training is specifically geared to help her survive the apocalypse. Because of this knowledge, she handles the Waterless Flood well both physically and mentally.

Aside from her physical preparations for the apocalypse, Toby is also well equipped to deal with the horror of watching people die around her. This is partially due to her rational approach to the world, and partially due to her work with the Gardeners. As she has done before, Toby is able to monitor and control her reactions to tragedy. Toby has a psychological framework that allows her to understand what is happening in a way that Snowman/Jimmy cannot. Even before Toby joins the God's Gardeners, she recognizes that the society around her is unsustainable:

I knew there were things wrong in the world, they were referred to, I'd seen them in the onscreen news. But the wrong things were wrong somewhere else.

By the time she'd reached college, the wrongness had moved closer. She remembers the oppressive sensation, like waiting all the time for a heavy stone footfall, then the knock at the door. Everybody knew. Nobody admitted to knowing. If other people began to discuss it, you tuned them out, because what they were saying was both so obvious and so unthinkable.

*We're using up the Earth. It's almost gone.* You can't live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up in you like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. (YF 239)

In Toby's view, even before she learns about the Gardeners and their Waterless Flood,

the apocalypse is inevitable. It is, as Frank Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending*, “immanent rather than imminent” (101). The apocalypse is an inherent part of society, something that people live with every day, even if they, like Jimmy, refuse to recognize it. Because Toby is not walled off inside the Compounds, and because she does not reject hard truths, she has a better vantage point from which to see it. Her recognition that the end is inevitable, and the validation of that recognition through the Gardeners, allows her to see Crake’s pandemic for what it is. She realizes much faster than Jimmy does that this pandemic is a “massive die-off of the human race.” A few days after the first outbreaks, Toby realizes that,

this was not an ordinary pandemic: it wouldn’t be contained after a few hundred thousand deaths, then obliterated with biotools and bleach. This was the Waterless Flood the Gardeners so often had warned about. It had all the signs: it travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery. (*YF* 20)

As soon as Toby recognizes the pandemic as the Waterless Flood, she has specific guidelines to draw on that Snowman/Jimmy lacks. She remembers Adam One’s advice about survival: “When the Waterless Waters rise...the people will try to save themselves from drowning. They will clutch at any straw. Be sure you are not that straw, my Friends, for if you are clutched or even touched, you too will drown” (*YF* 21). This piece of advice allows her to steel herself to avoid the people already stricken with disease. She describes seeing the pandemic strike outside the spa:

Toby had watched from the roof, crouched behind one of the planters, but she hadn’t watched for long. Some of those people had called for help, as if they’d known she was there. But how could she have helped? (*YF* 4)

The practicality evident in Toby’s focalization appears again here, as she engages



critically with her choices. Like Toby's other questions, this one is concrete and action-oriented; Toby wonders, still, if there is some way in which she could have helped, though she suspects there is not. Her Gardener training taught her that isolation was key to her own survival, so she stayed hidden. After the apocalypse passes, Toby's Gardener training continues to help her psychologically. She copes better than Snowman with the effects of isolation because "she'd trained for them during the God's Gardeners Vigils and Retreats" (*YF* 15). She is accustomed to being alone with her thoughts, and because she does not feel the guilt and trauma that Snowman does, she is not haunted by her memories. She faces reality, so she does not have to fear her own mind. Her focus on survival, and the many strategies for survival that she learns from the Gardeners, keep her from getting lost in her own head.

Toby has fewer opportunities for self-reflection than Jimmy/Snowman does, given that she is the only focalizer who is not locked away from the rest of humanity during the apocalypse itself. Jimmy locks himself into the Paradise Dome, and Ren is locked into the Sticky Zone by Mordis; both of them are protected from other people by impassable physical barriers. Toby is not: she hides out in the spa, but her place of concealment is significantly less secure than either Jimmy's or Ren's. She expresses her sense of exposure when she describes her living situation:

She's prepared. The doors are locked, the windows barred. But even such barriers are no guarantee: every hollow space invites invasion.

Even when she sleeps, she's listening, as animals do—for a break in the pattern, for an unknown sound, for a silence opening like a crack in rock.

When the small creatures hush their singing, said Adam One, it's because they're afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear. (*YF* 5)

Toby has done her best to make the spa secure, but she remains at risk from the people

who are still alive. She has supplies, and that makes her a target. Toby's experience of the apocalypse is unique in the text because she is the only focalizer who is ever really at risk while the pandemic rages. A few days after the first outbreaks, Toby ventures out into the pleeblands themselves to retrieve her father's hidden rifle so that she can protect herself. She braves both the pandemic and the resulting rioting, and provides the only view of the disease's effects on the wider population. She describes the scene in the pleeblands:

The boulevard was jammed with cars, trucks, solarbikes, and buses, their drivers honking and shouting. Some of the vehicles had been overturned and were burning. In the shops, the looting was in full swing. There were no CorpSeCorpsMen in sight. They must have been the first to desert, heading for their gated Corporation strongholds to save their skins, and carrying—Toby certainly hoped—the lethal virus with them.

Up the street there was a barricade, cars wedged together. It had its defenders, armed with what? As far as Toby could see they were using metal pipes. The crowd was screaming at them in fury, throwing bricks and stones: they wanted past, they wanted to flee the city. What did the barricade-holders want? Plunder, no doubt. Rape and money, and other useless things. (*YF* 21)

The total chaos inflicted on society is described here: the desperate people, the rampant looting, and the total lack of any institutional control. Toby sees firsthand the destructive effects of Crake's disease. Her experience of apocalypse is considerably more direct than Jimmy's or Ren's. During her trip to retrieve the rifle, for example, she is in almost constant danger:

The side streets were awash with people; she dodged to avoid them. She'd worn surgical gloves, a bulletproof vest made of silk from a spider/goat splice lifted from the AnooYoo guardhouse a year ago, and a black nose-cone air filter. From the garden shed she'd brought a shovel and a crowbar, both of which could be lethal if used decisively. In her pocket was a bottle of AnooYoo Total Shine Hairspray, an effective weapon if aimed at the eyes. She'd learned a lot of things from Zeb in his Urban Bloodshed Limitation classes: in Zeb's view, the first bloodshed to be limited should be your own...Several people passed her, intent on their own stories. Two teenagers paused as if to try a mugging, but she began coughing and croaked out 'Help me!' and they scurried away. (*YF* 22)

Toby is surrounded by people throughout this trip; despite her precautions, she could catch the disease from any one of them. Her Gardener training is useful once again, as she makes use of Zeb's Urban Bloodshed Limitation classes to keep herself safe. She describes people "intent on their own stories," which is rhetoric that would never appear in Snowman/Jimmy's account; his view is too myopic for him to recognize that everyone else has his or her own version of events. The line is a poignant reminder that, despite Snowman's narrow focus on his own personal tragedy in Atwood's first volume, Crake's pandemic created millions of tragedies. Toby's wider perspective allows her to acknowledge this fact, and also sets her up in opposition to Snowman again: his view, limited by both the physical and mental spaces in which he shuts himself away, is partially rehabilitated by Toby's view, which is unfettered by either physical or psychological barriers. This is further illustrated by a revelation Toby has as she and Ren depart the spa to search for Amanda: "She'd climbed up to the rooftop before they left, scanned the fields...How little I've ever been able to see, she thinks. The meadow, the driveway, the swimming pool, the garden. The edge of the forest" (*YF* 366). Toby's recognition of the physical limitations of her view sets her in direct opposition to Snowman/Jimmy; he would never have a thought like this. Snowman/Jimmy's limited field of view is self-imposed and self-maintained; he actively resists broadening either his physical or his psychological field of view. The fact that Toby does recognize her limitations—and sees them as negative—demonstrates that her perspective works against Snowman's and begins to address the flawed vision that is at the heart of apocalypse.

Toby's clear-eyed, firsthand account of Crake's apocalypse shows the value of both her practical approach to the world and the training she received from the God's Gardeners. Because she recognizes the roots of apocalypse in her society years before it actually comes about, and because she accepts enough Gardener theology to take practical steps in preparation for the Waterless Flood, Toby is not traumatized by Crake's action in the way that Jimmy is. She has a framework within which to cope, both mentally and physically, with the effects of the pandemic. That framework, extant before Toby's time with the Gardeners, but supported and developed by them, allows Toby to come through the apocalypse with her sense of the world still largely intact. Though a literal apocalypse takes place, Toby does not have to view her history in a new light the way Snowman does; her view of the world included the Waterless Flood, which means that she retains her sense of perspective. Toby's rational view, established through her focalization and maintained through her perspective on apocalypse, puts her in a position to contribute to utopia; her vision acts in opposition to Snowman's dystopian view.

#### Ren: A Central Perspective

Ren views the apocalypse in a way that combines aspects of Jimmy's perspective with aspects of Toby's perspective. Like Toby, she has a framework for the apocalypse that allows her to contextualize it, and thus avoid being scarred by the enormity of it. Her history with the Gardeners allows her to view the Waterless Flood as an anticipated event. In addition, Ren recognizes the human cost of the pandemic and can acknowledge the wider tragedy of it; she demonstrates a sense of empathy that Toby tries to suppress

and that Jimmy lacks entirely. At the same time, Ren, like Jimmy, is locked inside a secure environment while the pandemic rages; she only escapes the Sticky Zone after most of the damage from the disease has been done. Also like Jimmy, Ren experiences the apocalypse as a burst of shocking personal violence; her memory of the pandemic is interwoven with her memory of a night of terrible violence at Scales and Tails. Ren's experience of the apocalypse shares elements with both Toby's and Jimmy's experiences of the event, but reflects her own optimistic perspective. Ren is again placed in a central, integrative position in the text, straddling two worlds and using elements of each to survive.

Ren joins the God's Gardeners as a child, so she grows up learning both their theology and their more practical lessons. She explains her initial reaction to the Gardeners:

They smiled a lot, but they scared me: they were so interested in doom, and enemies, and God. And they talked so much about Death. The Gardeners were strict about not killing Life, but on the other hand they said Death was a natural process...And when they'd start talking about the Waterless Flood that was going to kill everybody on Earth, except maybe them—that gave me nightmares. (*YF* 59)

Ren is introduced to the idea of the Waterless Flood at a young age. It terrifies her at first, but over time she becomes more accustomed to it. By the time she is older, Ren can speak of it relatively casually, as she does when she discusses the Gardeners with Crake (whom she knows as Glenn). Glenn is very curious about Gardener theology:

Glenn already knew quite a lot about the Gardeners, but he wanted to know more. What it was like to live with them every day. What they did and said, what they really believed...Sometimes he'd ask me more personal things, like 'Would you eat animals if you were starving?' and 'Do you think the Waterless Flood is really going to happen?' But I didn't always know the answers. (*YF* 228)

Like Toby, Ren is uncertain about whether or not she genuinely believes in the reality of the Flood, but the basic framework provided by Gardener theology helps her to situate it in a context; the Waterless Flood is not a shock to her in the way that it is a shock to Jimmy. She accepts it as a possibility. In addition, Ren's exposure to Gardener training helps her to cope practically with her situation instead of panicking. She describes her reaction when she realizes that everyone at Scales is dead, and because of the pandemic, no one is likely to come looking for her to let her out of the Sticky Zone:

Now I was really scared...I knew I'd have to be practical, or I'd lose hope and slide into a Fallow state and maybe never come out of it. So I opened the minifridge and the freezer and counted all the stuff inside...If I ate only a third of every meal instead of half, and saved the rest instead of tossing it down the chute, I'd have enough for at least six weeks. (*YF* 283)

Because the Waterless Flood is something she can understand, Ren is able to react practically instead of being emotionally overwhelmed by the extent of the tragedy. Her Gardener training emphasizes survival, so Ren, though she has not made specific preparations for the Flood like Toby has, is able to accept her situation, emphasize its positive aspects, and take practical action. In addition, Ren has experience with the idea of a "Fallow state": some members of the Gardeners that Ren knew as a child were completely divorced from reality. Ren recognizes the danger of this reaction and is able to avoid it by falling back on the lessons she learned as a child. Like Toby, Ren is able to make use of her Gardener training, both psychologically and practically. She is not overwhelmed by the Flood in the way that Jimmy is because she expects it, and she can recognize and avoid the dangers of emotional excess. Because she can keep herself from panicking, Ren is able to take practical steps that allow her to survive. This does not

mean that Ren doesn't mourn; she recognizes both the personal cost and the societal cost of the Waterless Flood without being overwhelmed by either.

Ren's emotional response to the apocalypse is measured. She allows herself to mourn instead of suppressing her emotions in the way that Toby does, but she does not allow herself to be paralyzed by emotion in the way that Jimmy does. While she is still inside the Sticky Zone, shielded from the more widespread effects of the pandemic, Ren is concerned with her personal tragedies, with the possible deaths of people she knows:

Say the Names, Adam One would tell us. And we'd chant these lists of Creatures...Adam One said that saying the names was a way of keeping those animals alive. So I said them.

I said other names too. Adam One, Nuala, Zeb. Shackie, Croze, and Oates. And Glenn—I just couldn't picture anyone so smart being dead.

And Jimmy, despite what he'd done.

And Amanda.

I said those names over and over, in order to keep them alive. (*YF* 315)

Ren's use of the Gardener custom of naming is both a talisman to ward off the fact of death and a method of mourning. Ren names people, as she says, to "keep them alive," in memory if not in fact. (It is worth noting that she is largely successful; most of the people listed here survive, a fact I will return to in discussing Ren's relationship with utopia.) Through her naming, Ren faces the possibility that these people may all be dead; she allows herself to face the potential personal cost of the apocalypse. On the other hand, she applies her hopeful perspective: she allows for the possibility that these people are all still alive. Ren accepts the uncertainty of her situation and copes as best she can. In this, she differs from Toby, who assumes that everyone is dead and tries to suppress her emotional response to that fact. Toby sees a bizarre animal—a lion/lamb genetic splice called a "liobam"—and her first instinct is to share the experience: "How Pilar would

have enjoyed seeing these, she thinks. Pilar, and Rebecca, and little Ren. And Adam One. And Zeb. All dead now. Stop it, she tells herself. Just stop that right now” (*YF* 95). In keeping with her rigorous rationality, Toby assumes all of these people are definitively dead instead of posing it as a possibility, the way that Ren does. Toby also steers herself away from these kinds of thoughts to avoid the emotional pain that comes with them. Instead of allowing herself to mourn, Toby focuses on survival and avoids thinking about her potential losses. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Jimmy is consumed by his personal losses to such an extent that he is unable to consider the broader tragedy that the apocalypse represents. Ren recognizes both her individual tragedy and the larger tragedy. Ren’s acceptance and positive outlook set her apart. Once she is released from the Sticky Zone, Ren is forced to flee Scales and Tails in the company of Amanda and their childhood friends, Shackie, Croze, and Oates. She describes the wasteland through which they run:

There was a lot of trash cluttering the streets—burnt things, broken things...It was the small normal things that bothered me the most. Somebody’s old diary, with the words melting off the pages. The hats. The shoes—they were worse than the hats, and it was worse if there were two shoes the same. The kids’ toys. The strollers minus the babies. (*YF* 338)

Ren is affected by the remains of civilization; she is upset by the traces that indicate that people suffered and died. When she sees everyday items, she is able to feel empathy for the people who used to own them; she recognizes the broader tragedy that the apocalypse represents in a way that Snowman/Jimmy does not. Ren’s reaction to abandoned items can be compared to Snowman’s reaction when he enters a house looking for supplies:

Next door there’s a child’s room, with a computer in gay red plastic, a shelf of teddy bears, a wallpaper frieze of giraffes...But there’s no child, no child’s body...Maybe it was one of the cloth and bone bundles he passed on the



streets outside. Some of them were quite small. (*OC* 232)

Snowman does not evince any emotional reaction at all to the items in this child's room. He wonders whether the child is one of the bodies he saw outside, but doesn't seem to feel anything about the child's death. Snowman does not have the capacity to feel empathy for other victims of the apocalypse; his entire focus is on his personal loss of Oryx and Crake. Ren is able to feel sadness about her personal losses without losing herself to despair, and she is also able to feel sadness about the lives of strangers affected by Crake's pandemic. She combines elements of Toby's perspective and elements of Snowman's perspective into her own central vision.

While many of her reactions seem to parallel Toby's, Ren does have an important similarity with Jimmy: her experience of apocalypse, like his, is inextricably bound to an experience of shocking violence. Ren's story about the Waterless Flood is presented in the context of several chapters describing the night the Flood began. Ren is locked in the Sticky Zone, and she watches what happens at Scales and Tails through a series of cameras. As the night unfolds, a group of criminals arrives. The criminals are called "Painballers," after the "Painball arena" in which they fight other convicts to the death. A fight breaks out among the Painballers and quickly grows out of control. Ren describes the results of the altercation:

the room was a shambles. The customers must have all run out. Savona was lying on the bar: I could tell it was her by the sparkly costume, even though it was half torn off. Her head was bent at a strange angle and there was blood all over her face. Crimson Petal was hanging from the trapeze; one of the ropes was around her neck, and between her legs was the glint of a bottle—someone must have shoved it up her. Her frills and ruffles were ripped to shreds. She looked like a limp bouquet. (*YF* 280)

Ren goes on to describe the Painballers' attempts to get into the Sticky Zone and their murder of her boss Mordis when he won't disclose the door code. The trauma of seeing her coworkers and boss murdered is much more immediate to Ren than the trauma of the apocalypse. The two events take place at the same time and while Ren definitely feels empathy for the victims of the apocalypse, the violence at Scales and Tails has much more lasting effects. After Ren is released from the Sticky Zone, she and Amanda stay at the club because it has food and working power. Shackie, Croze, and Oates arrive at Scales and Tails, and before Ren recognizes them, her reaction is one of terror. She says at the sight of them, "I felt a chill shoot through me: I had a flash of Crimson Petal hanging from the trapeze rope with a bottle shoved up her, and I couldn't breathe" (*YF* 331). Ren has a physical reaction to her memory of the violence at Scales, instantly so terrified that she can't even breathe. Her fear of sexual violence—and specifically the three Painballers who destroyed Scales and Tails—persists. Later, when Ren and her friends flee the criminals, Ren realizes

It had to be them: the three Painballers who'd smashed up Scales, that first night of the Flood. The ones who'd killed Mordis. They'd seen me on the intercom. That's why they'd come back to Scales—to open up the Sticky Zone like an oyster in order to get at me. They would have found tools. It might have taken a while, but they'd have done it in the end.

That thought gave me a very cold feeling, but I didn't tell the others about it. They had enough to worry about anyway. (*YF* 338)

In the first sentence, Ren links the violence at Scales to the Waterless Flood, and it is the thought of that violence and the men who perpetrated it that leaves her cold. She has a framework that helps her to cope with the Waterless Flood: the idea has been a part of her beliefs for a long time. The violence at Scales and Tails, however, is outside of her

experience or beliefs, and is thus much harder for her to reconcile with her worldview. The apocalypse and the tragedy at her club are the same story to her and she has to tell them together. Ren represents the phenomenon Berger describes when he says that “healing cannot take place until the trauma is brought to consciousness through narrative” (27). By conflating the two narratives, Ren can begin to address both sources of trauma, a necessary step as her vision becomes increasingly utopian.

Ren’s experience of the apocalypse—much like her focalization—integrates the perspectives of both Toby and Jimmy/Snowman. Ren is both locked away and exposed, her response is both practical and emotional, and she sees both her private sorrows and a larger tragedy. Her measured middle path offers a perspective unsullied by self-deception and less constrained by doubt. Ren combines qualities found in the other two focalizers and filters them through her own positive viewpoint in a way that offers utopian possibilities. As the only character who responds to the apocalypse with both empathy and optimism, Ren offers a way forward. It is her central perspective that will finally redeem Snowman’s vision, limited by self-deception, and combine with Toby’s practical vision to suggest the barest hints of a potential future.

As Atwood’s three focalizers view Crake’s pandemic, their different perspectives further establish their positions in terms of dystopia, apocalypse, and utopia. Snowman/Jimmy’s dystopian vision continues to cause problems for him as he is presented with dramatic evidence of his misreading of his own life. He resists the self-examination that the apocalypse should inspire in him, however, shutting out the reality of the event both physically and psychologically. Instead of allowing Crake’s pandemic

to provide needed revelation, Jimmy/Snowman reduces it to its personal cost, placing the deaths of Oryx and Crake at the center of his history of trauma. Jimmy further trivializes the extinction of mankind by conflating it with the violent media he consumed as a teenager, failing to see the stark difference between fiction and human tragedy. Toby's view of apocalypse begins to ameliorate the flawed view embodied in Snowman/Jimmy. Her background, rooted in the pleeblands instead of inside the Compound walls, allows her to recognize apocalypse as an inevitable facet of the larger dystopian society. As a result of this recognition, and her time with the Gardeners, she copes much more successfully with the shock of Crake's pandemic than does Jimmy. Toby's practical view of the world also aids her survival, as she responds to tragedy with concrete action. Her exposed position during the pandemic allows for a broader view of the scale of Crake's apocalypse: a view that Jimmy is incapable of providing. Toby's rational response to the apocalypse, and her ability to come through it with her perspective intact, positions her as a transitional figure; her alternative to Snowman/Jimmy's dystopian view gestures toward the utopian vision embodied in Ren. Ren's experience of apocalypse reflects both her central position in the text and her generally optimistic vision. Ren, like Toby, has a psychological framework within which to understand a tragedy on a massive scale. Ren reacts to the tragedy of the apocalypse in much the same way she responds to other aspects of her life: she accepts her situation and strives to find the positive aspects of it, speaking in the language of possibility and hope. Ren recognizes the broader tragedy, but does not allow it to overwhelm her. She experiences Crake's pandemic in conjunction with the violence at Scales and Tails, and begins to heal by telling those intertwined

stories. Ren's response to apocalypse reinforces her previous focalization and emphasizes her hopeful view of the world. Her capacity to integrate various perspectives and experiences and remain open to possibility is what makes her vision utopian.

### Chapter Three—Utopia: What About a Future?

When discussing utopian vision in Atwood's two novels, I use the term to indicate a perspective that is open to possibility and hope rather than a static state of perfection. Atwood's novels are dystopian in nature, and offer much in the way of darkness. The utopian perspective, therefore, is present on the horizon, a glimmer of hope after extensive trauma. Laurence Davies, in "At Play in the Fields of Our Ford: Utopian Dystopianism in Atwood, Huxley, and Zamyatin," argues that "[r]eading dystopian fiction in a utopian spirit asks us to hear the voices of otherness, possibility, and uncertainty that challenge or mock the dystopian monologue" (207). This appears to be a central facet of Atwood's project in these books. In *Oryx and Crake*, there is only Snowman's flawed vision, only Snowman's "dystopian monologue." In *The Year of the Flood*, however, the voices—and the possibilities—multiply. The dystopian view of human nature established by the first text is challenged by the second. Toby and Ren both offer alternatives to Snowman's flawed vision, and the end of *The Year of the Flood*, while similar to the end of *Oryx and Crake* in that it is inconclusive, offers a variety of ways forward, a profusion of utopian possibilities. Utopia, as it appears in these texts, is not a static, perfected state. Dunja Mohr, in discussing a range of contemporary female dystopias, says of similar works that, "Without ever narrating or exactly defining utopia, these...dystopian texts map not a single path but rather several motions and changes that

may lead to a potentially better future” (Mohr 53). Though these two books by Atwood are not addressed by Mohr, they do feature many of the elements described in her work. Atwood is not engaging in a project of envisioning a perfect future state, but in her dark, dystopian world, she allows for glimpses of hope in human potential. Utopia, like apocalypse, is a matter of perception.

Snowman, with his limited dystopian vision, can see only the future Crake had envisioned for him: the death of humanity, including himself, and the rise of the Crakers. Even after he finds out that he is not the last human left alive, Snowman proves incapable of seeing a possible way forward for humanity. This is evident in his plan to kill the surviving humans to protect the Crakers: his choices about the future are made because he wants to fulfill the promises of his past. He looks backwards instead of forwards. Finally, Snowman’s increasingly poor health suggests that even as his fractured narrative is rehabilitated, he himself may not survive. Toby frames utopia in terms of negation and doubt. Like Snowman, she cannot initially envision a future. Also like Snowman, she seeks a sense of purpose and wonders why she was spared. When she is reunited with Ren and discovers that she is not the only one left alive, however, Toby’s perspective undergoes a shift. She begins to see possibilities for the future and concludes her narration on a note of hope. Her ability to adapt allows her to contribute to a utopian vision of the future. Ren, by contrast, is a utopian figure throughout the text. Her sections serve a specific purpose; as Mohr argues of similar works, “the utopian subtext is interwoven as a *continuous* narrative strand within the dystopian text” (Mohr 53). Ren always speaks in terms of optimism and hope, and she can always envision a future. Her

gradual movement away from dystopian perspectives on violence and sex also marks her as utopian. Ren sees the world through a prism of hope—she envisions the reality she wishes to see, and later events frequently support her wishful thinking.

### Snowman/Jimmy: A Dead End

Snowman's position in the text—both physically and psychologically situated inside a “walled space”—makes him unsuited for utopia. His vision remains too limited to allow him to picture—much less participate in—a utopian future. Snowman is an example of the phenomenon identified by Davies, who argues that “[d]ystopian society is framed in space as well as time” (209). The utopian possibilities for a human future exist outside of Snowman's walled space; the walls of the Compounds mark not only a physical barrier between the rich and the poor, but also a psychological barrier between a dystopian vision and a utopian one. This is illustrated in the vision of utopia to which Snowman commits himself: the destruction of humanity and the survival of Crake's new humans. This utopian vision is deeply flawed. One problem with it is identified by Natalia Skradol and Ephraim Sicher in their article “A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11.” While the article does not specifically address *Oryx and Crake*, its arguments about utopia are relevant to Snowman's vision of the future:

There is something inhuman (and thus potentially dysfunctional or dystopian) in the idea of a utopia which requires that human society as currently constituted be replaced (whether through natural selection or coercion) by a social order based on different (implicitly non-human) characteristics. (155)

Crake rejects humanity as it is and uses the limits of scientific technology to create his



new humans, attempting to craft a society that is incapable of the worst excesses of human nature. That Snowman adopts this inhuman utopia as his own suggests both that he is incapable of envisioning a future on his own, and that his dystopian perception blinds him to the horror of Crake's vision. Snowman's unsuitability for utopia is revealed in his refusal to see a future for humanity, his emphasis on the past, and the shift away from his perspective (marked by his deteriorating health) throughout *The Year of the Flood*.

Snowman's language regarding the future shows that he cannot picture a way forward for himself. He describes his perspective: "He doesn't know which is worse, a past he can't regain or a present that will destroy him if he looks at it too clearly. Then there's the future. Sheer vertigo" (OC 147). Snowman's language in this statement reflects the flawed perception that makes utopia inaccessible to him. Snowman longs for "a past he can't regain," that is, the state of not knowing that so insulated him from the realities of his world. He cannot face his present, unwilling to look too closely at the world created, in part, by his refusal to see the truths of his past. He cannot envision a future at all, characterizing even the thought of one as "sheer vertigo." Snowman's refusal to deal directly with either his past or his present leaves him trapped, and incapable of seeing a future for himself. Because of his own limited vision, he chooses to adhere to Crake's vision; he is genuinely incapable of framing a utopia of his own volition. This inability accentuates Snowman's dystopian position in the text. The only utopia Snowman is capable of seeing involves the Crakers. Snowman has no room in his worldview for other surviving humans:

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. (*OC* 41)

Snowman makes a number of revealing assumptions in this statement: he assumes that he is the only human being in the world who remains alive, he assumes the Crakers are the only possible future, and he assumes that the limits of his imagination represent the limits of possibility. As a result of his limited view, Snowman can see only one role for himself:

He is Crake's prophet now, whether he likes it or not; and the prophet of Oryx as well. That, or nothing. And he couldn't stand to be nothing, to know himself to be nothing. He needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood. (*OC* 104)

The first sentence of this statement suggests that Snowman does not enjoy this role, that he only interacts with the Crakers because he is forced to. The next few sentences, however, undermine that view. Snowman sees only two choices for himself: to be Crake's prophet or to be nothing. His ego will not allow him to be nothing; when Snowman lists his needs, they are all selfish. He needs to be listened to and heard, which is a position the Crakers fill very well, as they see him as the source of their instructions from Oryx and Crake. Snowman is not interested in listening or hearing what others have to say; he is preoccupied with his own need to be understood, and cares little for understanding others. For this reason, he is ideally suited for working with the Crakers. His true feelings about his role as their prophet are revealed when Snowman realizes he is not the only human left alive. Initially, he is excited by the prospect of human contact. Snowman intercepts a radio transmission from a group of survivors: "He feels buoyant, elated almost. There are more possibilities now" (*OC* 274). Snowman continues to describe his feelings in terms of multiplicity, using both "buoyant" and "elated" to

indicate his happiness. He is briefly pleased by the notion of possibility; the presence of other people opens up potential avenues for a future. Instead of being locked into his role as Crake's prophet, Snowman has choices. When he discovers that these other people have come into contact with the Crakers, however, Snowman grows concerned:

Maybe all will be well, maybe this trio of strangers is good-hearted, sane, well-intentioned; maybe he'll succeed in presenting the Crakers to them in the proper light. On the other hand, these new arrivals could easily see the Children of Crake as freakish, or savage, or non-human and a threat.

Images from old history flip through his head, sidebars from *Blood and Roses*: Genghis Khan's skull pile, the heaps of shoes and eyeglasses from Dachau, the burning corpse-filled churches in Rwanda, the sack of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. (OC 366)

In the first part of this statement, Snowman speaks in the language of possibility as he considers how contact between other humans and the Crakers might play out. Very quickly, however, he begins to eliminate possibilities that conflict with his (or rather Crake's) view of the future. He refers to "Blood and Roses," a game Jimmy used to play with Crake, where human achievements are played against atrocities. Snowman, because of his dystopian worldview, immediately pictures the atrocities; when he begins to consider specific possibilities, he only sees negative outcomes. Snowman is incapable of envisioning a hopeful future that has humans in it. Instead, he draws on his dystopian past to determine how he should act in the present.

Snowman's actions in the present are guided by the past, and are affected by his inability to see a human future. At the end of *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman finds himself faced with a choice: he can embrace the possibilities offered by other human survivors, or he can kill them to protect the Crakers. The final lines of the book are inconclusive:

'What do you want me to do?' he whispers to the empty air.  
It's hard to know.

*Oh, Jimmy, you were so funny.  
Don't let me down.  
From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face.  
Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go. (OC 374)*

In the final lines of the book, Snowman's focalization unfolds in a familiar way: he faces a difficult question and external voices underscore moments he would prefer to forget. The scraps of conversation he remembers give some indication of what he plans to do. The first sentence comes from an email he received from a woman after he left her. At the time, he noticed the incongruity of the past tense, "as if he'd died" (OC 291). Its use here suggests that his own mortality is on his mind; perhaps he expects a confrontation and worries that the past tense may soon be applicable to him. The second line is uttered by Jimmy's mother just before her death. It echoes throughout the novel, emphasizing Snowman's sense of guilt; he spent his life as Jimmy disappointing people. The line also recalls both Oryx and Crake asking Jimmy to look after the Crakers "just in case," and this weighs on him as he decides what to do. *Oryx and Crake* ends on this cusp of action, waiting for Snowman to choose between the utopian vision offered by the Crakers and the utopian possibilities offered by other human survivors. It is not until the end of *The Year of the Flood* that Snowman's choice is revealed. Ren narrates the scene. She and Toby locate Amanda and her two Painballer kidnapers. Ren and Toby hide from the Painballers, on the verge of stepping into the clearing to confront them:

Then suddenly there's a fourth person in the clearing—a naked man, but not one of the green-eyed beautiful ones. This one is emaciated and scabby. He has a long scraggly beard, and he looks very crazy. But I know him. Or I think I know him. Is it Jimmy?

He's carrying a spraygun, and he has it aimed at the two men. He's going to shoot them. He has that kind of maniac focus. (YF 418)

Snowman, in deciding to shoot the other surviving humans, chooses Crake's utopian future over the utopian possibilities of mankind itself. He plans to uphold his promises to Oryx and Crake, choosing his role as Crake's prophet over the lives of other people. When he is given a choice, he decides that he would rather have the "illusion of understanding" offered by the Crakers than the possibility of genuine understanding offered by other humans. In addition, he reveals his shortsightedness: he thinks only about himself and his own feelings. He does not take the time to speak to the group of survivors, and instead plans to shoot them on sight. His dystopian vision, however, does not prevail. Ren prevents Snowman from shooting, stepping into the clearing to keep him from killing Amanda. Despite his failure to actually murder anyone, Snowman's act of choosing demonstrates the limitations of his vision; even when confronted with an end to his loneliness, he cannot conceive of a future in which humans and the Crakers can coexist. His dystopian vision of society so thoroughly emphasizes the darker side of human nature that he has accepted Crake's premise: in order for the world to survive, humanity must be destroyed and replaced by the Crakers. That perspective precludes a utopia that includes people; Snowman can neither picture nor participate in a utopian human future.

Snowman's poor physical and psychological state at the end of *The Year of the Flood* suggests that his dystopian vision may no longer be required in the text. Croze describes the Crakers to Ren, and Ren asks when she can see them. Croze replies,

Once we take care of those Painballers. I'd have to go with you, though. There's another guy down there—sleeps in a tree, talks to himself, crazy as a bag of snakes, no offence to snakes. We leave him alone—figure he might be infected. I wouldn't want him bothering you. (YF 396)

From the perspective of the community created by the surviving God's Gardeners, Snowman's crazed, isolated existence looks very different. His mental state appears to be much worse than it was at the end of *Oryx and Crake*, and he has an infected foot that is bad and getting worse. When Ren finally encounters Jimmy, he is not doing well:

I walk towards him, slowly and carefully because he still has his gun. 'Jimmy,' I say. 'It's Ren. Remember me? You can put that down. It's okay now.' It's how you'd say it to a child.

He lowers the spraygun and I wrap my arms around him and give him a long hug. He's shivering, but his skin's burning hot.

'Ren?' he says. 'Are you dead?'

'No, Jimmy. I'm alive, and so are you.' I smooth back his hair.

'I'm such a mess,' he says. 'Sometimes I think everyone's dead.' (YF 420)

Snowman deteriorates both physically and psychologically. He's burning with fever from his infected foot, and he seems almost completely disconnected from reality. He vaguely recognizes Ren, but he isn't sure if she's alive or a hallucination, and his last sentence indicates that the fact of the apocalypse is not quite real to him. A few pages later, at the very end of the book, Snowman's condition has worsened. Toby tries to distribute her soup to everyone around the fire:

The other cup she gives to Jimmy, but he can't hold it right and spills half of the soup into the sand. I crouch down beside him to help him drink. Maybe he's dying, I think. Maybe in the morning he'll be dead.

'I knew you'd come back,' he says, this time to me. 'I knew it. Don't turn into an owl.'

'I'm not an owl,' I say. 'You're out of your mind. I'm Ren—remember? I just want you to know that you broke my heart; but anyway, I'm happy you're still alive.' Now that I've said it, something heavy and smothering lifts away from me, and I truly do feel happy.

He smiles at me, or at whoever he thinks I am. A blistery little grin. 'Here we go again,' he says to his sick foot. 'Listen to the music.' He tilts his head to the side; his expression is rapturous. 'You can't kill the music,' he says. 'You can't!' (YF 431)

Ren's language at the start of this passage, where she predicts that Jimmy might be dead

by morning, is not a good sign for him. Ren has a consistently hopeful approach, and her view of the world is frequently accurate; if she does not see much hope for Jimmy, he probably will not last much longer. In addition, Jimmy has suffered a complete break with reality. Ren refers to “whoever he thinks I am,” and he worries that she might turn into an owl, the way that Oryx does in his hallucinations. This indicates that Snowman still refuses to engage with the reality of his world. He evinces

a refusal or inability to mourn that does not involve repression of traumatic memory but is rather ‘a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness.’ (Santner in Berger 28)

Through his hallucinations, and now through his misidentification of Ren, Snowman shuts out the reality of Oryx’s death. His fantasy that she is still alive prevents him from coming to terms with his own trauma, and leaves him trapped in his increasingly limited psychological world. The text ends with the Crakers approaching the campfire, singing as they come. Another cusp has been reached, and the different possibilities for a utopian future are about to collide. Snowman, it would appear, will not be around to see how this cusp is resolved. In keeping with a utopian vision of possibility, however, Snowman may survive. As Davies argues, “dystopian writing has a strong affinity with utopianism—with a kind of utopianism that rejects closure” (212). Snowman’s survival, and the clash between dystopian and utopian visions that his survival would entail, would certainly create more possibilities than would the neat closure of Snowman’s death. Until the final book of the trilogy is released, Snowman’s fate will remain uncertain.

## Toby: An Evolving View

Toby's view of herself would seem to make her unsuited for utopia: she doubts that she has anything to offer to a utopian future. As is often the case in the novel, however, events reveal that Toby's doubts are unwarranted. She has a great deal to offer, in fact, as the views of her provided by other characters make clear. After the apocalypse, Toby, like Snowman, has a hard time envisioning a future:

She's been having some difficulty waking up. She must fight against lethargy. It's a strong desire—to sleep. To sleep and sleep. To sleep forever. She can't live only in the present, like a shrub. But the past is a closed door, and she can't see any future. Maybe she'll go on from day to day and year to year until she simply withers, folds in on herself, shrivels up like an old spider. (*YF* 96)

Toby's language is the language of negation. She describes the past as “a closed door” despite its relevance to both her present and her future, and she “can't see any future,” a description that seems to preclude her having a future at all. In the next line, however, she describes a potential future in which she envisions herself surviving alone, simply passing time until she withers and dies. It is not that she cannot picture any future, then, it is that she cannot picture a future in which she has a purpose, a reason for survival. She makes this distinction explicit when she wonders why she survived the apocalypse:

Why has she been saved alive? Out of the countless millions. Why not someone younger, someone with more optimism and fresher cells? She ought to trust that she's here for a reason—to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck. She ought to trust, but she can't. (*YF* 95)

Toby's phrasing here belies her professed lack of belief: she uses the passive voice, wondering why she “has been saved,” a construction that requires a higher power to do the saving. Toby believes, then, that God saved her, but she doesn't understand why she would survive and not others. Her emphasis on “more optimism and fresher cells”



indicates that she does see a future, but she does not see where she will fit into it. She believes that she should trust in her fate, that she should simply accept that she was saved for a reason, but instead, as she does in previous situations, she doubts. Her language reveals the tension between her desire for faith and her inability to see any purpose for her continued survival. It is not until Ren arrives that Toby begins to abandon the language of negation and doubt in favor of the language of possibility.

Ren's arrival at Toby's hideout in the AnooYoo Spa prompts a moment of crisis for Toby. She has become accustomed to prioritizing the practical—her survival—over the emotional—her human feeling for others. This hierarchy allowed her to survive the apocalypse by ignoring the sick and the dying, but it does not offer a sustainable template for moving forward. At first, Toby tries to apply this hierarchy to a new situation; Ren is injured and ill, and Toby worries about the logistics of keeping them both alive:

This is going to be a lot of work, thinks Toby. And when Ren recovers—if she recovers—there will be two people eating instead of one. So the food stash will be gone twice as quickly. What's left of it. Which isn't much.

Maybe the fever will get the better of Ren. Maybe she'll die in her sleep.

Toby considers the powdered Death Angels. It wouldn't take much. Just a little, in Ren's weakened condition. Put her out of her misery. Help her to fly away on white, white wings. Maybe it would be kinder. A blessing. (*YF* 357)

Toby frames her impulse to kill Ren as “kinder” and “a blessing.” She appropriates the language of faith for a darker purpose. The fact that Toby considers poisoning Ren shows that, at first, she still views her choices through the lens of apocalypse; she thinks about herself and her own survival above all else. Toby has become accustomed to suppressing her emotions, so she is able to take a look at her situation in a completely rational way, divorced from feeling, and determine that caring for an injured girl is not going to make

her life easier. Her immediate rejection of this idea, however, proves that she is capable of transitioning to a utopian perspective. Her next thoughts after she considers killing Ren show that she is capable of change:

Adam One would say that Ren is a precious gift that has been given to Toby so that Toby may demonstrate unselfishness and sharing and those higher qualities the Gardeners had been so eager to bring out in her. Toby can't quite see it that way, not at the moment. But she'll have to keep trying. (*YF* 357-58)

Toby frames her desire to kill Ren as a perception problem when she indicates that she “can't quite see it that way.” She also, however, indicates her willingness to try a different angle of view. In fact, as soon as Toby has rejected her purely survival-based perspective, she offers herself an alternative way to see the situation. She cannot change her perception instantly, but she commits to trying a perspective that is more hopeful than her initial view. Indeed, it is just after she rejects the idea of poisoning Ren that her language begins to shift from negation and doubt to possibility. Two pages later, Toby thinks about her friends from the Gardeners: “Dear Adam One, thinks Toby. He must be dead. And Zeb—dead also, despite wishful thinking. Though maybe not; because if I'm alive—more to the point, if Ren's alive—then anyone at all could be alive too” (*YF* 359). The language at the beginning of this statement matches Toby's previous focalization; she chooses not to hope, to feel her grief now instead of waiting to be disappointed. Halfway through the statement, however, her language begins to evolve. She believes that Zeb is dead “despite wishful thinking,” but the success of Ren's wishful thinking undermines Toby's sense of certainty for the implied reader. In the next sentence, Toby shifts to the language of possibility, acknowledging a sense of openness when she says that “anyone at all could be alive too.” This acceptance of multiple possibilities places

her in opposition to Snowman, who can see only a single future that is not his own. Indeed, even the structure of *The Year of the Flood*, with its two focalizers, draws attention to multiplicity. The appearance of Ren inspires new hope and Toby's language reflects it: her admission that her friends may still be alive is a departure for her, and it shows that she can adapt her perception to more utopian circumstances. Toby finds a sense of purpose, a reason for survival in Ren's arrival:

Her homicidal impulse of the night before is gone: she will not drag dead Ren out into the meadow for the pigs and vultures. Now she'd like to cure her, cherish her, for isn't it miraculous that Ren is here? That she's come through the Waterless Flood with only minor damage? Or fairly minor. Just to have a second person on the premises—even a feeble person, even a sick person who sleeps most of the time—just this makes the Spa seem like a cozy domestic dwelling rather than a haunted house. (*YF* 360)

In the course of a day, Toby has managed to adopt Adam One's more generous view of Ren's arrival: instead of viewing Ren's murder as "a blessing," she now views Ren's survival as a miracle, as hope, as possibility. Her language has shifted from the practical and factual to the language of belief. Ren is something to be cherished. This shift indicates that Toby's perspective becomes more utopian in the recognition of possibilities. She is capable of unwarranted doubt, but she is also capable of its opposite: faith. Toby's faith—and her true potential—is demonstrated not through her words, but through the words of others and through Toby's actions.

Toby's intense scrutiny of her world is reflected in her often harsh view of herself. Much as she doubts her own perception as a focalizer, she doubts her own capabilities, viewing herself much more critically than other characters in the novel view her. This is most evident in the final chapters of the book. Toby and Ren reunite with the

surviving members of the God's Gardeners, and Toby volunteers to accompany Ren to find and rescue Amanda. In the final chapter from Toby's perspective (Chapter 75), Toby worries about the challenges of the task:

She pauses, turns, smiles at Ren. Do I look reassuring? she wonders. Calm and in control? Do I look as if I know what the hell I'm doing? I'm not up to this. I'm not fast enough, I'm too old, I'm rusty, I don't have the whiplash reflexes, I'm weighed down with scruples. Forgive me, Ren. I'm leading you to doom. I pray that if I miss we both die quickly.

What Saint should I call upon? Who has the resolution and the skill? The ruthlessness. The judgment. The accuracy.

Dear Leopard, dear Wolf, dear Liobam: lend me your Spirits now. (*YF* 415)

In this section, Toby begins by wondering how she is perceived; she is concerned with whether or not she looks as if she is in control. The rest of the statement combines doubt and faith: Toby begins with a litany of reasons why their rescue mission will not work and finishes by calling on animal spirits to help her. She sees herself as incapable, as someone slowed by age and hampered by a lack of ruthlessness, but the act of calling on spirits for assistance shows that she has some hope for their encounter with the criminals. In the following chapters, all told from Ren's perspective, Toby's doubts are once again demonstrated to be unfounded. Ren's perception of Toby is very different from Toby's perception of herself. Ren says,

I feel myself breathing fast. Toby takes hold of my arm and gives it a squeeze. That means *Keep calm*. She turns her brown face towards me and smiles a shrunken-head smile; the edges of her teeth glint through her lips, the muscles of her jaws tighten, and all of a sudden I feel sorry for those two men. (*YF* 416-17)

Ren doesn't see all the doubts that Toby has about herself; she has no doubt that Toby is in control of the situation. As it turns out, Ren's view of Toby's capabilities is more

accurate than Toby's own view. Ren describes how Toby takes charge of the situation when Snowman and the Painballers face off in the clearing:

Toby steps into the clearing. She has the rifle up and aimed...She must sound scary to him, and look it too—skinny, tattered, teeth bared. Like a TV banshee, like a walking skeleton; like someone with nothing to lose.

To me: 'Get that spraygun. Don't let him grab you.' To the shorthair: 'Lie down.' To me: 'Watch your ankles.' To the bearded one: 'Let go of her.'

I think I might faint. But I can't, because I need to help Toby. I don't know how, but I run over. So close I can smell them. Rancid sweat, oily hair. Snatch up their spraygun. (*YF* 419)

Toby's actions match Ren's perception of her much better than they match her perception of herself: she handles a crisis calmly and intelligently, and she and Ren get the better of the Painballers. Toby takes charge of the situation in a way that belies her internal doubts; she is revealed to be far more capable than she believes. Toby's actions in the aftermath of the capture of the Painballers and the release of Amanda are also indicative of her many strengths:

The first thing Toby did—once the Painballers were safely roped up—was to give [Amanda] a cup of warm water with honey, for dehydration, with some of her lamb's-quarters powder stirred in...Once Amanda's electrolyte levels were back up, said Toby, she could start to deal with whatever else about Amanda needed fixing. The cuts and bruises, to begin with. (*YF* 429)

Toby also applies a poultice to Snowman's foot and makes a pot of soup so that everyone can eat. She slips easily into a mothering role, healing and feeding the rest of the survivors. Despite her doubts, Toby never fails to come through in a crisis. Her internal view of herself is reflective of her pattern of unwarranted doubt, but her actions show her utopian potential. Her final speech in the novel, viewed from Ren's perspective, reflects her transition from doubt to faith and acceptance of a future. The survivors sit around a fire, celebrating a Gardener feast night:

‘What is the point?’ says Amanda, not to me but to Toby.

‘This is not the time,’ says Toby in her old Eve voice, ‘for dwelling on ultimate purposes. I would like us all to forget the past, the worst parts of it...And I would like us to remember those who are gone, throughout the world but most especially our absent friends. Dear Adams, dear Eves, dear Fellow Mammals and Fellow Creatures, all those now in Spirit—keep us in your view and lend us your strength, because we are surely going to need it.’ (YF 431)

Amanda, one of the strongest characters in the novel, is shattered by her kidnapping and rape and she turns to Toby for guidance. Toby slips easily back into her role as an authority figure for Amanda and Ren, and her language reflects her new sense of purpose. She emphasizes the importance of letting go of the past, and the collective nature of the future. She calls on “Fellow Mammals and Fellow Creatures,” creating an impression of a collective endeavor that is in direct opposition to Snowman’s individualistic vision. It is also in opposition to the larger dystopia:

dystopian fiction must contend with the loss of favor of utopianism in a consumerist mass-culture which values instant gratification and fetishizes material objects of desire. The egocentric meanness of “me-ness” stresses the individual at the expense of shared ideological goals. Family ties, group identity, or the collective tend not to be feelgood experiences. (Skradol and Sicher 165)

Snowman’s “consumerist mass culture” (and our own) is designed to devalue “family ties, group identity, or the collective.” The God’s Gardeners, on the other hand, reject consumerism and stress the value of human relationships and the importance of collective effort. This particular contrast is highlighted in Toby’s speech. She emphasizes the value of the collective, finishing her statement by referring to the group in future tense. This final speech reflects the practicality present throughout Toby’s focalization, but it also illustrates her sense of faith and hope: she recognizes both worldwide and very personal losses, she mourns for the dead, and she draws on memories of loved ones for strength

going forward. The last line indicates that Toby can now picture a future—the way forward will be difficult, but there is a way forward. Toby’s final speech, ending on a hopeful note, shows that she is adapting to the new perspective required by a utopian future. Her own survival is not as important as helping others. Toby’s evolving perspective demonstrates that she sees human possibilities and is capable of utopian vision.

### Ren: Warranted Optimism

Ren is positioned as a utopian character in the text in a variety of ways: she is set up in opposition to Crake, she speaks in the language of possibility, and she rejects the values of her dystopian society. Ren first encounters Crake (known to her as Glenn) through the God’s Gardeners: Crake helps a friend in the Gardeners gain access to the medical laboratory inside the Compound where he lives. Later, when Ren returns to the Compounds with her mother, she attends school with Crake. After Jimmy dumps her, Ren pursues a friendship (of sorts) with Crake:

We talked a lot. We hung out in the mall so much that kids started saying we were a thing, but we weren’t—it was never a romance. What was it then? I guess Glenn was the only person at HelthWyzer I could talk to about the Gardeners, and it was the same for him—that was the bond. It was like being in a secret club. Maybe Jimmy was never my twin at all—maybe it was Glenn. Which is a strange thought because he was a strange guy...Were we friends? I wouldn’t even call it that. Sometimes he looked at me as if I was an amoeba, or some problem he was solving in Nanobioforms. (*YF* 228)

Ren suggests earlier in the text that Jimmy is her twin because they share the same sense of sadness, and the same sense of isolation in their families. In this section, she suggests that perhaps Glenn is her twin instead because they share a bond based on the God’s

Gardeners. The opposition is interesting because it is Ren who answers Glenn's many questions about the Waterless Flood, an event he later brings about. In this statement, Ren sets herself up as Crake's twin, as the character who can potentially rehabilitate the world he destroyed. Crake was driven to release his pandemic by his inaccurate, dystopian perspective, and his utopian vision is equally flawed. His disregard for the consequences of his actions—and his dismissal of humankind as a viable species—demonstrates the limits of his view. Ren rejects dystopian thinking over the course of the text through her embrace of an open, hopeful vision; her utopian perspective offers an alternative future for the world Crake destroyed.

Ren's language throughout *The Year of the Flood* marks her as a utopian character; she is the only focalizer who maintains a consistent sense of optimism, and who can always picture a future. When she realizes that the violence at Scales and the pandemic have combined to leave her stranded in the Sticky Zone, she initially despairs:

I realized what would happen. The Sticky Zone was a fortress. No one could get in without the door code, and nobody but Mordis knew that code. That's what he always said. And he hadn't told it: he'd saved my life. But now I was locked inside, with no one to let me out. *Oh please*, I thought. *I don't want to be dead.* (YF 281)

Ren does not see a way out of her situation. She briefly faces the possibility that she might die, but she phrases it as a plea: she does not want to be dead. This phrasing suggests that even here, she sees a future for herself, and she does not want to die. While Snowman and Toby both have trouble perceiving a future for themselves, Ren does not have the same problem. In the very next chapter, she recovers her optimism: "I told myself that although I couldn't get out, nobody else could get in, and I'd be okay as long



as the solar didn't break down...I would take one day at a time and see what came of it" (YF 283). Ren recovers from her despair quickly and decides on a course of action. She emphasizes the positive aspects of her situation, dire as it is, and demonstrates her belief in a future. Ren actually has a hard time picturing herself not having a future:

I counted the food I had left. Four weeks' worth, three weeks, two. I marked off the time with my eyebrow pencil. If I ate less, I could make it last longer. But if Amanda didn't come soon, I'd be dead. I couldn't really imagine it. (YF 315)

Whereas Snowman and Toby can't imagine what their futures might look like, Ren can't imagine not having one. Her rhetoric is the opposite of theirs: she always believes that things will work out, even when that seems the most improbable outcome. This may seem to establish her as foolish or hopelessly naive, but (as I will show in the next paragraph) the text often supports Ren's view of the world. After Ren is released from the Sticky Zone by Amanda, the two girls along with Shackie, Croze, and Oates flee Scales and Tails with the Painballers right behind them. Ren is scared, especially because she has seen firsthand what the Painballers are capable of, but she still maintains her sense of confidence. As the group escapes through the pleeblands, Ren pictures her future: "I guess this is what the rest of my life will be like, I thought. Running away, scrounging for leftovers, crouching on floors, getting dirtier and dirtier" (YF 340). The group is in mortal danger: there is no doubt that the Painballers will rape and kill them if they find them, but Ren is confident that they will survive. She doesn't relish the prospect of spending the rest of her life on the run, but her statement assumes that she will have a life to spend running. Even in the most difficult of situations, Ren's optimism is her dominant

response to the world. She sees a future for herself throughout the novel, even if it is a bleak one, and the text itself tends to corroborate her view.

In the early chapters of the novel, it is easy to dismiss Ren as foolish and naive. Other characters comment that she is “overly pliable” and “easily led” (*YF* 79). Combined with her misreading of situations because of her innocence, these characterizations of Ren paint her as a silly girl who does not understand how her dystopian society works. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes increasingly evident that Ren’s vision of the world is more accurate than it first appears; Ren’s hopeful picturing of specific events is frequently followed by those events. When Ren is trapped in the Sticky Zone, she isn’t sure whether or not Amanda will be able to reach her:

You create your own reality, the horoscopes always said, and the Gardeners said that too. So I tried to create the reality of Amanda. Now she was in her khaki desert-girl outfit. Now she’d stopped to have a drink of water. Now she was digging up a root and eating it. Now she was walking again. She was coming towards me, hour by hour. She wouldn’t get the sickness, and no one would kill her, because she was so smart and strong. She was smiling. Now she was singing. But I knew I was just making it up. (*YF* 284)

In this section, Ren initially comes across as foolish: she depends on her horoscope to guide her responses to her world, and she tries to create the concrete reality of Amanda by picturing her. She describes Amanda’s actions, starting with her outfit and ending with her singing as she makes her way across a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Ren’s self-awareness in the last line makes her appear more practical: she knows this mental exercise is just a way to make herself feel better. A few chapters later, however, Amanda arrives at Scales and Tails: “I first spotted Amanda as a shadow on the videoscreen...I

was crying so much with relief I couldn't speak" (*YF* 317). In short order, Amanda figures out the door code and releases Ren from the Sticky Zone. She is not sick, and she is even wearing the outfit in which Ren pictured her. Ren's vision of Amanda working her way across the country to rescue her turns out to be accurate. Ren makes use of a similar technique when the roles are reversed. She and Toby set out to rescue Amanda from the Painballers, and Ren worries about whether or not they will succeed:

I have to find her, and get her away from whatever may be happening to her. Though maybe she's already hanging in a tree with parts of her cut out, like Oates.

But I don't want to picture that, so instead I imagine myself walking towards her because that's what I'll have to do. (*YF* 407)

Ren reiterates her conviction that she has to rescue Amanda, that she has to reciprocate for being rescued. She briefly considers the possibility that it may be too late, that Amanda might already be dead, but rejects that mental picture in favor of a more optimistic view. As Ren and Toby approach the Painballers' camp, Ren dismisses her wish as foolishness: "I'm wishing again: planning lunch, when in the back of my head is just plain fear. We can never do it. We'll never get Amanda back. We'll be killed" (*YF* 412). Here, Ren dismisses her act of wishing as a pointless coping mechanism, a way to deal with her fear. She doesn't trust her vision of the future, but she should. She and Toby do rescue Amanda, and they take the Painballers captive. Ren says of the aftermath of the confrontation,

After the mid-day heat and the thunderstorm I went back to the beach for our packsacks and brought them to the clearing, along with some wild mustard greens I'd found along the way. Toby took out her cooking pot, and the cups, and her knife, and her big spoon. Then she made soup with the leftovers from the rakunk and the rest of Rebecca's meat, some of her dried botanicals. (*YF* 429)

Ren's daydream about food wasn't as misguided as she thought; as soon as the confrontation is over and the Painballers are tied up, Toby sets about preparing dinner. When Ren envisions or wishes for something, more often than not, it occurs. She says of this habit of hers,

It's make-believe. Wishful thinking, I know I shouldn't do it: I should face reality. But reality has too much darkness in it. Too many crows.

The Adams and Eves used to say, *We are what we eat*, but I prefer to say, *We are what we wish*. Because if you can't wish, why bother? (YF 400)

Ren's belief that she should face reality is misguided: her wishes are frequently fulfilled. Her ability to envision and hope for a better future, more light than dark, is what makes her a character who embodies a utopian impulse. Throughout her narration, Ren retains a sense of hope. She believes that the world can be better—she can picture it. This hopeful perception is what makes Ren redemptive. She can recuperate dystopian perspectives with her endless capacity to see a future. Structurally, Ren's position as a utopian character is emphasized as the perspective in the novels shifts from Snowman's to hers. *Oryx and Crake* is a narrative of fall, as Atwood describes it: "Narratives of fall feature separation from loved ones, calamities, imprisonments, tortures, mechanical beings that mimic life, defeats, dehumanizations, and deaths" (*In Other Worlds* 49). Snowman's narrative in *Oryx and Crake* contains many of these elements: he loses his mother, Oryx, Crake, and everyone else he ever cared about; Crake's apocalypse is definitely a calamity; Snowman is trapped within his own dystopian perspective; Crake's new humans certainly seem to be "mechanical beings that mimic life," since they evince few manifestations of human nature; and Snowman's narrative features a litany of defeats and deaths, including (possibly) his own. *The Year of the Flood*, on the other hand, seems to

fulfill the criteria for a narrative of ascent, which feature, “reunion with loved ones, getting out of the bellies of whales, healing, nature in its more benevolent aspects, life abundant, and birth or rebirth” (*In Other Worlds* 49). The scene near the end of the novel, in which Toby and Ren are reunited with the surviving members of the God’s Gardeners, is a miraculous example of reunion with loved ones; almost everyone that Toby and Ren hope to see again has survived. There are no whales in the text, but Ren does escape from the Sticky Zone, and the skill of the Gardeners in living off of the land casts nature in a benevolent light. Life is abundant, though not necessarily human life, at the end of *The Year of the Flood*, and while there is no actual birth, references are made to the rebuilding of the human race. While the first two novels of this trilogy could hardly be described as utopian in nature, there is a steady progression from a narrative of despair to a narrative of hope, and this progression is most evident in the shift from Snowman’s perspective, through Toby’s perspective, to Ren’s perspective.

Ren’s rejection of dystopian values is most evident in her perception of violence and sex. In direct opposition to Snowman/Jimmy, Ren rejects the violent and sexual content available for consumption on the Internet. She describes the Painballers who arrive at Scales, adding,

[t]he third one was drinking himself into mud. Maybe he was trying to forget what he’d done inside the Painball Arena. I never watched the Painball Arena website myself. It was too disgusting. I only knew about it because men talk. (*YF* 131)

Ren rejects the premise that genuine human suffering can be entertaining—a major component of Jimmy’s perspective in *Oryx and Crake*. Instead, Ren finds it disgusting. She does not enjoy watching people suffer precisely because she is able to feel empathy.

She also avoids viewing pornography, which differentiates her from most of the students at her high school inside the Compound. She speculates about what Jimmy and Glenn are doing when they hang out, saying, “I thought they were probably watching porn—most of the guys did, and a lot of girls too” (*YF* 222). The set of values that Snowman/Jimmy embodies in *Oryx and Crake* is widespread at her high school, but Ren rejects it. She doesn’t enjoy exploitative violence or pornography, and she notes elsewhere in the text that she only drinks alcohol on special occasions. Given the excesses described in Jimmy’s narrative, these rejections are presented as moderate rather than puritanical. Despite her time inside the Compound walls, Ren does not succumb to the dystopian culture there. Her perspective, so different from the dystopian one, is evident in her first interaction with Jimmy. Ren describes her life with the God’s Gardeners to a group of curious students at lunch:

‘You were child labour,’ one boy said. ‘A little enviroserf. Sexy!’ They all laughed.

‘Jimmy, don’t be so dumb,’ said Wakulla. ‘It’s okay,’ she said to me, ‘he always says stuff like that.’

Jimmy grinned. ‘Did you worship cabbages?’ he went on. ‘Oh Great Cabbage, I kiss your cabbagey cabbageness!’ He went down on one knee and grabbed a handful of my pleated skirt. ‘Nice leaves, do they come off?’

‘Don’t be such a meat-breath,’ I said.

‘A what?’ he said laughing. ‘A meat-breath?’

Then I had to explain how that was a harsh name to call someone, among the extreme greens. Like pig-eater. Like slug-face. This made Jimmy laugh more. (*YF* 217)

Jimmy’s perspective is clearly informed by his extensive consumption of pornography: all of his comments are sexual in nature. He calls the idea of Ren as an “enviroserf” sexy, adding a sexual component to a non-sexual idea, and conflating subservience with sexiness. He goes on to comment on the bizarre (to him) religious practices of the

Gardeners, adding a sexual component to that idea as well when he asks Ren if her leaves come off. In response, Ren offers the insult “meat-breath,” which is only insulting under the values of the God’s Gardeners; they reject the eating of meat, so a meat-breath is a person who has violated their religious strictures. Similarly, pig-eater and slug-face are insults based on a specific set of values, values in opposition to Jimmy’s culture of conspicuous consumption. Both Jimmy and Ren illustrate their different perspectives in this exchange.

Similarly, Ren rejects dystopian values in the gradual evolution of her view on sex. Initially, she accepts society’s implicit lesson that she is not entitled to dictate the terms of her sexual encounters. Ren smokes marijuana for the first time with Amanda, Shackie, and Croze, and, “there was someone’s hand on my bum, I didn’t know whose. It was creeping up, trying to find a way in under my Gardener one-piece dress. I wanted to say, Stop that, but I didn’t” (*YF* 155). Ren is very eager to be liked, and she has learned that allowing access to her body is one way to gain the approval of boys. She isn’t comfortable with this contact, but she says nothing because she doesn’t want to alienate her friends. After she leaves the Gardeners, she meets Jimmy and they begin a sexual relationship. The first time they have sex, Ren says,

I felt like I was helping Jimmy and he was helping me at the same time. It was like a feast day back at the Gardeners, when we’d do everything in a special way because it was in honour of something. That’s what this was like: it was *in honour*. (*YF* 223)

When Ren first experiences sex, she views it as something beautiful, something accompanied by strong feelings for the person with whom she is having sex. It’s a special experience. When she finds out that Jimmy doesn’t feel the same way, it breaks her heart.

Ren goes on to work in the sex industry, trading sex as a way to make her living. After she leaves Scales and Tails with Amanda and her other friends, she is kidnapped and repeatedly raped. She escapes and is cared for by Toby, and the two of them eventually meet up with the rest of the survivors from the God's Gardeners, where Ren is subjected to further sexual pressure. Croze offers her his bed in which to take a nap, and

When the afternoon thunderstorm wakes me up, Croze is curled around behind me, and I can tell he's worried and sad; so I turn around and then we're hugging each other, and he wants to have sex. But all of a sudden I don't want to have sex without loving the person, and I haven't really loved anybody in that way since Jimmy; certainly not at Scales, where it was just acting, with other people's kinky scripts.

Also there's a dark place in me, like ink spilled into my brain—I can't think about sex, in that place. It has brambles in it, and something about Amanda, and I don't want to be there. So I say, 'Not yet.' And even though Croze used to be kind of crude he seems to understand, so we just hold on to each other and talk. (YF 394)

Here, Ren rejects the dystopian notion that her body is nothing more than a tool of exchange; she wants sex to be associated with love. She is clearly still traumatized from her kidnapping and rape, as she cannot articulate that experience just yet. She speaks up and sets a boundary for her own body, asserting her right to control her sexuality. Her reclamation of bodily autonomy reflects how far she has come from her position as a sex worker in a dystopian society, and gestures in the direction of a utopian vision of sex. Croze does not immediately accept her boundaries. At the end of their conversation, "he puts his arm around me, lets his hand fall onto my breast, as if by accident. I take it off. 'Okay,' he says in a disappointed voice. He kisses my ear" (YF 397). Croze tries again, putting additional pressure on Ren to perform sexually. She holds firm, rejecting him again. Setting and maintaining her own boundaries around her body is a change in



language and behavior for Ren, and it marks her rejection of dystopian narratives surrounding sex. Ren has come a long way from her previous view that sex is a nice thing to do for someone; as the novel progresses, she actively seeks a different way, a path forward that does not involve the dystopian values that led to apocalypse in the first place.

In envisioning utopia, Atwood's three focalizers draw on previous elements of their perception. Snowman, as in the preceding sections, is limited by his dystopian vision, and cannot envision a future on his own. Instead, he commits to Crake's deeply flawed view of the future. In doing so, he shows how heavily his view is constrained by the past. He acts because of promises he made to Oryx and Crake, and not because he has thought through the future consequences of his actions. Structurally, Snowman's perspective is rehabilitated and replaced in *The Year of the Flood* by the perspectives of Toby and Ren. The shift away from Snowman's view is underscored by his failing health at the end of that text. Toby's view of utopia is transitional. At first, she cannot see a future, and it seems as though her language of negation and doubt will keep her from envisioning a way forward. When she reunites with Ren and rediscovers a sense of purpose, however, her view of the future evolves. By the end of the text, she speaks in the language of possibility and hope, indicating that her view is increasingly utopian. Ren requires no such transition; her language indicates optimism and hope throughout. The text sets her up in opposition to Crake, suggesting that perhaps her ability to envision a human future can begin to repair the damage done by Crake's flawed vision. Ren's shift away from dystopian perspectives on violence and sex also indicates her utopian position

in the text. As her voice is centered at the end of *The Year of the Flood*, the text shifts away from Snowman's narrative of fall and toward Ren's narrative of ascent.

## Conclusion

In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood's three protagonists trace a progression from dystopia, through apocalypse, and toward the potential of utopia. *Oryx and Crake* establishes both dystopia and apocalypse as problems of perception. Everything about Jimmy's society inside the Compounds, from the walls shutting out the rest of the world to the constant stream of consumer goods, is designed to distract, to keep people from seeing the exploitation that underlies their comfortable lives. Jimmy exemplifies this limited vision, carefully ignoring any indication that his society might be headed for disaster. Crake, on the other hand, is well aware of the unsustainable nature of his world. Because he is embedded in dystopian society, however, his utopian solution is inhuman. *Oryx and Crake* offers little hope for a human future; Snowman's bleak choice between humans and Crakers at the end of the text highlights his thinking, thoroughly mired in dystopian perceptions. The only apparent possibility for a future is the Crakers, whose alien approach to the world marks them as something very different from mankind. In *The Year of the Flood*, however, events are presented in a different light. The text takes place outside the Compound walls and highlights alternatives to Jimmy's closed view. The God's Gardeners, many of whom survive the apocalypse, are presented as a viable alternative to the utopian future represented by the Crakers. Toby's vision is offered as a direct contrast to Snowman's view. Toby's rigorous skepticism allows her to

see the world as it is, though she sometimes applies doubt where it is unwarranted. Her practical approach to the world allows her to survive, though in order to see a utopian future, she has to accept faith and possibility. Ren experiences both the pleeblands and the Compounds, and she occupies a central position in the text. Her optimism and faith in the world around her are borne out again and again throughout the text. Her utopian vision allows for a human future, and emphasizes possibility over closure. *The Year of the Flood* ends on another moment of choice. The Crakers approach the human survivors, and all of the utopian possibilities are on the verge of coming together. Atwood's protagonists will wait there, on the cusp of that encounter, until *MaddAdam* comes out in September 2013, and the final act of the story is resolved.

One of the benefits of exploring the ideas in these texts lies in the lessons that are applicable, not to Snowman or Toby or Ren, but to us. Dystopian and apocalyptic writings, after all, "put forward a total critique of any existing social order" (Berger 7). Part of Atwood's project in these novels, then, is to ask us to consider our own flaws in perception. Atwood's consumption-obsessed dystopian society is our future, and Snowman's flawed vision is our vision. One element of utopia hidden inside Atwood's dystopia is the past—the world as it is now, before we have made all of the mistakes that culminate in Crake's pandemic. It is for this reason that the God's Gardeners are necessary: their version of utopia is useful to us. Becoming more aware of, and concerned with, our impact on the natural world is a concrete step that can steer us away from Atwood's horrifying future. The utopian vision in these books that sees a glimmer of human possibility in the midst of so much darkness offers us a way forward, a way to

avoid the dire future Atwood has so carefully drawn. Though stories of redemption are perhaps not Atwood's usual fare, the emphasis on Biblical references and implications—in addition to the general trajectory of the first two texts in this series—suggests that redemption is among her interests here. In establishing the varied perceptions of her focalizers, Atwood asks us to consider where we stand in terms of dystopia, apocalypse and utopia, inspiring us to contemplate the potentially dire consequences of our own flawed, if not yet dystopian, vision.

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