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“Post-apocalyptic Storytelling and Post-anthropocentric Ethics
in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy”

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The SANAS CfP sets out the idea that “literature is neither ethical nor moral.” While it may be the case that some, if not most, literature does not set out an *explicit* moral – within, for example, narrative judgment or plot conclusions – nonetheless, our morals and ethics are substantially formed and reinforced by the stories we consume and the stories we tell. Granted, we might read literature that intrigues us – for the play of language or unique story-worlds – but the truly popular stories, the master plots and their reiterations that transcend time, space, and cultures, are those that allow us *as the audience* to make a moral and/or ethical judgment, even if the story does not explicitly provide it. When this sense of poetic justice is violated and characters don’t get “what they deserve,” Jonathan Gottschall argues (in *The Storytelling Animal*) that “we close our books with a sigh, or trudge away from the theater, knowing that we have just experienced a tragedy” (132). It is for this reason, among others, that Gottschall claims that “stories are intrinsically moralistic,” serving the biological, personal, sociocultural, religious, and/or national function of teaching the audience how to act as individuals and how to interact with others. It is also for this reason that Thomas King argues in *The Truth About Stories* that we have exactly the ethics we deserve, because they stem from the stories we tell. As he writes:

Perhaps we shouldn’t be displeased with the ‘environmental ethics’ we have [...] or any of the myriad codes of conduct suggested by our actions. After all, we’ve created them. *We’ve created the stories that allow them to exist and flourish.* They didn’t come out of nowhere [...]

Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.

(emphasis added; *The Truth About Stories* 164)

But how can one go about telling a different story in order to create a different ethic? Haven’t we all heard some version of Umberto Eco’s famous phrase that “every story tells a story that has already been told” (Umberto Eco, *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*)? Or, as stated in Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*: “The Human moral keyboard is limited ... there’s nothing you can’t play on it that hasn’t already been played before” (*Flood* 498). How, then is it possible create a new ethics, if all the stories have already been told and all the morals already played out?

In “The Spirit of Terrorism,” Jean Baudrillard argues that a violent act is required in order to break out of the hegemonic metaphysics of western ontology’s damaging binaries. While I have reservations about aspects of Baudrillard’s essay, I want to take his idea a step further, by positing that if you want to move beyond Western, anthropocentric ethics and morals through different stories, you not only need a violent act, like an apocalyptic plague, but perhaps more importantly, you need a storyteller *born* of this cataclysm, as opposed to one who has survived with their residual traumas and experiences. Specifically, through an analysis of narrative dissolution and ambiguous endings, I argue that the stories told in the *MaddAddam* trilogy evolve from contemporary Western ethics and morals – with their bases in anthropocentrism – to a post-anthropocentric ethic and morality by the close of the third. The three novels feature a similar narrative structure which relies upon the use of narrative interruptions in the form of voices (*Oryx and Crake*), sermons and hymns (*The Year of the Flood*), and stories (*MaddAddam*). These interruptions serve to guide, narratologically and *morally*, the protagonists; yet, in the first two

novels and nearly all of the third, the predominating protagonists fail as storytellers and subsequently, they repeat and reinforce the anthropocentric ethics that led to the apocalypse in the first place. This failure leads to narrative dissolution and ambiguous conclusions to the first two novels, preventing the audience from making conclusive moral judgments. As Gottschall says, we close the first two novels feeling we've experienced a tragedy, or are at least cheated of a conclusive point; the novels prevent any definitive, explicit sense of what is "right" and "wrong" in this post-apocalyptic world. In contrast, by the end of *MaddAddam*, a new, post-apocalyptic storyteller emerges and eventually takes over all narrative responsibilities. His stories provide structural stability and eventually offer not one, but a *number* of paradoxically conclusive endings, all of which lead to a revelation of a potential new post-anthropocentric ethical framework and moral guidance.

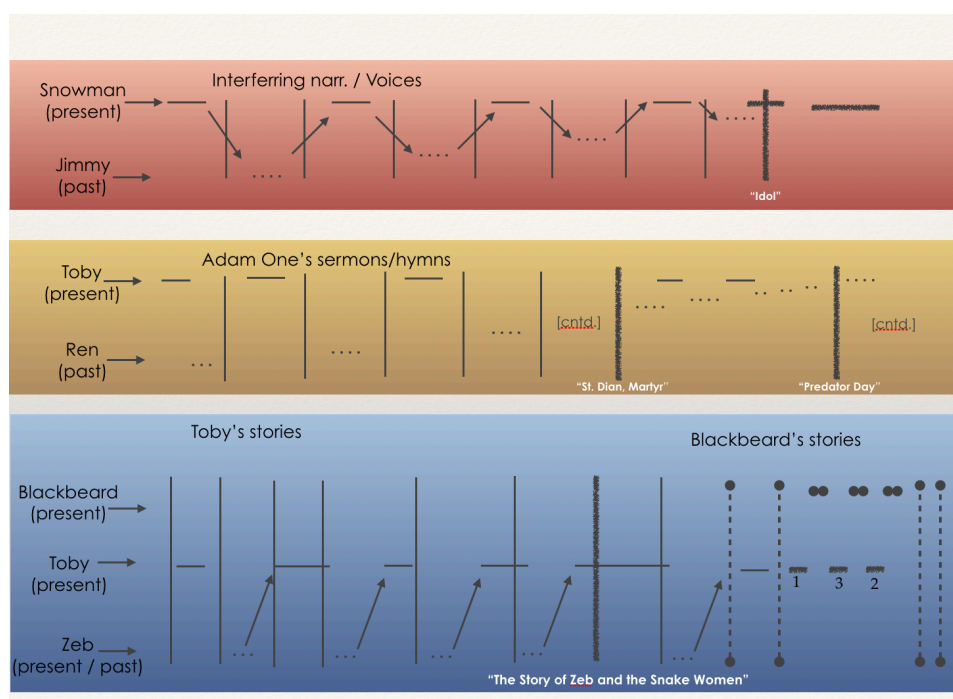
Oryx and Crake tells the story of Snowman, a morally conflicted individual to say the least: he's a fan of child-porn, squash and snuff films, and an emotional sadist who finds pleasure in breaking up with his girlfriends. At the novel's opening, Snowman is starving to death after a virus has killed most of the human species. His childhood friend, Crake, created this virus and secretly vaccinated Snowman in the hopes that Snowman would remain alive in order to protect and assist the Crakers – a race of peaceful, herbivore human-animal-plant hybrids designs by Crake to inhabit the world after the mass human die-off. As Crake himself says, the virus and the new hybrid species were 'inextricably linked [...] they were two stages of the same plan' (Atwood 2003, 358).

The story is structured around Snowman's quest to find food but, as this narrative graph demonstrates (see annex 1), the discourse is constantly interrupted: by an intruding heterodiegetic 3rd person narrator and by the disembodied voices of Snowman's past. These voices gradually gain context and sense through the regularly occurring flashbacks, in which Snowman remembers his pre-pandemic life as Jimmy. The narrative pattern can be roughly summarized as beginning with Snowman's narrative-present, then an instance of narrative interference from these voices, which leads to a Jimmy-flashback, which is eventually interrupted by the voices again, leading back to Snowman's present. This narrative pattern features in the next two novels. Subsequently, Snowman becomes a two-part storyteller – creating the narrative-present stories and theology for the Crakers while telling himself the story of his past life as Jimmy. But as Snowman moves closer to, and eventually arrives at, the "ground-zero" location of the apocalypse – the Paradise compound where the virus and the Crakers were created – the narrative pattern of the novel begins to unravel as the two distinct perspectives – of Snowman and Jimmy – come closer together in time and space. This narrative dissolution culminates once Snowman leaves the compound: through an instance of metalepsis, the distinction between the narrator, Snowman, and Jimmy is lost; it is no longer clear who is narrating the story, from where or when. Likewise, upon returning from the compound, Snowman makes a number of what he calls "narrative mistakes" in adding onto the Craker theology. As a result, Snowman fails as a storyteller, both of the story of himself and the stories he tells the Crakers. Shortly thereafter, he must decide whether or not to kill the possibly only other surviving humans. Yet, while he searches for moral guidance among his mental voices, he finds none. At the novel's conclusion, the dissolution of Snowman's stories leads to moral ambiguity. Comprised of memories and traumas of the past, Snowman's stories collapse and he is unable to find not only a *new* ethic or morality, but *any* ethic or morality to guide him and to provide an ethical framework to the Crakers.

The second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, follows much the same line of narrative and moral dissolution as *Oryx and Crake*. *Flood* is based in roughly the same time and space as *Oryx and Crake* and tells the stories of Toby and Ren, two former members of an environmentally friendly Christian sect called God's Gardeners. Like Snowman, they also survive the pandemic.

Despite some significant differences to the moral framework of *Flood* (which I will return to shortly), the narrative structure of the novel matches that of *Oryx and Crake*. The present-tense narration of Snowman is replaced by Toby, also told in the present-tense, third-person, while the past-tense narration of Jimmy is replaced by Ren, a (largely) past-tense, first-person narrator. Likewise, the intruding narrator and disembodied voices in *Oryx and Crake* are replaced by the more explicit narrative and moral guidance of the God's Gardeners' sermons and hymns, told and led by the Gardeners' founder and leader, Adam One.

Table 1: Narrative Repetition and Distortion in the MaddAddam Trilogy



Like Snowman's memories and voices, these sermons intersect Toby and Ren's narratives, providing narrative and moral guidance by leading them into the stories of their past, where they question their past, present, and future actions.

Finally, *Flood* also mirrors the relationship between narrative and moral dissolution, as found in *Oryx and Crake*. Similar to the point of narrative metalepsis between Snowman and Jimmy, near the end of *Flood*, Ren switches from being a largely past-tense narrator to a present-tense narrator when she arrives at the same time and place as Toby. Shortly afterwards, the narrative pattern of "sermon–Toby–sermon–Ren" also breaks down into seemingly random alternations between Toby

and Ren while the Gardener hymns temporarily lose their predominating rhyme scheme of ABCB to ABAC and ABAB.

The dissolution of the narrative structure is more subtle in *Flood* than in *Oryx and Crake*, as is the presence of an anthropocentric moral framework. While Snowman/Jimmy is quite clearly without any moral guidance and displays the anthropocentric behavior which led to the apocalypse in the first place, Toby and Ren try to maintain a greener code of behavior, though they both question their beliefs. Eventually, they break the moral codes laid out by the Gardener sect – by killing animals and humans, by eating flesh, and by participating in the environmentally degrading, capitalistic culture of the “exfernal” world by working at a spa and a sex club. While eating meat and engaging in spa treatments and strip-teases might not seem like the worst thing someone can do, in Gardener terms, these actions (to say nothing of killing humans and nonhumans) demonstrate a significant “back-slide” from the two characters’ previous moral positions. However, within Adam One’s own sermons are often shocking examples of anthropocentric behavior and judgement, especially when you consider that he is the founder of a supposedly anti-anthropocentric religious sect. As such, Toby and Ren’s moral lapses are not surprising; to rephrase Thomas King, Toby and Ren have received the morals of the stories that they’ve been told, from their anthropocentric childhoods to the modified, yet *still* anthropocentric views of the Gardeners.

Finally, like *Oryx and Crake*, *Flood* remains open-ended in its moral conclusion. Toby and Ren arrive at literally the same time, place, and moral quandary as Snowman; and while Toby attempts to forgive the men Snowman was going to shoot (who are serial rapists and murderers), the novel does not end with her attempt to forgive and heal, but instead closes with the approach of the hybrid Crakers. That is, *Flood* provides an *opening* at an *end*, signalling, as it were, the arrival of the latest, and perhaps best, attempt to realize a new story and a new, post-apocalyptic and post-anthropocentric moral framework.

MaddAddam picks up the story where *Flood* and *Oryx and Crake* leave off, with the arrival of the Crakers, the escape of the murderers, and the day-to-day life of the surviving community comprised of Snowman, the Gardeners, the Crakers, and a band of eco-terrorists led by Zeb, Adam One’s brother. Initially, MaddAddam retains roughly the same narrative style and pattern as *Oryx and Crake* and *Flood*, summarized as an interrupting voice (Toby’s stories to the Crakers) which leads to a past-tense story (told by Zeb) providing context and history, before returning to the present-tense story (told by Toby), before finishing with another “guiding” or interfering story. (See Table 1).

Like Snowman’s voices and Adam One’s sermons and hymns, Toby’s stories to the Crakers serve to guide the narrative and the audience. Her stories even use the same narrative style as Adam One’s, of free indirect discourse to an unseen, but implied, audience, and they continue with the same anthropocentric storylines started by Snowman.

However, unlike Adam One's sermons, Toby's stories *respond* to questions from the Craker audience. This is a significant different from the first two novels and the third, in that the Crakers begin to act as *shaping agents to the narrative* – guiding and refining Toby's performance as a storyteller as well as forming and redirecting the stories that she tells. The Crakers' interruptions not only affect the story, but begin to decenter the latent anthropocentrism left over from Snowman's previous iterations, by questioning, for example, why Snowman eats fish. However, while the Crakers can shape the *content of*, and the *means through which*, the stories are told, they do not entirely control the story itself. It remains that which is told *to* them by a human character who has survived the traumatic experience of the plague. But, as we have seen, Snowman, Toby, Ren, and Adam One never fully escape their anthropocentric and binary epistemologies.

Instead, I propose that a young Craker boy, named Blackbeard, *is* able to escape these binary worldviews because of his relationship with the apocalyptic plague – being “inextricably linked” to it, the other half of it – as well as being the subject of his own personal apocalypse, the collapse of his theology. The combination of an apocalyptic origin and experience prompt him to shift from a narrative character to a post-apocalyptic storyteller, and these post-apocalyptic stories that he tells *reveal* a post-anthropocentric moral framework. This reorientation in post-anthropocentrism occurs simultaneously with narrative reformation: while the previous two novels undergo gradual narrative dissolution, the third novel *gain narrative structure and narratorial distinction and offers moral closure* through a number of acceptable endings.

Near the end of *MaddAddam*, there is a scene of immense physical and metaphysical violence, in which the protagonists battle the murderers from the end of *Flood*. During this event, Blackbeard discovers that his gods, Oryx and Crake, are a pile of bones. It is only after this spiritual and emotional cataclysm that Blackbeard becomes the first non-human narrator and replaces Toby as the evening storyteller. It is also the first time this story of the battle has been intradiegetically told (so it's new) and thus, Blackbeard controls the manifest ethics which emerge from his non-anthropocentric perspective. Notably, Blackbeard is able to report the reactions of not only the humans but also the genetically modified pigs who led the battle; thus, his narrative operates outside of anthropocentric limitations. As a result, he is able to assert the ethical position of the Crakers, in providing not only a sense of what is right (i.e. protecting the happiness of the greatest number of living beings) and wrong (eating flesh – though they taste fish as a ritualistic act), but also how to see the world: in a way that is far beyond the normal “human” ability, including extra-sensory perception and the smell and color of fear and evil. Far more so than the other storytellers, Blackbeard's first post-apocalyptic story reveals the beginnings of a post-anthropocentric moral framework.

Over the ensuing chapters, Blackbeard's stories slowly provide a new structure to the novel, in contrast to the entropic patterns of dissolution found in the previous two novels. Likewise, Blackbeard's narrative style, despite being written in free indirect discourse, is so intensely focalized through his perspective that it is always clear who is speaking and to whom. In contrast, Toby's narration style frequently switches between free indirect, tagged direct, and externally or internally focalized speech. As in the instances of metalepsis in the other novels, it becomes impossible to tell who is narrating her story – between a homo- or heterodiegetic narrator - and from what time and place. Subsequently, only through Blackbeard's narration does the narrative patterns slowly regain structure and distinction.

The final section of the novel demonstrates the culmination of this *reformation* of narrative structure and perspective and the ensuing post-anthropocentric moral closure. The narrative perspective settles solely on Blackbeard, through his direct and uninterrupted narrative mode. Likewise, the narrative pattern settles on his diary/storytelling style. Finally, the ethical framework embedded within his stories is grounded outside of the limitations of anthropocentrism. For example, it sets out respectful means of interaction between different species groups:

- through Blackbeard's narration, a viable post-anthropocentric code of social and judicial conduct is described and demonstrated within the multi-species community of human, hybrids, and pigs;
- his narration sets out the means of social interaction and roles among the different species groups based upon the abilities and sensitivities of these groups (pigs/humans defend; Crakers do not as they would be harmed by the emotional pain);
- it sets out moral guidelines through the expression of grief over Zeb's death, demonstrating he was a morally good person, despite his seeming transgressions depicted throughout the novels;
- And perhaps most significant, while the previous two novels ended with inconclusive endings which prevented a sense of moral clarity (and closure) for the audience Blackbeard's narration provides a number of (morally) conclusive endings regarding Toby's death.

This multi-ending conclusion echoes the need for resolution while nevertheless avoiding any explicit resolution. As a result, Blackbeard's stories to the Crakers provide a new, post-anthropocentric worldview and offer a new moral position, one in which multiple means of narrative resolution are offered from multi-species sources. Significantly, the most *likely* ending – that Toby died alone and was eaten by vultures – is provided by the pigeons. In asking the implied reader to fill in the gaps of the story (that is, the figure out what “really” happened) and thereby find closure, the novel pushes the reader to make a moral judgement that recognizes the mental capacity, reasoning ability, and interiority of the pigeons and thus to find moral closure outside of anthropocentrism. What is more, by providing other possible endings, and by assuming them all to be true, Blackbeard's narration undermines the constructed nature of a singular “truth,” of species hierarchies, and of the limits of physical embodiment.

Overall, in my analysis of the first two novels, I argued that narrative dissolution (in structure and perspective) is linked to moral ambiguity and dissolution. My analysis of the third novel demonstrated that only a post-apocalyptic storyteller is capable of revealing a paradoxical narrative reformation and, simultaneously, a *new* post-anthropocentric moral framework. I have called this new morality “post-anthropocentric” for the following reasons:

- Blackbeard is a human-nonhuman-plant hybrid; he is, at a genetic level, non-anthropocentric.
- This genetic mixture, as well as his apocalyptic origins, provide him with a worldview outside the human perspective. He is fundamentally incapable of understanding the damaging binaries of Western anthropocentric morality.
- Subsequently his stories, and their implicit and explicit morals, operate outside these binaries. The only morals and ethics he can know, and thus disseminate through his post-apocalyptic stories, are post-anthropocentric.

But what does this all mean? If, as Gottschall, King, and others have argued, stories are indeed inherently moralistic – in how they construct and reinforce pro-social behavior through the reader’s desire for moral closure, then *MaddAddam* seems to be answering the question: how can we, as humans, ever hope to achieve a world perspective, and thus a moral framework, outside of our own human perspectives. That is, *can humans be anything* but *anthropocentric*? In situating the moral conclusion within a non-human narrator, who only provides closure through paradoxical resolution, we human readers are pushed into a moral framework that encourages us to reconsider the boundaries of so-called “pro-social behavior” and to include within our moral codes those beings and environments whom we have so often excluded from our social and moral considerations and responsibilities.