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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Apocalypse and Posthumanism in  
Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy:  
Towards a Comprehensive Theoretical  
Approach

Lidia María Cuadrado Payeras

Ana María Fraile Marcos

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Tutor: Ana María Fraile Marcos

Vº Bº

Signature

## ABSTRACT

In the novels that comprise her MaddAddam trilogy, Margaret Atwood presents us with a series of accounts of a man-made apocalypse and its aftermath on a future “New” New York where a few survivors struggle to stay alive and protect a group of humanoid creatures designed to take over man after its planned demise. Throughout the series, Atwood intertwines posthumanist concerns with a preoccupation with the rhetoric of apocalypse. In this paper, I aim to analyse the MaddAddam books through the lens of posthumanist and (post-)apocalyptic theory, arguing for a comprehensive, rather than separate, theoretical approach to the series.

## KEYWORDS

Margaret Atwood, MaddAddam, posthumanism, apocalypse, theory

## RESUMEN

En las novelas que forman la trilogía MaddAddam, Margaret Atwood nos presenta distintas narraciones del apocalipsis y sus consecuencias en una futura “Nueva” Nueva York, donde un grupo supervivientes debe mantenerse con vida a la vez que proteger a unas criaturas humanoides diseñadas para repoblar la Tierra tras el intento de borrar al ser humano de la faz del planeta. En la saga, Atwood muestra su preocupación tanto por los desafíos de la posthumanidad como por el uso y función de la retórica del apocalipsis. En este ensayo, mi intención es proponer un acercamiento teórico inclusivo a las obras que reconozca los puntos de unión entre las formulaciones teóricas de la posthumanidad y del (post-)apocalipsis.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Margaret Atwood, MaddAddam, posthumanismo, apocalipsis, teoría

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## INTRODUCTION

In her MaddAddam trilogy, which comprises the books *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), Margaret Atwood presents us with different survival narratives recounting the advent and aftermath of the apocalypse on Earth. In the novels, the near-demise of the human race is brought about by genius scientist Crake. In the belief that the extinction of human life offers the only chance for the corruption-laden, environmentally-compromised planet to regenerate, Crake spreads a deadly bioform in the very commercially successful shape of a pill that is simultaneously a hormonal contraceptive, a libido enhancer and a protection against venereal diseases. The ruins of the Earth are left to a group of humanoid creatures—the “Crakers,” after their designer—that are engineered with the planet’s sustainability in mind, and to their reluctant caretaker, Jimmy, a close friend of the late Crake. Although it was not in Crake’s plan to allow for the survival of any other humans, Jimmy will eventually meet some of the survivors. He allies himself with some remaining members of the God’s Gardeners—an eco-religious sect invested in planning for the apocalypse—and the MaddAddamites—an eco-terrorist group of scientists involved in the creation of the Crakers—, and together they try to fend off the ruthless Painballers—criminals who survived in confinement—as well as the dangers of the not-so-natural world, which include a sheep-lion splice and aggressive pigs with human organs.

As the series unfolds, we see how Atwood’s narrative shows the bell curve progression taken by technoscientific advancements from their onset to their peak as they contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a sophisticated welfare state, and downwards as they come to be the means by which the aforementioned state is eliminated, and, with it, the high-tech artefacts of its creation, but not, however, their

pernicious manifestations. In doing so, the MaddAddam trilogy explores the modern man's convoluted relationship with scientific knowledge, wherein reside the contrary possibilities of progress and destruction. In the process, Atwood traces a clear link from the belief in betterment that is characteristic of Western Modernity—channelled through the improvement of technology—to the moment of technical and chronological posthumanism that lies at the other side of the bell curve, where the apocalypse prompted by misdirected notions of progress and enabled by advanced technologies has displaced the anthropocentric model of society. The novels' representation of this movement towards a post-anthropocentric scenario shows graphically the interconnectedness of posthumanist thought and apocalyptic rhetoric. This is particularly exemplified in the logic of *Crake* and *the God's Gardeners*, for their sole source of hope lies in a large-scale calamity, as only cataclysmic destruction seems to offer the possibility of breaking with the humanist claims of anthropocentric dominance against which posthumanist thought is set (Wolfe xii).

In this paper I suggest that the MaddAddam novels clearly portray the close relationship between the posthuman and the apocalypse. I will prove this point by focusing, first, on the trilogy's engagement in posthumanist theorizations; and second, I intend to argue that the MaddAddam trilogy pertains to the existing criticism of post- and apocalyptic rhetoric, while enriching the tropes of postapocalyptic rhetoric because of the novels' participation in Canadian literature's long apocalyptic tradition.

#### THE MADDADDAM TRILOGY AND THE POSTHUMAN

As many scholars have pointed out, there is a certain disparity in criticism with regards to the exact definition of "posthumanism" (Mosca 46-7, Sharon 4, Wolfe xi).

As such, it is better to consider the term as the umbrella under which many approaches may fall. I find Sharon's classification of these approaches particularly pedagogical. In Sharon's model, we are able to distinguish between conceptions of posthumanism that are rooted in humanism—generally essentialist models where a strict divide between the human and the technological is established—and others which are not, and therefore recognise the “intricate enmeshing between humans and technological artifacts” (14). This is a useful distinction that succinctly provides a comprehensive enough account of posthumanism's theoretical disparity. However, it is also problematic, for, if essentialist models are flawed in that their arguments ultimately revolve around the slippery—because difficult to articulate—concept of “human nature” (Sharon 6), non-essentialist “posthumanisms” fail to recognise that “the ‘post-’ of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism” (Badmington 21). The pervasiveness of humanism—or its remains—is clearly articulated in Atwood's fiction: even the deadliest, most contagious and more widely spread disease known to man has failed to erase it completely from the picture. In the MaddAddam posthumanist setting, the Crakers—purportedly designed to take over the Earth after the erasure of mankind, for they have none of man's “features responsible for the world's current illnesses” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 358)—share what is left of the planet with some surviving humans. This already poses a theoretical problem: if the Crakers are designed to be “a post-human population—literally and chronologically” (Mosca 45), does their coexistence with humans, few as they are, threaten their *being* posthuman? We may say with little friction that, chronologically, it does. But literally, the answer is hardly so obvious. One may argue, for instance, that the Crakers remain a posthuman population because their “basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans

as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards” (Garreau 231-2). However, the extent to which the Crakers are “unambiguously” nonhuman must be gauged. The Crakers are equipped with several advantageous features for the posthuman world that humans lack, as can be a UV-resistant skin or built-in insect repellent. In order to prevent the behaviours that have enabled humanity’s downfall, an attempt to remove symbolic thinking in the Crakers had been carried out, but doing so entailed “turning them into zucchinis” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 43). A semblance of the human must be maintained for the experiment to work, and so, despite their obvious enhancements with respect to man, it may still be possible to think of the Crakers as superior human models and not an altogether different species. Furthermore, even when the differences between Crakers and humans are highlighted, the contact between the two also complicates the Crakers’ posthuman status. As the series progresses, the interaction of humans and Crakers results in the latter coming to understand abstract concepts such as good and evil, and their artistic expressions become more sophisticated—which, in this case, means more human-like.

It has already been noted that, if there is a debate over the definition of “posthuman,” the definition of “human”—from which the former definition must necessarily depart—is no less contentious. Translated into Atwood’s fiction, this means that, if—as we have seen—it is difficult to unequivocally assert the Crakers’ status as a posthuman lifeform, it is also difficult to pinpoint the degree to which the humans in Atwood’s tale merit the name. Throughout the series, we are introduced to a number of technologically-enabled ways used by humans to alter their physical appearance. Jimmy’s father, for instance, works for a biotechnology company that is trying to develop “a method of replacing the older epidermis with a fresh one . . . a genuine start-over skin that would be wrinkle- and blemish- free” (Atwood, *Oryx and*



*Crake* 62). Another company, Mo’Hair, uses genetically-spliced sheep to grow human hair that may be later used for scalp transplants. The question of whether or not the new possibilities for bodily enhancement signify a move towards a posthumanist conception of the self has been subject to ample discussion in theory, especially in such models as take into account the human relationship with prostheticity. For many transhumanists, “the cybernetic-type model of the body, where . . . technologies are wholly incorporated into the body, seems to replace a more traditional homeostatic one” (Sharon 7). However, the displacement of traditional conceptions of the body is not replicated in the conception of the subject, which is still being understood in humanist terms. As a result, we may conclude that biotechnological enhancements do not question the concept of “humanity,” for the Cartesian self—where subjectivity resides—remains always autonomous and unchanged. By contrast, other theorists, such as Elaine Graham, argue that prosthetics, as a human artefact, is necessary to articulate our humanity, being part of the “web of relationships” that is intrinsic to human nature (27). In this case, we see how an extension of our interpretation of the “human” that covers enhancement technologies forcefully implies a redefinition of the term, and as such Atwood’s population as a whole becomes posthuman even before the advent of the “Waterless Flood” that chronologically signals posthumanity, because the widespread use of enhancement technologies has blurred the line between what can be clearly be considered “human” or “technological.”

#### THE MADDADDAM TRILOGY AND THE APOCALYPSE

In her essay “Crossing Human Boundaries,” Valeria Mosca argues that we may think of Atwood’s novels as “not so much tales about the end of humanity as tales about what is beyond traditional human boundaries—the ends of humanity” (49, italics in

original). As I hope to have shown, it is evident that in Atwood's trilogy there is a preoccupation, mirroring posthumanist thought, with what constitutes the set of traits that define our understanding of the (post)human. Thus far, I agree with Mosca's statement, yet I would like to propose that Atwood's concern with the "ends of humanity" is not as separate from her concern with the "end" of humanity as Mosca's conclusion would lead us to believe. Indeed, because in the MaddAddam trilogy the peak of posthumanism for its ideologue Crake depends on the occurrence of an event that renders anthropocentric models obsolete, we cannot assert that in Atwood's novels a discussion of the posthuman is necessarily more important than a discussion of the apocalypse. If anything, the attempts to rationalize the posthumanist moment make a discussion of the apocalypse more pressing: we must remember that, after all, the first two of the three books in the series are particularly concerned with accounting for the "Waterless Flood," giving us insight into the degenerationist conceptions of society held by Crake and the God's Gardeners, so that the characters—and us—may better understand and cope with their present post-apocalyptic situation. To my mind, the emphasis in rationalising the end along with the reader is indicative of two relevant aspects. First, it points to the fact that, for Atwood's characters, the importance of apocalyptic narratives lies in that they function as fictive "concordant structure[s]" with which humans, who are born *in medias res*, "make sense of their span" (Kermode 7). Second, it is indicative, I think, of the close relationship that exists in theory between the apocalyptic and the posthuman, which is well exemplified in Brooks Bouson's—who is also quoting Heffernan—justification of the "'proliferation' of apocalyptic scenarios": "even as [it] brings to mind Walter Benjamin's prediction that 'we might come to enjoy the

spectacle of [our] own destruction . . . ,’ it also reflects the ‘cultural anxiety that we may have reached . . . the end of our species’” (10).

The case of using the apocalyptic paradigm as a framework from which to give meaning to human experience is illustrated in the *MaddAddam* trilogy with the character Toby, who keeps a record of her experiences before and after the Waterless Flood. For Toby, keeping a diary is initially part of her routine, one action repeated systematically in order to keep track of the days and—per the Gardener’s teachings—the Feasts and the seasons. Writing literally keeps her alive as it preserves her sanity and gives her references with which to plan for her garden and forage natural resources. Later, writing takes on a more figurative meaning, as a question of hope: to write is to act “as if she believes in [a] future” so that it will perhaps “help to create it” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 136). This is a hope that Jimmy denies himself when he considers “making lists” to “give his life some structure,” but ultimately does not do because “even a castaway assumes a future reader” and “any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 45). The end of the series assumes the more optimistic tone of the two: writing will preserve the memory of Jimmy and the survivors as Toby teaches one of the Craker kids, Blackbeard, how to write, who in turn will teach writing and reading to other children so that they “might know of all the words of Crake, and Oryx . . . And about ourselves also, and about the Egg, where we came from in the beginning” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 387). Blackbeard’s reference to the original Egg, with its connotations of life that is about to spring, and to the continuation of the story by future writers, subverts *Oryx and Crake*’s view of the apocalypse, appearing to indicate that, for all the grief and loss of the post-apocalyptic moment, there is still hope that the promised hope of birth and/or renewal (Heffernan 8) may still be fulfilled.

Narration is not only important for Atwood's characters but also broadly in post-apocalyptic theory as one of the tools available for the reassessment of reality before and after the cataclysm. As Berger explains, the "apocalyptic-historical-traumatical event becomes a crux or pivot that forces a retelling and revaluating of all events that lead up to it and all that follow" (21). In this respect, post-apocalyptic theory has much in common with some posthumanist precepts, in that they both resort to Freud's idea of "working through" (*Durcharbeitung*) in order to make sense of, respectively, the apocalypse and humanism, for, in "post-'ing" them, both frameworks are "forever tied up" with these concepts (Badmington 20). In the same way that Badmington remarks how humanism is to some extent an inescapable part of humanism, Berger also theorises the paradox of post-apocalyptic representation, which "impossibly straddles the boundary before and after some event that has obliterated what went before yet defines what will come after" (19). The strong link between the theorisations of the posthuman and those of the post-apocalypse, I believe, makes it necessary for us to view the MaddAddam trilogy as concurrently commenting on both modes of rhetoric, for the discussion of posthumanism is informed by the discussion of the apocalypse, and vice versa, in a setting where posthumanism itself has been the medium through which the calamity has been carried out.

To conclude this section, I would like to call attention to the MaddAddam novels as the product of one of the eminent Canadian writers of our time—and, furthermore, one who has actively sought out the patterns that allow us to recognise what constitutes Canada's national literary identity (Atwood, *Survival* 11). Even though the MaddAddam trilogy is set in a future New New York, the pervasiveness of Canada's apocalyptic tradition in Atwood's books, I believe, shows in her particular

approach to apocalyptic discourse. Here I would like to focus on the concept of victimhood. In the introduction to *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*, Marlene Goldman speaks of the “characteristically Canadian approach” towards apocalypse in fiction, which conveys “the experience of the disenfranchised, those denied entry into the new paradise and condemned to die” (4). Referencing Linda Hutcheon, Goldman goes on to say: “Owing to this ‘ex-centric’ Canadian perspective, [writers] do not portray typical heroes . . . ; instead, they give voice to the ‘. . . losers’” (4). In the MaddAddam novels we see how this is largely the case. In *Oryx and Crake*, the narrator Jimmy is the “neurotypical” (Atwood 239) friend of Crake who is also a disappointment to his family (57). Jimmy spends much of his time working through his own shortcomings in his mind as he takes on the responsibility of protecting the Crakers: “[H]e feels protective towards them. Intentionally or not, they’ve been left in his care, and they simply have no idea. No idea, for instance, of how inadequate his care really is” (180). Jimmy’s despair stems in part from the fact that, having been one of the castaways of technocracy, he is now paradoxically Crake’s unwilling “elect” and begrudging prophet. This relative step up from his former life can offer no comfort because the Crakers “don’t need him any more” and his disappearance would only condemn him to being “falsely remembered” as a “secondary player in their mythology” (262). In the MaddAddam series, Jimmy becomes the epitome of the non-elect as he is victimised by society—first, his family; then, Crake; then, by comparison, Crake’s creatures—and also becomes his own victimiser. The choice of such a narrator, I believe, gives *Oryx and Crake* a distinctly Canadian flavour, which because of the existing underlying contrast, also helps to convey the cautionary tale of the “fall into Americanism” (Jameson, “Then You Are Them”) that the first two books emphasise. In her novel *Surfacing*, Atwood describes

how being “American” is “like a virus” which effaces individuality, and relates Americanism to “technology, mechanisation, and mass production” (Jameson, “Then You Are Them”), all of which have brought about a destruction that, we can easily see, is echoed in the MaddAddam setting.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, however briefly, Atwood’s trilogy constitutes a particularly useful piece of fiction with which we can exemplify the diversity and contradictions of posthumanist theory. In the MaddAddam novels, the coexistence between human and posthuman lifeforms before and after the apocalypse shows how, in a world driven by technoscientific progress, the boundaries between what can clearly be considered human and what cannot have gradually become blurred. Atwood’s dystopian trilogy is, of course, set in the future, but this concern is representative of the anxiety of our postmodern era where, as some strands of posthumanism thought are quick to point out, “emerging biotechnologies are contributing to the blurring of borders between seemingly ontologically separate domains, like nature and technology or organism and machine” (Sharon 8). The blurring of ontological boundaries necessitates of a paradigm shift where the human can no longer be at the centre, because its own humanity has become even more difficult to articulate in the light of the emergence of new technological agents which can potentially mesh with it to a bigger and greater end, but which at the same time carry the possibility, realised in the posthuman moment, of humanism’s own demise. In the MaddAddam trilogy, the paradigm-shifting event becomes central as its apocalyptic dimensions force the characters into an attempt to rationalise its coming about, to make sense of their present situation while assessing how likely the possibilities of renewal offered by the post-apocalyptic

moment are to be realised. This concern with rebirth is echoed in posthumanist thought, and our taking into account this close relationship between the posthuman and apocalyptic strands of theory allows for a discussion of Atwood's use of apocalyptic rhetoric that is also enriched by our analysis of the particular attitudes that Atwood, as a Canadian writer, may take as she uses a trope that has been present in Canadian fiction from its early beginnings (Goldman 3).

In the analysis conducted so far I aimed to show how the posthuman and the apocalyptic imagination, which the MaddAddam trilogy so acutely makes use of—and whose extreme consequences it also vividly represents—are intrinsically linked, both in theory and in fiction. Although my examination is by no means extensive, I hope that it will be useful in considering the value of a comprehensive theoretical study of Atwood. I believe that such work as will simultaneously account for the means and the ends of postmodern society will greatly enhance our understanding of Atwood's speculative fiction, for, as she says, if we can “put the shadowy forms of thought and feeling”—the products of the posthuman imagination—“out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we are,” we will also hopefully come into the knowledge of what our “limits”—our ends—may be (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* ‘In Context’” 517). Understanding how they function together will give us the chance to avert the dark consequences of the postmodern imagination, helping us heed the warning implicit in Atwood's recognition that “increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it” (517).

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