The Need for Action: Understanding the Environmental Warnings in Princess Mononoke and Oryx and Crake

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In both Margaret Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake* and Hayao Miyazaki’s film *Princess Mononoke*, we see the fall of humanity and civilization at the hands of humankind, and through them we are able to assess our present and future circumstances, as well as understand our desperate need for a solution. When looking at Atwood’s novel and Miyazaki’s film and assessing their respective genres and the events that take place within their worlds, each one speaks about our own relationship with nature. *Princess Mononoke*, from the ecocinema genre, sprinkled with dystopian aspects, portrays our current relationship with the natural world and how our actions are killing it despite it being set in Medieval Japan. The dystopian and apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic genre of *Oryx and Crake*, with its depiction of advancements in technology and the manipulation of nature, speak to the future of our society and the deteriorating state of the world that we will one day face. Both of these texts use their respective genre to create a sense of urgency and alert in the audience, inspiring and fostering the growing generations of activists.

Despite the texts’ portrayal of the desecration of nature, the leading destructive forces are nonbinary, meaning they commit these atrocities against nature with good intentions centered around human progress. We see this in the characters Lady Eboshi and Crake, who both take advantage of nature, molding and shaping it as if it is clay, consciously destroying and manipulating nature in pursuit of improved living circumstances. It is this mismatched combination of actions and morals that creates a level of ambiguity around each text. Although their good intentions establish this aura of ambiguity, I argue that the outcome of their actions, what is most important, designates them as binary and wholly malevolent, because as these texts show us, destructive behavior wrapped in good intentions does nothing to benefit nature or prevent its fall. When it comes to preserving nature, we as individuals and a society are either contributing or standing in the way, and a combination of the two does more harm than good, seen in Miyazaki’s character Ashitaka, as he is content allowing the destructive forces to continue, rather than attempting to stop them altogether, like the character San, *Princess Mononoke*’s lead environmentalist.
Although both texts create these nonbinary, non-polarized characters and forces, Crake’s and Lady Eboshi’s good intentions contribute nothing to the overall preservation of nature, and it becomes apparent that the methods in which we resolve our own ecological and environmental crisis are not knotted in a quandary either. By understanding the purpose of the genres utilized by both texts and by assessing the outcomes of the actions of the nonbinary destructive forces in each text, we begin to see that both *Princess Mononoke* and *Oryx and Crake*, do in fact, possess a polarized message that promotes resolution through direct action.

Atwood’s novel tells the tale of the two childhood friends Jimmy (who assumes the name “Snowman” after the fall of society) and Glenn (who goes by the nickname “Crake”), who grow up in a futuristic civilization built upon the bioengineering of animal hybrids. As they grow up, we see Jimmy’s family fall apart, as his mother cannot stand the corruption of corporate companies and the cruelty suffered by animals and walks out on Jimmy and his father. After graduating high school, Jimmy and Crake attend different colleges, Jimmy at a humanities school and Crake at one of the leading science schools. During their time apart, Crake begins to experiment with animal biological engineering, which leads him to establish his Paradice Project, where he engineers the life-enhancing BlyssPlus Pill, but does so to hide his real project, which is the creation of a new species of humans, referred to as “Crakers” by everyone but Crake, that are biologically superior to humans in every way. After Crake’s BlyssPlus pills are distributed world-wide, he initiates the virus inside them, wiping out the entire human population, leaving only Jimmy and the Crakers, who he must now watch after.

Set in Medieval Japan, Miyazaki’s film follows Ashitaka, a prince from a village in the East, who becomes cursed by the boar god Nago. He then travels west in search of a cure for his curse, and winds up at an iron mill called Irontown, the source of an iron musket ball that was found in Nago’s body and was the source of his curse. There he meets Lady Eboshi, who runs Irontown and watches over her population of lepers and ex-prostitutes. While there, Ashitaka meets San for the first time, a human girl adopted by wolves who protects the Forest of the Deer God, and he becomes wounded as he is thrust into the war between the human manifestations of life and death, San and Lady Eboshi. He then leaves Irontown with San and goes into the Forest with her, where he is
brought to the Deer God’s pond to be healed, but only his wounds are healed, not his curse. On the eve of the climactic battle, he is told by Moro, San’s wolf-mother, to leave the Forest, which he does, but promptly returns to assist San in the battle. After many casualties, the wounded Okkoto, a boar god who ventured with his tribe to the Deer God’s Forest to fight the humans, becomes cursed just like Nago, and leads the humans to the Deer God’s pond. There, Lady Eboshi successfully kills the Deer God and the Forest, unleashing a wave of dark energy that kills anything it touches. The death continues to spread as San and Ashitaka attempt to reattach the Deer God’s head and restore all life. Before they succeed, the muck reaches Irontown and destroys the village completely, with only a few remains standing. Once they reattach the Deer God’s head, he crashes to the ground and releases a blast of air, restoring all life to the Forest and even Irontown, that is now covered in new, green vegetation, and even lifts Ashitaka’s curse. After seeing this, Lady Eboshi vows to rebuild her village, but to live in a way that does not harm the Forest.

The genres and mediums of both texts, while being completely different, amplify the present messages by speaking on our current environmental circumstances. Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake* is set in a not-so-distant future, and her use of the dystopian genre drives the image of our impending doom. In her article, “Environmental Dystopias: Margaret Atwood and the Monstrous Child,” Jane Bone states that “Dystopian narratives support the idea of childhood as in some way endangered,” fostering the notion that life is unsustainable under these conditions, triggering a sensation of urgency in the audience and waking them up to the reality of the environmental catastrophe that looms over our heads (630). Coupled with that, she asserts that what is most appealing and effective about dystopian literature and media is it’s “roots in the everyday” (Bone 628). In the case of Atwood’s novel, the characters Jimmy, Oryx, and Crake live in a world not unlike our own, which is overrun by technology, and the similarities between their world and ours continues to grow. As a society, we continue to progress our scientific capabilities, such as attempting to grow and harvest human organs in human-pig hybrids to be used for transplants (Schwartz), which is the exact same purpose that Atwood’s genetically engineered pigoons served (Atwood 23). The increasing similarities between the two worlds is extremely troubling, and that is what Atwood sought to achieve. By using the dystopia genre, she wanted to draw our attention to the future that potentially awaits
us in the near-future; a future of human extinction, much like what we see in Oryx and Crake.

As for Miyazaki’s film *Princess Mononoke*, a fantastical perversion of the past, creates its own dystopia, revealing the current state of our affairs and relationship with nature. Gwendolyn Morgan discusses in her article “Creatures in Crisis: Apocalyptic Environmental Visions in Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke*,” the topic of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories and how Miyazaki saw those themes as “central to understanding the potential destruction and impacts we can have on the environment” (175-6). In conjunction with these apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic themes, Miyazaki sets the film in the preindustrial, fourteenth-century Muromachi period of Japan, which was otherwise known as “an era of relative peace” and the transitional period from a natural/supernatural-centric to a more human-focused culture (Napier 177-81). This setting, when juxtaposed with apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic imagery, work together to portray our present relationship with nature. This violent relationship can be seen in the war between the humans and the kami, “the ancient gods of the Japanese people who either embody or are closely linked to the forces of nature,” which when linked to characters such as San creates the image of nature as a “supernatural outsider haunting the boundaries of the increasingly ‘civilized’ world” (Napier 177-8). Michelle Smith and Elizabeth Parsons offer commentary on this in their article “Animating Child Activism: Environmentalism and Class Politics in Ghibli’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and Fox’s *Fern Gully* (1992),” writing that the “fantasy plots are aligned with real world tensions between conservation movements railing against a perceived need for capitalist progress combined with the trade union-led social justice agendas associated with lower-class citizens and their employment cutting down forests,” asserting that despite the use of fantasy in the film, the struggle and character motives that are present speak of our own current circumstances (28). Morgan shares my thoughts, stating that the film “reflect[s] simultaneously our history and our future with [its] environmental issues and themes. To bring a sense of heightened awareness and significance to humanity’s struggle with nature, Miyazaki chose apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives” (172). This creates an image that is both palatable and accessible for audience members and engages with their concern for our planet and our species, drawing a line in the sand, with irreversible environmental destruction waiting on
the opposite side.

Not only does Miyazaki blend fantasy and reality to drive the message of *Princess Mononoke*, the film also bends genre, establishing nonpolarized antagonists. As Benjamin Thevenin discusses in his article “Princess Mononoke and beyond: New Nature Narratives for Children,” ecocinema uses melodrama “to challenge the dominant paradigm by advocating revolutionary ideology,” but *Princess Mononoke* disrupts that tradition, as the film “stands out as an alternative to the dominant mode that relies on melodrama’s spectacle, moral polarity, and narrative conclusiveness” (155, 166). Miyazaki’s film’s independence from melodrama creates characters with nonbinary intentions, leaving the audience conflicted about how we feel about them. The most pivotal of these characters is Lady Eboshi, who stands opposed to the Deer God and his Forest, seeking to kill him and take control of the Forest to turn the resources into monetary gain and to use the Deer God’s blood to cure the leprosy that plagues some of her citizens (Miyazaki 00:42:03-00:42:45). This is reminiscent of our society’s present intentions, seeking to greedily grow industry and turn a profit, while also working to improve civilization. This conundrum often undermines the efforts of environmentalists, as people are likely to be reluctant to abandon their life of comfort in order to preserve the world in which we live.

In Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, the intentions of society are no less conflicted, and in some cases are more severe. Atwood’s novel is set in a nondescript futuristic society that functions as a post-Deer-God-death perspective, as we see just how far the society’s dominion over animals and nature stretches. Throughout the novel, bioengineering is discussed, along with animal hybrids such as wolvogs, wolf and dog hybrids that were commissioned by the authoritarian police force, CorpSeCorps, and were “bred to deceive”; bobkittens, which were created “to eliminate feral cats,” providing a boon to the failing songbird population; and spoats/giders, “one of the first successful splices,” the combination of a spider and a goat that produces high-strength silk in its milk that is used for bulletproof material by the CorpSeCorps; with the most commonly discussed being the aforementioned pigoons (Atwood 205, 164, 199). All of these hybrids were created to progress society, much like Lady Eboshi attempts to do, and much like how her efforts are met with catastrophic outcomes, so, too, are the efforts of humanity in Oryx and Crake. Lady Eboshi fills the role of leading-
ambivalent-destructive-force in *Princess Mononoke*, and in *Oryx and Crake*, that role is filled by Crake, who is just as troubling. As a scientist, Crake worked to improve human existence and created the BlyssPlus Pill that would “eliminate the external causes of death,” as well as prevent all sexually transmitted infections, increase sex-drive and decrease general unhappiness, prolong life, and act as a semi-permanent contraceptive, but according to him, that is not his greatest effort to aid human existence (Atwood 293-4).

After establishing complete control over nature, the world began to become increasingly harsh and unsustainable for human existence, and Crake devised a way to mitigate this. Before wiping out all of human existence, Crake made an effort to save humanity by genetically engineering the “Crakers,” a new race of human beings; one that is superior and more practical than the humans before them (us) in every sense (Atwood 302-5). In his article titled “Survival in Margaret Atwood’s Novel *Oryx and Crake*,” Earl Ingersoll discusses Crake’s decision to restart humanity, stating:

> He knows that even homo sapiens cannot survive in an environment devastated by the 20th century’s insistence on burning fossil fuels and by a mushrooming population. Because the species is headed for extinction, along with all the others unable to adapt to a hostile environment, Crake concludes that science must create a species with a better chance of surviving in a damaged ecosystem.

(166-7)

Ingersoll’s commentary assists in understanding that Crake’s intentions of saving humanity are ultimately benevolent, but as we see, these efforts come at the cost of human extinction. These biological advancements, both the animal hybrids and the “Crakers”, although were made with humanity’s best intentions at heart, were only achieved by establishing complete control of nature, which leads to environmental collapse.

This collapse of civilization is present in both texts, and by examining these events, we begin to understand that it does not matter how nonbinary one’s intentions are when they result in the ruination of all life. Morgan brings up a vital point, stating that “We are connected to nature, and what we do affects everything down the environmental chain” (179-80). As members of the ecosystem and the food chain, we and our actions are not immune to repercussion, and we need to understand that it is...
the outcome of our actions that dictate the alignment of our efforts, not our intentions, and that intentions are not what promote sustainability. In Atwood’s novel, the BlyssPlus pills act as receptacles for the virus that wiped out all of humanity, which as we discussed earlier, were meant to benefit society, but these improvements only progressed Crake’s genocide (Atwood 294). Similarly, in *Princess Mononoke*, Lady Eboshi sought to utilize the resources ravaged from the Forest to improve the life of her workers, and she nearly irreversibly shattered all life in the process.

These waves of death that sweep over everyone in both texts are the product of exerting dominion over nature, which cannot possibly be earned, but is stolen. This seizing and abuse of power is present in both texts, but the power struggle we see in *Princess Mononoke* is a precursor to the flagrant abuse that takes place in Oryx and Crake. It is clear that the struggle between Lady Eboshi and the Forest is long-established, but one event that depicts this struggle is Irontown’s battle with Nago. As Lady Eboshi and her citizens are cutting down trees around their camp to grow their village, they are attacked by Nago and his tribe who are attempting to protect the Forest, but they are met with defeat in the form of muskets and fire, and a musket ball becomes lodged inside Nago (Miyazaki 00:34:53-00:36:10). Nago is then cursed and transformed into a demon by the ball of iron buried deep inside him, and he travels east where he encounters Ashitaka, who kills him, but not before the curse spreads to Ashitaka’s right arm, which prompts his journey west (Miyazaki 00:02:30-00:09:45). This curse symbolizes the corruption of nature caused by industry such as firearms, the products of industry, and the tools of humankind that bestow a curse upon nature that spreads and kills every aspect of the natural world upon contact.

Once industry imposes on nature, the curse of humanity will continue to spread, eliminating everything in its path. Morgan discusses this in her article, stating that the single musket ball that pierced Nago’s skin triggers a sequence of events that ends with the annihilation of the Forest and all life (177). From the very beginning, when Ashitaka becomes cursed, we see this chain of destruction leading up to the point when Lady Eboshi decapitates the Deer God as he begins to transform into the Nightwalker, the protective entity that wanders the Forest at night, and the Forest begins to die (Miyazaki 01:53:00-01:54:45). As the Forest decays, we see Kodama, the spirits that live in the Forest, representing its health (Miyazaki 00:23:20-00:23:51), perish and plummet from the
treetops as dark energy exits the Nightwalker’s headless form (Miyazaki 01:53:00-01:54:45), signifying defeat and the death of the Forest. This environmental butterfly-effect represents just how much harm humans are capable of doing to nature; signifying the amount of suffering that is caused by taking things too far and overstepping our boundaries.

*Princess Mononoke* shows us that in a state of acute instability and disarray, nature struggles to recover, and civilization crumbles along with it, and the events of *Oryx and Crake* occur between nature’s death and civilization’s end. As briefly mentioned earlier, *Princess Mononoke* functions as an allegory of the present and a precursor to *Oryx and Crake*, a speculation of our future. Just after the Deer God is beheaded, humankind establishes full control of nature, only having to dodge the muck that surrounds them (Miyazaki 01:53:00-01:54:45), and the events of *Oryx and Crake* take place after some form of dominance is forced upon all natural life, as bioengineering is a driving force behind both the plot and their civilization as a whole. After years of bioengineering and technological advancements, tightening its grasp around nature’s throat, the civilization begins to struggle with sporadic environmental conditions, which then leads Crake to initiate his “solution” and intentional fall of society, exterminating all humans and letting the Crakers take over and begin their simple existence. This sequence of events, beginning with a solitary event of corruption and ending with the downfall of all life, sounds imaginative, but we you look around, it becomes utterly staggering to realize that our own society, our own world, is presently on this path, and no amount of good intentions will reverse what has been done and save our existence.

After identifying the nonbinary nature of the intentions behind the efforts made by each text’s respective destructive force and understanding the atrocious outcome of their efforts, we can begin to determine an appropriate solution to this astronomical issue. In his article detailing the avant-garde nature of *Princess Mononoke* as an ecocinema film, Thevenin discusses that a common motif in the genre is the depiction of the struggle between environmentalists and those who oppose them in the form of physical engagement, with the hero (who embodies or is associated with nature) defeating the forces that oppress and harm nature, “symboliz[ing] the environmentalists’ ideological victory” (154). Despite the ambivalence surrounding the film, I would argue that the film still exudes this struggle and that
the “ideological victory” comes in the form of the destruction of Irontown. The iron mill’s reversion to a village in union with nature (Miyazaki 02:07:52-02:08:08) symbolizes a much-needed treaty between humankind and nature; one that must be established in order to preserve the earth and humanity. This unity can only be achieved through the metaphorical, or literal in the case of Irontown, destruction of civilization, putting an end to our operations that are detrimental to the environment and attempting to reverse the harm we have caused the earth.

Throughout *Princess Mononoke*, the question of whether or not there can be peace between nature and humanity is asked of multiple characters, as well as the audience, and is alluded to in *Oryx and Crake*. Smith and Parsons discuss this dilemma in their article, noting that the film asks its “viewers to weigh complex questions, and demands a critical and intellectual engagement with the issues at stake without comfortable resolution” (36). This conundrum that the audience is placed in is similar to the one Ashitaka struggles with throughout the entirety of the film. On the eve of battle, Ashitaka approaches Moro and asks if humans and the Forest can live in peace, to which she responds by stating that it is simply too late to do anything, and “There is nothing [he] can do” (Miyazaki 01:19:25-01:21:50). Although it appears that this peace is not reached in the end, I argue that harmony is achieved, but at the cost of the downfall of civilization, which is possibly the only way to restore balance between civilization and nature, as it allows society to rebuild and restructure its foundation. As stated, *Oryx and Crake* alludes to this question, but never asks it outright. After his first encounter with the wolf-dog hybrid, wolvogs, and the abomination of a chicken that is created to produce the signature fried chicken, ChickieNobs, Jimmy is troubled, and “he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed,” and the audience is then forced to ask the same question; how far is too far when it comes to meddling in nature and the lives of others? (Atwood 206) Just as San prepares to go to war with the ironworks to save her home, Snowman reflects on his life as Jimmy and considers if the post-apocalyptic present could have been avoided by murdering Crake before he had a chance to initiate the illness (Atwood 276). This thought process hearkens back to the defeat of Lady Eboshi, which ultimately allows natural life to thrive and harmony to be established. Peace and civility between nature and humanity is not obtained without great sacrifice on the part of humanity, and it is through Miyazaki’s film that we see just how hefty
that sacrifice is.

In their article, Smith and Parsons argue that there exists no pretty, clean-cut solution, and while they are right about that, they are ultimately mistaken. They argue that the ending of *Princess Mononoke* fails to provide us with either a “universal solution” or a “complete restoration of order or triumph for San” and the Forest, seeing that remnants of the ironworks are left standing, but I would argue that this does not suggest the lack of a solution (Smith and Parsons 32).

Of course, restoration will not be complete. There is no simple way to reverse the damage that Lady Eboshi caused to the Forest and the Deer God, and the same goes for Crake. Crake’s decimation of the human race, once triggered, is nearly unstoppable, as the solution died along with him, but moreover, Crake’s “solution” of restarting humanity is not an identical replacement for what was lost, but the new race of humans is engineered to live commensally with nature, similar to how Lady Eboshi vows to rebuild both the village and its relationship with nature (Miyazaki 02:07:52-02:08:08). This resembles a reversion to a point in time when society lived in conjuncture with nature before the rise of Industrialism. From this state, society can reformat itself to operate in a way that is ambivalent to nature.

This restructuring of society will not be achieved through inaction, and both Miyazaki’s film and Atwood’s novel discuss activism in some capacity. Thevenin discusses this in his article, writing, “The very grave consequences of inaction regarding issues like global warming, deforestation, water pollution, etc. encourage the use of mobilizing, unifying political rhetoric that melodrama provides” (154). By refusing to take action and work to preserve a sustainable Earth, we yield to environmental dangers, which are already upon us, that threaten the habitability of our planet. As Thevenin puts it, if we do not act quickly, the level of severity of these natural menaces will continue to increase and we will be faced with situations similar to the ongoing war between the Forest and Irontown in *Princess Mononoke*, or in some cases, we will face an irreversible doom, much like the human race in *Oryx and Crake*. In order to save our species, we must be willing to sacrifice some part of comfortable life, much like San from *Princess Mononoke*, who does not struggle with the thought of putting her life on the line, as she proclaims, “I’m not afraid to die if it will drive away the humans!” and it is clear that San talks the talk and walks the walk (Miyazaki 00:55:02-00:55:05). As Ashitaka departs from the Forest on the morning of the battle, he leaves
San with a parting gift, a crystal dagger, and upon receiving this gift, Moro reminds San that she has the potential to have a life with Ashitaka, but she chooses the life of activism, deciding to put her life at stake and fight alongside Okkoto and his clan (Miyazaki 01:26:00-01:27:15). In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy’s mother is connected to a resistance and environmental activist group, and every time she appears in the novel after leaving the family, we see a snippet of these protests and the group’s efforts to prohibit corporate meddling in nature. One of these corporations is Happicuppa, the leading manufacturer of coffee, that engineered a new coffee bean that grew on bushes that ripened concurrently and would then be harvested using large machines on massive plantations, and we find out that “the resistance movement was global. Riots broke out, crops were burned, Happicuppa cafés were looted, Happicuppa personnel were car-bombed or kidnapped or shot by snipers or beaten to death by mobs,” which was met with intense crowd control in the form of massacre (Atwood 178-9). These examples of action signify just how severe the environmental crisis is in those fictitious worlds, requiring widespread, violent resistance just to make the voices of the environmentalists heard.

It is no secret that our climatic crisis continues to worsen, and the state of our environment steadily declines. As things progress, I believe it is in our best interest to take a page from Atwood’s and Miyazaki’s literal and metaphorical books. It is growing increasingly imperative that we take binary action for the sake of our planet, to ensure our prolonged existence and the existence of those we share the planet with. There is no hope to be had if we do not do everything in our power to put an end to environmental devastation; meaning we must abandon this non-polarized concept of environmentalism when considering our efforts, both as individuals and as a society. Our society stands on an empire of corruption and murder of both the environment for resources, and animals for food and clothing, and although some are guiltier than others, none of us are “entirely innocent when it involves environmental challenges, especially with climate change. Whether or not we choose to ‘see it with eyes unclouded’ depends on us” (Morgan 178). The state of the future rests on our shoulders, and we need to stop shrugging off the responsibility. Our climatic clock is counting down, and it will not stop any time soon. The time to act is now, before it is too late; before our own population is threatened by extinction.

About the Author

Dylan Gregor is a recent graduate who double majored in English and Secondary Education. In Fall 2019, he completed his student-teaching practicum and is pursuing a career as a high school English Language Arts teacher. This essay was written for a seminar taught by Dr. John Kucich (English) in the spring of 2019, examining North American texts and their commentary on ecology.