

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Submit](#)

[Meet the
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)

[Previous
Issues](#)

[Join Our
Team](#)

Literary Essay Contest

[BACK](#)

1st Place

Sophie Moore:
The Murderous Motives Within Oryx and Crake

2nd Place

Quinton Callahan:
Climate Change, Capitalism, and Oryx and Crake: A Road Map for Destruction

3rd Place

Aaron Tigert:
A Picturesque Cataclysm

The Amrit. R. Chatterjee Memorial Writing Award

Heather Phillips:
Thirsty for Love: Mary Oliver and Grieving

Copyright Eastfork Online Literary Journal. All Rights Reserved.

POWERED BY
WebsiteBuilder

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

The Murderous Motives within *Oryx and Crake*

By: Sophie Moore

[BACK](#)

Crake: creator of the Crakers; top of his high school class; genius scientist; the mastermind behind the BlyssPluss Pill; and exterminator of humanity. Now, as readers, we all know the who, what, where, when, and how of this awful—yet brilliantly crafted—crime in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. However, the key piece of information that has been left out, and has had readers conspiring since its release, is *why*. Why did Crake make the BlyssPluss Pill? Why did he hire all those scientists? And most importantly, *why* did he try to wipe out the human race? All who have read the thrilling tale of Crake and his master plan have come to their conclusions as to what they believe is the motive behind his desire to restart the planet, the most common and obvious being: Crake is a psychopath. Plain and simple. From his childhood to his final moments, Crake displays all possible traits and characteristics of what a psychotic murderer would possess. But what if it's not that simple? What if there are small details hidden within the context of the story that reveals a new side of Crake and his reasoning for the mass extinction of the human race? Ultimately, Crake does show obvious signs of being a psychopath, with his motivation being his psychotic desires to cause pain; however, Crake also has the potential of being an avenger with a plan to harm the people who killed his father.

So what are psychopaths? Criminologist Xanthe Mallett's article "The Difference Between a Psychopath and a Sociopath," defines them as people with "a lack of remorse or empathy for others, a lack of guilt or ability to take responsibility for their actions, a disregard for laws or social conventions, and an inclination to violence" (Mallett). Owing these characteristics is the causation of little to no neuron activity in the brain's amygdala (the emotion center) and prefrontal cortex (the regulator of emotions and judgment), while its limbic system (reward center) is hypersensitive. Dr. Mike Koenigs, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, performed MRI scans on the brains of regular people and compared them to those of psychopaths in prisons. *Doc Zone*, a Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) documentary series, aired an episode entitled "The Psychopath Next Door," in which Koenigs shares his discoveries on. He explains how some brains are "hypersensitive to rewards [and some] brains that seem to be under sensitive to the suffering of others," which creates the basic "picture of psychopathy" ("The Psychopath Next Door"). The key trait to remember is this: "Psychopaths are born and sociopaths are made" (Mallett).

Professor Robert Hare of the University of British Columbia invented what is known today as the Hare Psychopathy Checklist: a "diagnostic checklist [that] measures 20 key personality characteristics which reveal psychopathic traits," each psychopath receiving a rank between 1-40 for each trait and averaged out ("The Psychopath Next Door"). The top five traits that are ranked are: egocentric; lack of remorse, empathy, or guilt; deceitfulness; glib; and shallowness. Crake exhibits four out of the five characteristics at some point in the novel, his lack of empathy or emotion being his most repetitive feature. In his early years, Crake develops a fascination for the dark web and all its contents—live executions, child porn, assisted suicides, and various other things—all while sporting either a demented smile or no reaction at all. As he gets older, Crake has no interest in dating or sex like Jimmy does and brushes questions like "you got a girlfriend?" aside (Atwood 207). His mother's death also sparks suspicion when his initial response to her death is not to be sad or angry like a normal person, but to say how the whole event was "impressive" (Atwood 177).

Glibness, conceitedness, and deceitfulness all go hand in hand when it comes to Crake; using the ability to "smooth talk" his way to manipulating people to do this dirty work. As Crake explains how he conducts his master plan to Jimmy, he—evidently—leaves out the whole 'wiping out the human race' part and tells Jimmy with utmost confidence how the BlyssPluss Pill will be a "huge money spinner. It would be the must have pill, in every country, in every society of the world" (Atwood 295). In addition to the confidence of his plan, he uses Oryx as a tool by promoting her to "a more official position...[with] triple the pay she'd been getting" to go around and sell the pills as she had done as a child (Atwood 310). What's most diabolical is that by controlling Oryx, Crake also controls Jimmy. Jimmy has been in love with Oryx since he first watched her on the child porn site, HottTotts, with Crake, and with this information, Crake uses it to his advantage. Psychopaths have various methods to play with the emotions of their victims, from sex to money to power. In Oryx and Jimmy's case, sex is Crake's main weapon. From basic evidence, Crake is what is known as a "Puppet Master" Psychopath: "an individual who has the wide repertoire of psychopathic traits...[and gets] other people to do their dirty work" ("The Psychopath Next Door"). Oryx and Crake's sexual relationship is boring, to say the least: "direct and simple, according to Oryx" (Atwood 314). Yet, Oryx and Jimmy are both borderline sex addicts, so naturally, they are pulled to each other to satisfy their sexual needs, and wordlessly convincing the other to stay under Crake's employment to continue to do so. Also using his egocentric nature, Crake angers Jimmy with the comment, "if I'm not around, Oryx won't be either," making Jimmy feel guilty and angry in a sense knowing Crake also sleeps with the woman he loves, yet feeling powerless knowing that if he wants to be with Oryx, he'll have to stay within Crake's Paradise facility (Atwood 321).

Though Crake manifests common symptoms and traits of a psychotic mind, he also has the potential motive of avenging his father's mysterious death. However, according to English Professor Shuli Barzilai, Crake doesn't believe it to be so mysterious. Her literary journal, "Tell My Story: Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," Crake "knows that neither suicide nor accident was the cause," but rather a corporate group of people: his father's company (Barzilai 100). Once Jimmy and Crake spot Jimmy's mother—who had disappeared when Jimmy was younger—on T.V with a group of protestors, Crake tells him, "my dad was the same...he bugged off too" (Atwood 182). A peculiar pattern appears between the two missing parents: they both work for a company, start acting strange, run away, and then are tracked down and killed. Jimmy's mother had been executed on a live stream while Crake's father "went off a pleebland overpass," though whether he jumped or was pushed remains unclear (Atwood 182). Either way, Crake doesn't talk about it much with Jimmy.

Because Jimmy knows so little about Crake's father and how he died, he is considered an "unreliable narrator"; on top of that, his memory is unstable since Crake released the disease to kill humanity. Barzilai mentions how Jimmy concludes that "Crake didn't seem too worked up about" his father's death, the focal point of this statement being the word, "seem" (Atwood 182). "Seem" is a word used to suggest something with caution in case the prime inference is wrong—it is not a permanent deduction. Keeping this in mind, it is clear Jimmy assumes how Crake feels without truly understanding what is going through his mind. Meanwhile, saddened by the sudden loss of his father, with the knowledge of who murdered him, Crake could have been planning his revenge all along.

The planning process of revenge is similar to that of a psychopath. With a conscious mind, psychopaths "will plan their crimes down to the smallest detail, taking calculated risks to avoid detection," which may lead to life-long preparation (Mallett). As for a revenge-seeker, the same applies. The idea of revenge when another mistreats us is known to be psychologically pleasing, as the University of Waterloo Professor, Karina Schumann, and real-life serial killer turned author, Michael Ross, confer in their shared journal: "The Benefits, Costs, and Paradox of Revenge." After experiencing "penalizing wrongdoing," the victim of such an act can develop stress and anxiety, which "revenge may enable [them] to reduce...by restoring equity with the transgressor" (Schumann and Ross, 99). Eric Jaffe, author of "The Complicated Psychology of Revenge," informs us that when revenge becomes an option to ensure, "the decision [causes] a rush of neural activity in the caudate nucleus, an area of the brain known to process rewards" (Jaffe). It is not until this desire for revenge is sated that the neural activity will dissipate. "It's a natural urge"—Dr. Kevin Carlsmith of Colgate University tells the American Psychological Association's Michael Price—that is "to keep societies working smoothly...You're willing to sacrifice your well-being in order to punish someone who misbehaved" (Price).

Revenge can be categorized as either: violent or socially harmful. Social harm intends to defame a person or their position by, for example, framing them for a crime. Remembering the theory that a corporate business killed Crake's father, we can piece together why Crake decides to release the pill from a corporate company: to make the lone survivors hate them. Crake purposely programs the pill to kill people in a sequence—with certain countries dying before others. The remaining few will know where the pill came from and blame them for causing the disease.

With this concept kept in our back pocket, we can now pick up on all the cases where Crake shows the one thing psychopaths are *not* supposed to have: emotions. The key detail about psychopaths that is very clear is that they don't have an emotional attachment to anyone or anything, yet Crake does. As he remembers his father, Crake "[smiles] in an odd way" when he remembers his lack of coordination, a memory and a fact that shouldn't cause such a reaction (Atwood 182). On top of that, when Jimmy does ask about Crake's love life, he gets a sense that "Crake might be jealous" of the fact that he is unable to get as much action as Jimmy is (Atwood 207). Finally, Crake checks on Jimmy after he finds out his mother was executed, saying he wanted to "see if [Jimmy was] alright" (Atwood 287). After such a traumatic experience, a psychopath would have been thriving off of Jimmy's pain, not asking him how he was feeling.

With Crake's tendency to display both sets of characteristics, it is clear that he fits the bill of both a psychotic murderer and a vengeful son. His backward and forward attitude on certain concepts makes it difficult to fully close the case on what the deadly motive for this homicide was. At first glance, it is normal to presume him to be a psychopath or some form of it. For me, I considered him a misunderstood villain; someone who believes he is doing good by doing something wrong, a mindset a large range of psychopaths have. But after careful consideration and research, it is clear that is not the whole story; there is more to Crake than meets to eye. It goes to show how quick we are to point fingers and judge a person without taking the time to sit down and fully understand what is going on in their head. Even psychopaths, though we rather not deal with them, are human beings with a mental disease. Once further research is conducted, we can eventually cure the psychotic sickness that infects their minds and causes them to act the way they do and the reason *why* they do.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *MaddAddam Trilogy*. *Oryx and Crake: a Novel*. Anchor Books, 2004.
- Barzilai, Shuli. "Tell My Story": *Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood's Oryx and Crake and Shakespeare's Hamlet*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2008, pp. 87-127.
- Jaffe, Eric. "The Complicated Psychology of Revenge." Association for Psychological Science - APS, 4 Oct. 2011. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-complicated-psychology-of-revenge>.
- Price, Michael. *Monitor on Psychology*. American Psychological Association, June 2009. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/06/revenge>.
- Mallett, Xanthe. "How to Tell the Difference between a Psychopath and a Sociopath." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 1 May 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/the-difference-between-a-psychopath-and-a-sociopath-10422016.html>.
- "The Psychopath Next Door." Banjavich, Geoff, director. *Doc Zone*, Canadian Broadcasting Company.
- Schumann, Karina, and Michael Ross. "The Benefits, Costs, and Paradox of Revenge." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 4, no. 12, 2010, pp. 1195-1205., doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00522.x.

[BACK](#)

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Submit](#)

[Meet the
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)

[Previous
Issues](#)

[Join Our
Team](#)

Climate Change, Capitalism, and *Oryx and Crake*: A Road Map for Destruction

By Quinton Callahan

BACK

Imagine with me now, a world with cities flooded and crumbling in the now distant ocean, the tallest buildings covered in overgrown vines, a dark blue hole burnt around the sun. How would you survive in this world? With the sun blistering your uncovered skin. The water too dirty and trash-filled to even drink, while the dehydration ebbs at your ever-drying mouth. No trees to shade you from the constant and ever-prevalent sunshine. Now, think to our world, how we are just a few steps closer down this path, one littered with flat Light cans and McDonalds bags, the one laid out before us in Margaret Atwood's book *Oryx and Crake*. The saddest part is that we humans are to blame, as we continue to support the destruction caused by major corporations. Companies that see no correlation between what they are doing and the effects that their business practices are having on the environment. If we as humans continue to follow the path that we are on when it comes to major corporations and climate change, our world may come to a conclusion that is significantly close in comparison to that of *Oryx and Crake*. We can no longer focus on worrying about the plastic cups, straws, and other non-biodegradable items, if we do not do anything to make major companies and corporations see that their business practices are killing us. If they don't change, and we don't hold them accountable for their actions, then the Climatologists', scientists who study our climate, prediction of the world only having twelve years will become our irreversible and inevitable future. We humans, living on this big green rock, need to take a stand, and stand together with Mother Nature.

Before we can even begin to look at how to we can start change, we need to look at how our current form of capitalism, and what is meant to be used for, is affecting the world around us. According to Jonathan T. Park, a first-year law student at William and Mary who also received a B.S. in Environmental Science and Sustainability with a minor in Political Science from the University of Utah, "Capitalism was designed as a mechanism for efficiently allocating scarce resources, encouraging human ingenuity, and improving the quality of life for those willing and able to participate in the system" (Park; 189). Park goes on to explain that under the original workings of the capitalist system, the production of wealth and quality of life can be enhanced. Even when any natural resources have reached a point of depletion, "the market will produce an alternative." These alternatives end up being man-made, creating a larger demand and gives reasons for companies to produce more. This causes more waste and byproducts that bring harm to the environment.

The system on which we as a capitalist society run, and are meant to run, bears a striking resemblance to that of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. When we talk about the depletion of natural resources and the production of alternatives, many of the corporations mentioned sporadically throughout the book are able to produce alternatives. Even with the endless possibilities and scientific breakthroughs, in Atwood's world, this society can and will run out of ideas, and even more importantly, time. When we take a look at one of the quotes from *Crake*, Atwood's villain and secondary character in her book:

"It's not altruism exactly," said Crake. "More like sink or swim. I've seen the latest confidential Corps demographic reports. As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone" (Atwood, 294-295).

This is our first time learning how *Crake* feels about what is happening to the world. Throughout a major portion of the book, we feel that he has no emotion, no feeling for what is around him, when really, he more or less feels numb to the truth. This feeling can be linked to the many people fighting for a climate solution. They feel numb and helpless in their ever-growing fight against major corporations and the pollutions that they produce. Learning that *Crake* does care shows the reader that, while he does feel almost nothing, he still cares for the earth and what will come of it, which, again, can be paralleled to the many climate activists we have in the world in or day to day lives.

Though Atwood's book focuses on the extremes of what the end could be like, it is not too far off what scientists are saying today. According to the website Exploratorium.edu, if we are to keep producing the same amounts of CO2 emissions we are now, the estimated temperature will rise 74-degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2100. This is a scary future that we are laying out for the next generation. But it doesn't stop there. With this increase in the overall temperature, the sea level will also raise by an astonishing 29 inches. This also means that in Sacramento, California, the overall yearly temperature, including winter, would be almost 10 degrees warmer, rising from 74 degrees (in the 1960's through the 1980's) to 83 degrees in 2100. While this may be a scary thought to have floating around in your mind, as you come through the article, it is later stated, "Not only that, there would be about 10 times as many extreme heat days (heat in the 90th percentile)-about 40 days per year in 2100, compared with only four days in the 1980s. There would also be about six heat waves per year, instead of one, and these heat waves would last longer. (A heat wave here means four days in a row of 104°F or higher)". To think of the world we may leave behind is a scary thought. Just to survive in this overheating, overflowing world, our descendants would have to evolve to maintain a stable existence, just like that of the *Crakers*, the humanoid beings that *Crake* made for his Paradise Project.

Unsurprisingly, Atwood also seemed to have predicted how the temperatures would rise, changing the way that the world moves and functions. When talking about Jimmy, the main protagonist and the character who we follow throughout the novel, and *Crake's* graduation from their high school, Atwood writes "Jimmy and Crake graduated from HelthWyzzer High on a warm humid day in early February. The ceremony used to take place in June; the weather then used to be sunny and moderate. But June was now the wet season all the way up the east coast, and you couldn't have held an outdoor event then, what with the thunderstorms. Even early February was pushing it; they'd ducked a twister by only one day" (Atwood; Section 8). This is a prime example of how climate change can majorly affect the overall temperature, the seasons, and how we live our day-to-day lives in the appropriate weather.

It is a hard thought to process when we are told that if we don't change what we are doing to the world around us will change for itself, to our detriment. At this point you may be asking yourself "Is there any way we can stop this? Any way that we can reverse what we are doing to the Earth and go backwards on this winding path?" According to some, it is not impossible. Although we are further down the road than most would like to be, it is not too late if we are able to not only change our ways but bring light to and enforce change within the conglomerate that makes up corporate America. The change in the ever-present climate change is not done with just a single group deciding that things need to change, but the need for many, if not all, parties to come together and find a fair and trusted system. "To succeed, such a system and the institutions which implement it must be seen as fair by all parties: the biggest challenge will be achieving the necessary level of trust," Says Anil Markandya, author of "Can Climate Change be Reversed under Capitalism?" In fact, once we are able to come together as a system, living in a more sustainable society is not an impossible feat. Take Bhutan in South Asia for example. This is a "carbon negative" country and according to Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Bhutan's 4th King, "Gross National Happiness is more important than gross national product". This society believes more in their people's happiness rather than the capitalistic needs that plague other countries.

The saddest part, though, is that when we think about how many of the companies and high-paid executives live without the fear and think that climate change doesn't affect them. The types of people that have the luxury to believe that effects of the climate do not exist, even when they themselves are major contributors to Earth's downfall. When we look at pop culture, specifically anything set in an apocalyptic setting, we can take note on how these rich communities are able to survive in a more comfortable, luxurious style while the underclass try their best to survive in what is left of the world after its destruction. Much like Jimmy has to do.

This hold true even for the many compounds and companies scattered throughout Atwood's text. Throughout the book, the reader will see many comparisons of the compounds to the pleeblands, which are the remains of the city that everyone had once lived in together, specifically displaying how great the compounds are and how poor the pleeblands and its people are. "The dome complex was at the far-right side of the Kojov Compound. It had its own park around it, a dense climate-controlling plantation of mixed tropical splices above which it rose like a blind eyeball." (Atwood, 297). In one quote, we see how amazing and controlled the climates were inside the compounds, even though we are only showed one of them.

On the other hand, when Atwood writes about the pleeblands, we see what happens when climate change reaches a point of no return. She writes:

"Jimmy spent a lot of the three-hour trip looking out the window at the pleeblands they were passing through. Rows of dingy houses; apartment buildings with tiny balconies, laundry strung on the railings; factories with smoke coming out of the chimneys; gravel pits. A huge pile of garbage, next to what he supposed was a high-heat incinerator. A shopping mall like the ones at HelthWyzzer, only there were cars in the parking lots instead of electric golf carts. A neon strip, with bars and girlie joints and what looked like an archeological-grade movie theatre. He glimpsed a couple of trailer parks, and wondered what it was like to live in one of them: just thinking about it made him slightly dizzy, as he imagined a desert night, or the sea. Everything in the pleeblands seemed so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide open. So subject to chance" (Atwood, 196).

The stark contrast between the two settings shows the reader that what the wealthier and "smarter" did to the world around them could be resolved by making a more protected, controlled area for the elite. Thus, bring forth the capitalistic classism that exists in both the imaginary world of *Oryx and Crake* and our own world.

In Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction, we are shown two different worlds that the main character visits. One, destroyed and left unrecognizable and the other created to keep the wealthy and smart safe from the previous city they helped to create. These imaginary companies mirror what can happen to our society if we are to follow capitalistic goals and climate change to the furthest point on our path.

Laying before us, we as a society have three options. One, we can sit around, going nothing while the Earth that we have come to love wastes away before our very eyes. Two, we can continue to fight for a more alternative and sustainable way to drink our fancy expensive Starbucks out of, or three, we can get on our feet and fight for what's right. Together we can demand that these big companies and corporations take a step back and change their immoral and unethical practices to ensure a better, more controlled world around us. Our planet is crying. Our planet is dying. And yet, we sit here and put straws and cups above what is truly bringing us further and further down this path of self-annihilation; climate change brought on and furthered by capitalistic greed.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *MaddAddam Trilogy, Oryx and Crake: a Novel*. Anchor Books, 2004.

"Looking Ahead." *Exploratorium*, 25 Oct. 2018, <https://www.exploratorium.edu/climate/looking-ahead#DatasetHowMuchWarmer?>

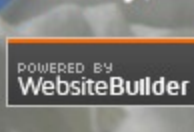
Markandya, Anil. "Can Climate Change Be Reversed under Capitalism?" *Development and Change*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2009, pp. 1159-1152, doi:10.1111/j.1467-7660.2009.01615.x.

Park, Jonathan T. "Climate Change and Capitalism." *Consilience*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2015, pp. 189-206.

Tobgay, Tshering TED.

https://www.ted.com/talks/tshering_tobgay_this_country_isn_t_just_carbon_neutral_it_s_carbon_negative?language=en.

BACK



East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

A Picturesque Cataclysm

By: Aaron Tigert

[BACK](#)

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is the epitome of his poetic career, a masterpiece. In the poem, we are granted sight, through the eyes of a narrator in a moment of realization. Beginning with solitude in the confines of a dwelling, and concluding in a monologue posed to the significant other of the narrator. The development of each stanza is composed of a depiction of human condition swaying towards acceptance of fate, the fate of human despair. The poem itself displays the utmost relationship between landscape and consciousness, meeting in a connection where picturesque emotions combine with a message of love and existential contemplation.

Over the course of the text, the firm paintings of landscape lie in the wake of words posed to arouse emotion, however, emotion must first be aroused, in order to arouse that of another. We find our narrator deeply enthralled by the landscape, as he gazes about the beach of Dover somewhere along the English Channel, as both the French coast and the cliffs of England are referenced in the first stanza. Amid watching the waves, our narrator is moved. Calling out for one to "Listen!", before ultimately simmering to the realization that he may not bring this moment with him; he decides to live and thrive for the time being. The visual flow of the waves is grounding for him as he recalls

"With a tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in." (Arnold, lines 14 and 15)

The bewildered notion adds to the narrator's consciousness in relation to the waves and the world.

In the most subtle of transitions we return to an ancient scene of Sophocles having the same realization, prompted by the sound of the waves. Sophocles was one of the few Greek tragedians whose plays have survived to modern day. Where he was hearing the waves of The Aegean, our narrator hears the same sound on the English Channel. The disasters that beset the house of Oedipus were once likened to that of a "mounting tide" by Sophocles, generating inspiration for his writings, and alluding to those writings, and thoughts stirring in the mind of Arnold. Given the comparisons Arnold draws between his own moment, and Sophocle's pondering on human misery, it would stand to reason that Arnold finds Sophocles to be what he describes as "a real classic". In Arnold's criticisms of poetry, he frequents this idea of "classic poetry" both in distaste, and perfection. The assumption of a "real classic," as is posed here, develops the notion of a more so timeless creator, rather than the classical poetry which he exclaims that the French poetic scholars have become "dissatisfied with." This state of mind which Arnold has entered is, as he puts it in align with his understandings reflected in his critical essay, wherein he states "that the substances and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness."

The air of seriousness becomes gripping once departing this stanza; plunging into inevitable deconstruction of "The Sea of Faith." Within the third stanza, Arnold delves further into his painful epiphany steadying his mental gaze over the span of the body of water beneath him. The recognition of indiscriminate change of the ocean's empty breath, guides his stream of consciousness to the temporary nature of all that he perceives in this moment. This is a rendering of his definite mortality, as he ponders the grand scheme of existence in general, the senses become more prominent within the poem. Arnold describes the wind and waves as breath blowing along the "naked shingles of the world," referencing the beaches composed of pebbles (Arnold, line 28). The retreat of this wind leaves reminds our narrator of his current moment accompanied by his significant other, thus presenting love as an emotion and idea within the poem. Within Arnold's critical essay on poetry, he has this to say of emotion: "Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fat." To take this natural tone, and add love is to present an idea. The idea of love within this poem is planted as a seed and subsequently germinated into what Matthew Arnold refers to as fact in the above quote.

The latter portion of the poem leading up to the final stanza serves as the context for the narrator's state of mind, only to reveal that, contrary to the implications of the three prior stanzas, he is not alone. Although the thought process through which our protagonist is capable at arriving to his conclusion is, for the most part a solitary journey, for the physical duration of his epiphany or contemplation he is accompanied by his love interest. "Dover Beach" does not begin as a poem centered around love, however, perhaps the entirety of the poem is being confessed to the narrator's love interest. With this in mind, it can be considered factual; this poem is a portrayal of monologue towards one's lover. Therefore, when the narrator turns his words to another, as opposed to the outside world stating

"Ah, love, let us be true

To one another!" (Arnold, lines 29-30)

thereby coaxing the reader into the preceding conversation. The induction of another person further develops the imagery of the poem, making love a key theme. The narrator concludes by placing their existence in accordance to the large, apathetic world which the poem depicts. Thus the reader poses themselves in a similar placement, returning to the insignificance of such a pitiful existence. In the midst of the portrayed existence within the poem, there is a nugget of

truth, an appreciation for the moment. This moment provides clarity, and appreciation for all that surrounds, an all that resides within our immediate surroundings; and thus Arnold concludes:

"And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight

Where ignorant armies clash by night." (Arnold, lines 35-37)

The poem rounds back, tying the themes of landscape and existence to love and consciousness.

Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. "The Study of Poetry by Matthew Arnold." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, OAD, www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69374/the-study-of-poetry.

Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." *Literature to Go*, Michael Meyer, Third Edition, Pages 383-384

What do think about Aaron's thesis? Do you agree? Why not tell him yourself by putting his name, your email, the title of his essay in the subject, and your message so he can see your comment!

Name: *

Email: *

Subject: *

Message: *

[BACK](#)

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

Thirsty for Love: Mary Oliver and Grieving

By: Heather Phillips

[BACK](#)

Mary Oliver was a modern-day Romantic. Meaning, like the great Romantics of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century such as Shelley and Keats, Oliver wrote her poetry with a seemingly religious response to the natural world around her. Her poem, "Oxygen" is beautifully constructed, vivid with rich imagery and raw emotion on the surface. It is a seemingly simple poem that uncovers the speaker's deep revelations about life, death and about the necessity of love. Oliver's Romantic style of combining the human experience and the beauty and superiority of the natural world into one single entity is evident in "Oxygen" when she takes the air that we physically need to breathe and writes about it in a way that becomes synonymous with the human emotion of love; something this poem tells us is vital to truly living.

To fully understand why Oliver's poetry preaches to the reader the significance of the human bond with nature, it is important to consider where Oliver came from. In an interview conducted in 2015 by Krista Tippet from On Being, Oliver discusses her childhood and her struggles with certain ideas in the Christian community:

"And then I had trouble with the resurrection. So, I would not join the church. But I was still probably more interested than many of the kids who did enter the church. It's been one of the most important interests of my life and continues to be. And it doesn't have to be Christianity...I know that a life is much richer with a spiritual part to it. And I also think nothing is more interesting. So, I cling to it." (Oliver)

The spiritual part of life Oliver discovers, as she highlights many times in the same interview, is a deep, emotional connection with nature; a connection she found in the salvation of the woods at her childhood home in north eastern Ohio. To escape the abuse of her father, Oliver would spend hours on end walking around the woods, writing poetry in her journal. Oliver says, "I think it saved my life...It was a very bad childhood for everybody...But I did find the entire world in looking for something. But I got saved by poetry. And I got saved by the beauty of the world." (Oliver). This comfort she found in nature strongly influences Oliver's Romantic style. Even in a poem like "Oxygen," where the speaker is inside their home, thinking about death, homages to nature are still there to anchor human life to the natural world, be it the passionate life of the fire, the beauty of a dozen roses or the acute necessity of the air we breathe.

In "Oxygen," the reader meets a speaker who is processing through their feelings about a loved one who is gravely ill and nearing death. It is significant to know that in 2005, when the poem was written, Oliver's long-time partner, Molly Malone Cook, passed away after losing her battle with lung cancer. It is reasonable to assume that "Oxygen" is a poem in which Oliver is processing her own feelings about life and death. With this in mind, the tone of the speaker is not of sadness, but one of gratitude. There is no evidence of anger in the speaker's voice. The feeling of sadness is overpowered by a complacent sense of calm. How the speaker is processing the demise of their loved one strongly reflects Oliver's own feelings towards death. In the interview with Tippet, Oliver shares how she views the end of our lives:

"...everything's a little energy. You go back, and you're these little bits of energy, and pretty soon you're something else... The world is pretty much - everything is mortal. It dies. But its parts don't die. Its parts become something else. We know that when we bury a dog in the garden and with a rose bush on top of it. We know that there is replenishment. And that's pretty amazing. What more there might be, I don't know. But I'm pretty confident of that one." (Oliver)

Oliver is firm in her convictions, which stand prominently in the foreground of all her writing. The fact that Oliver believes we become something new and replenished when we die allows her to find acceptance in her grief. Which in turn, allows her to bring light to the darkest of subjects. The reader can feel an overwhelming sense of comfort in the speaker's attitude and appreciation for the end of life.

The reader finds the speaker tending a fire, symbolizing their role as a caretaker. They are caring for the fire and quietly listening to the sounds coming from the breathing machine in the upstairs bedroom. It is in this moment of solidarity, the speaker begins to think about the necessity of oxygen, "Everything needs it: bone, muscles, and even, / while it calls the earth its home, the soul." (Oliver 12). These beginning lines of the poem are essential, because the speaker is acknowledging the complete dependency we have on oxygen. Saying that even the soul needs oxygen to survive implies that maybe oxygen is a symbol of something deeper, something less tangible. But, what besides oxygen are we as human so deeply reliant on for survival? Food? Water? Yes, but what Oliver is telling us with this poem is that humans need love to thrive.

Further into the poem, the reader can see that the speaker appears to be coping well under the circumstances of this person's death. There is an aura of strength that seems to be emitting from the speaker's words. Oliver again alludes the reader to thoughts of dependency when the speaker talks about how intertwined the two's lives have been:

"...It is
your life, which is so close
to my own that I would not know
where to drop the knife of
separation." (Oliver 15-17)

They have spent their lives blended together, inseparable. Their strong, loving relationship became integral and seamless, as essential to life as the air we breathe. This powerful image tells us that the potency of a relationship filled with love and strength gives us this need and desire for the other person that we cannot truly live and thrive without. The lines in the poem that give substance to this claim are, "And what does this have to do / with love, except / everything?" (Oliver 17-19). The deep connection that runs between these two characters and the love they share essentially means everything, and without it who knows where the speaker would be. It seems that the unbreakable bond of love is what drives this speaker forward, allowing them to put their grief on the back burner to step back and look at the bigger picture.

The end of the poem is where Oliver really shines in her modern Romantic style, connecting nature, love, life and death. The speaker watches the fire as it, "rises / and offers a dozen, singing, deep-red / roses of flame." (Oliver 19-21). The fire, a bright and burning force of nature, is meant to symbolize life: feeding off oxygen in order to grow. This fire rises to consume the oxygen around it, and it's beautiful and lively; like our lives as we travel through infancy into adulthood:

"Then it settles
To quietude, or maybe gratitude, as it feeds
As we all do, as we must, upon the invisible gift:
Our purest, sweet necessity: the air." (Oliver 21-24)

Oliver gives us this beautifully humble image of the fire dying down to embers. It is quiet, it is grateful, and it will continue to feed on the oxygen that is left, until it is extinguished. This metaphor is the speaker accepting not only their loved one's eminent death, but their own eventual death as well. Oliver then brings the entirety of this together with the final line in the poem, "Our purest, sweet necessity: the air." (Oliver 24). This line takes the feelings of love that have been built up through the course of the poem and merges them with air, making them one in the same, a vital and seamless entity.

Poetry is meant to be a communal experience shared and felt by everyone; something that too often goes unappreciated. Luckily, we still have a handful of incredible individuals, like Oliver, who see poetry as an opportunity to give a gift to the world. That gift is a voice of comfort, a voice that reaches out its hands when we feel lost. Oliver's "Oxygen" may be the words of one individual who is experiencing loss, but she has written it in a way that wraps her arms around anyone who has ever lost, as if to say, "We are in this together." The power of poetry gives the receptive reader strength to endure their trials with a peaceful mind and a soothed heart. This is why we should all consider making the effort to engage with poetry and consider what a poem is trying to say to us. Because if we could allow ourselves to understand the connections poets are trying to make with their readers, we would never have to feel alone again.

Works Cited

Oliver, Mary. "Listening to the World." Interviewed by Krista Tippet. *On Being*. 5 Feb. 2015. <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019>.

Oliver, Mary. "Oxygen." *Literature to Go*, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017, pp. 373.

What do think about Heather's thesis? Do you agree? Why not tell her yourself by putting her name, your email, the title of her essay in the subject, and your message so she can see your comment!

Name: *

Email: *

Subject: *

Message: *

[BACK](#)