


Theme: Dystopian Worlds

Text: Extract from Margret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003)

Annotations:

1 pleebland – cf. plebeian; troll – [slang] patrol (an area) in search for someone or something 8 Compound - an enclosure of production facilities and residences belonging to an industrial company 13 guck - thick messy substance 16 cone -  17 particulate - minute particles, e.g. diesel particulates 30 street urchin - mischievous youngster 31 gawk - stare stupidly 34 blue – gloomy; depressed 35 cribfiller – (fill a) crib = bed with high sides for a baby 39 Rejoov – cf. juvenile 41 dank - unpleasantly cool and humid

Assignments:

1. Describe the world that the protagonists encounter in the presented extract. (Stay factual in your description.) [Orientation/Context, 16 pts.]
2. Use dystopian genre markers to characterize the true nature of the society that Atwood's novel deals with. Put special emphasis on genetics in your answer. [Analysis 24 pts.]
3. Comment on the implications of the presented issues for the technocratic world that we live in. [Evaluation 20 pts.]

"Let's go to the pleeblands," he said. "Troll a few bars."

"This is a joke, right?" said Jimmy.

"No, really. I've got the passes. My regular one, and one for you."

By which Jimmy knew that Crake really must be somebody. He was impressed. But much more than that, he was touched that Crake would experience concern for him, would come all this way to seek him out. Even though they hadn't been in close touch lately – Jimmy's fault – Crake was still his friend.

Five hours later they were strolling through the pleeblands north of New New York. It had taken only a couple of hours to get there – bullet train to the nearest Compound, then an official Corps car with an armed driver, laid on by whoever was doing Crake's bidding. The car had taken them into the heart of what Crake called the action, and dropped them off there. They'd be shadowed though, said Crake. They'd be protected. So no harm would come to them.

Before setting out, Crake had stuck a needle in Jimmy's arm – an all-purpose, short-term vaccine he'd cooked himself. The pleeblands, he said, were a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck and contagious plasm got spread around there. If you grew up surrounded by it you were more or less immune, unless a new bioform came raging through; but if you were from the Compounds and you set foot in the pleeblands, you were a feast. It was like having a big sign on your forehead that said, Eat Me. Crake had nose cones for them too, the latest model, not just to filter microbes but also to skim out particulate. The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said. More junk blowing in the wind, fewer whirlpool purifying towers dotted around.

Jimmy had never been to the pleeblands before, he'd only looked over the wall. He was excited to finally be there, though he wasn't prepared for so many people so close to one another, walking, talking, hurrying somewhere. Spitting on the sidewalk was a feature he personally could skip. Rich pleeblanders in luxury cars, poor ones on solarbikes, hookers in fluorescent Spandex, or in short shorts, or – more athletically, showing off their firm thighs – on scooters, weaving in and out of traffic. All skin colours, all sizes. Not all prices though, said Crake: this was the low end. So Jimmy could window-shop, but he shouldn't purchase. He should save that for later.

The pleebland inhabitants didn't look like the mental deficient the Compounders were fond of depicting, or most of them didn't. After a while Jimmy began to relax, enjoy the experience. There was so much to see – so much being hawked, so much being offered. Neon slogans, billboards, ads everywhere. And there were real tramps, real beggar women, just as in old DVD musicals: Jimmy kept expecting them to kick up their battered bootsoles, break into song. Real musicians on the street corners, real bands of street urchins. Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth. He was gawking. [...]

"Here we are – this is what they call the Street of Dreams."

The shops here were mid-to-high end, the displays elaborate. Blue Genes Day? Jimmy read. Try SnipNFix! Herediseases Removed. Why Be Short? Go Goliath! Dreamkidlets. Heal Your Helix. Cribfillers Ltd. Weenie Weenie? Longfellow's the Fellow!

"So this is where our stuff turns to gold," said Crake.

"Our stuff?"

"What we're turning out at Rejoov. Us, and the other body-oriented Compounds."

"Does all of it work?" Jimmy was impressed, not so much by the promises as by the slogans: minds like his had passed this way. His dank mood of that morning had vanished, he was feeling quite cheerful. There was so much coming at him, so much information; it took up all of his headroom.

"Quite a lot of it," said Crake. "Of course, nothing's perfect. But the competition's ferocious, especially what the Russians are doing, and the Japanese, and the Germans, of course. And the Swedes. We're holding our own though, we have a reputation for dependable product. People come here from all over the world – they shop around. Gender, sexual orientation, height, colour of skin and eyes – it's all on order, it can all be done or redone. You have no idea how much money changes hands on this one street alone." [737]