

## **Ethics for Survival in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood***

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### **Abstract**

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* presents a story about ethics and survival in the wake of apocalypse. Environmental ethics is the key factor that allows God's Gardeners to survive in both the pre- and post-apocalyptic time. The group champions a non-materialistic, self-sufficient lifestyle and a belief in the equal and intrinsic value of all lives. The chance of survival and salvation is credited to the group's environmental ethic which bears a resemblance to that of the deep ecology philosophy propagated by Arne Naess. Nonetheless, it must be noted that Atwood portrays God's Gardeners in an equitable manner, despite their commendable belief system, so as to foreground the complexity of the actual application of ethics and call into question the perfectibility of human beings, human society, and ethics itself.

*Keywords:* Survival, Ethics, Deep Ecology, Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*

In *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Margaret Atwood writes a tragic story that tells how humans relentlessly exploit the natural world and ultimately face almost complete destruction; however, the book does not delve deeply into what humanity or anyone might be able to do to avert the apocalypse or to survive it, thus leaving the reader hanging on a pessimistic note along with an implacable sense of crisis. It is only six years later in *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the second instalment of the MaddAddam trilogy, that the author presents an alternative story to that of the desperate circumstances which we witness in the first book. This paper contends that in *The Year of the Flood* Atwood presents a preferable ethic embedded in a religious group called God's Gardeners which champions a simple and eco-centric lifestyle filled with humility and love for all living beings. It also discusses how God's Gardeners' creed and practices are underpinned by a belief in the intrinsic value and equality of all lives and a self-sufficient, non-violent way of living. That there is the potential hope for survival hidden in God's Gardeners is evident in the fact that many of its members not only manage to stay alive after the lethal virus outbreak, that exterminates most

human beings but also continue to live on in a significantly healthier condition. However, as the analysis will demonstrate, Atwood delineates this cult of God's Gardeners in an ambivalent way, despite their commendable attributes and characters. This equivocal portrayal suggests that the actual application of ethics is usually complex and challenging in reality and perhaps the perfect ethic and the perfection of humans are still an impossibility.

Presenting the same world and a concurrent setting as *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* is narrated by three different members of God's Gardeners, namely, Toby, Ren, and Adam One. The narrative switches between the present and the past and between Toby's perspective and Ren's with the occasional intervention of Adam One's voice in the form of a chronicled sermon and a hymn from their Oral Hymnbook. The book begins with Toby's present situation after she has secured herself in a safe zone, thus surviving the deadly virus outbreak or the waterless flood, as God's Gardeners call it. Toby is tending a small garden of vegetables and keeping herself fed by eating food from her secret emergency store. Despite being alive, she suffers from solitude as she waits to find other survivors and she has to fend off the invasion of the fearsomely intelligent pigoons who are running amok after they have been liberated from laboratories after the humans in control have been infected and have melted to death. Concurrently, Ren also survives the waterless flood because at the time of the virulent pandemic she has been locked up in a quarantine area, safe from all kinds of biotic infection. Later, Ren is found by her best friend, Amanda, along with some other childhood Gardeners friends who have also managed to survive. Ren and Amanda venture out and suddenly get attacked by the surviving painballers, the convicted criminals whose humanity is no longer intact as a result of the CorpSeCorps' popular inhumane form of punishment, the painball. Amanda is taken hostage by the painballers while Ren escapes and, fortunately, meets Toby. Searching for Amanda, Toby and Ren join with the MaddAddamites, a resistant group of scientists who commit eco-sabotage against the CorpSeCorps. As the surviving humans strive to look for Amanda, the narrative goes back and forth between the past and the present. The pasts of Toby, Ren, Amanda and others are told at intervals revealing their shared experiences of being in the God's Garden up until the Year Twenty-Five, or The Year of the Flood, when the slaughtering waterless flood happens. Finally, as Toby and Ren proceed to track Amanda, they run into feverish Snowman or Jimmy—the narrator and protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*. Finally, Toby, Ren and Snowman defeat the painballers, tying them to the trees without killing them and thus, Amanda is successfully saved. The novel ends with Toby's group sitting around a bonfire while a mysterious sound seems to be approaching them from afar.

Scholars have used various approaches to examine *The Year of the Flood*. Examples of ecocritical and ecofeminist readings are Jane Brooks

Bouson's article "'We're Using Up the Earth. It's Almost Gone': A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*" (2011); Lucy Rowland's "Speculative Solutions: The Development of Environmental and Ecofeminist Discourse in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*" (2015); Anna Lindhe's "Restoring the Divine Within: The Inner Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*" (2015); and Miles Weafer's "Writing from the Margin: Victim Positions in Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*" (2015). Bouson (2011) argues that, in the novel, the trope of cannibalism is employed to depict male commodification and consumption of women in the capitalistic world. Women and the natural world are similarly oppressed and exploited by the male-dominated society. Against these severely ill social and environmental conditions, the eco-religion of God's Gardeners is the place where human ethical capacity and possible redemption are found. In a similar vein, Rowland (2015) contends that *The Year of the Flood* is the author's exploration of the post-feminist world and serves as an acrimonious criticism of the society's negligence of feminism, scientism, privatization of science, and humans' unchecked domination over the natural world. The female characters are the main reformers who are moving away from the pre-apocalyptic world plagued by cannibalistic consumerism and heading towards a new future that is marked by a yearning for democracy and egalitarianism. Also focusing on the female characters, Weafer (2015) bases her reading on Atwood's notion of four victim positions and proposes that the four women characters—Toby, Ren, Amanda, and Oryx—can be categorized into four different types of victims. Lastly, Lindhe (2015) in her examination of Toby's psychological and spiritual apocalypse argues that the novel can be read as the redemptive tale of Toby and her transformation from a weak victimized woman into one of the most reliable leaders of God's Gardeners.

Other critics have approached the text with a focus on apocalypse or how human society falls apart and on the topic of survival. Some critics are pessimistic in their reading of the novel. For example, Slawomir Kuznicki (2017) in *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction: Fire Is Being Eaten* sees little hope for the survival of *homo sapiens* under the rampant abuse of technology and science for personal gain without considering the benefits of the whole community. By extension, that the Crakers, genetically designed and modified to be a superior version of humans and better suited to the severe environment, seem to be the best candidates for future survival is questionable because they are too innocent and their well-being, growth and learning are too dependent on human guidance and instructions. Hannes Bergthaller's (2010) article "Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*" points out that, in both novels, Atwood poses an important question of sustainability, in which the survival of humans and humanism is challenged.

Hope Jennings (2010) in “The Comic Apocalypse of *The Year of the Flood*” contends that Atwood subverts the apocalyptic tradition in literature and demythologizes the biblical myth of the Great Flood from the Book of Revelation, resulting in a sometimes-comical delineation of such a grave matter as the end of the world. Thus, God’s Gardeners’ green scripture is read as a silly hybrid of the Christian faith and modern scientific rationale which constantly contradict each other and cannot be regarded as a serious manifestation of hope and optimism. Similarly, Bouson (2016) in “A ‘Joke-filled Romp’ Through End Times: Radical Environmentalism, Deep Ecology, and Human Extinction in Margaret Atwood’s Eco-Apocalyptic *MaddAddam* Trilogy” analyzes the religion of God’s Gardeners by connecting it with the philosophy of deep ecology and the radical environmentalism of Earth First!, a radical environmental group which believes in biocentrism to such an extreme extent that it, for the sake of defending the natural world, allows violent measures, such as eco-sabotage, towards the culprits of environmental destruction. Bouson (2016) further argues that God’s Gardeners are similar to Earth First!, in that both are influenced by a misanthropic attitude because the environmental crisis has been brought about by humans’ unbridled exploitation of nature. Such misanthropy and radicalism might not be desirable in the quest to find solutions to ecological problems.

Some critics are more optimistic about the future of humanity in their reading of Atwood’s novels. For example, Richard Alan Northover (2016) suggests reading the novel as a parallel to *Oryx and Crake*. His analysis argues that Jimmy’s story is bleak and filled with despair but Toby’s narrative is the opposite as it is characterized by optimism, kindness, and pragmatism. Nazry Bahrawi (2013) in “Hope of a Hopeless World: Eco-Teleology in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*” argues that the eco-religion of God’s Gardeners is a messianic force. According to Bahrawi, the non-anthropocentric belief of God’s Gardeners is antithetical to the hubristic anthropocentrism prevalent in the fictional world of the *MaddAddam* trilogy. It is this non-anthropocentrism that offers humanity some light at the end of the tunnel in the hopeless times humans have brought upon themselves. Some critics note the novel’s optimism but they see it from different angles. For instance, Gerry Canavan (2012) in “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*” acknowledges hope in the novel but argues that it might not be for the human race. Canavan points out that Atwood presents the apocalypse not as the end of the world and all lives but specifically as the end of *homo sapiens*. If there is hope, it is not for humankind but for the Crakers who are fitter to survive in the severe ecological condition of the planet. Similarly, in *Biopunk Dystopias*, through a posthumanist lens, Lars Schmeink (2016) sees the Crakers as the existence that has the most likely possibility of replacing humans. Dunja Mohr

(2015) in “Eco-Dystopia and Biotechnology: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)” reads *The Year of the Flood* as an alternative account of what happens in *Oryx and Crake* and contends that God’s Gardeners’ insightful awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world is beneficial and helpful to environmentalism when it is incorporated into science, especially biotechnology.

In line with several other scholars who hold an optimistic attitude towards God’s Gardeners, this paper chiefly examines how the beliefs, doctrines, and practices of God’s Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood* might allow better opportunities for human survival or at the very least lead them to a less grim outcome. Firstly, it analyzes God’s Gardeners and their core values as well as their connection with the philosophy of deep ecology. It contends that Atwood suggests God’s Gardeners as a more positive ethical influence for humanity at a time when the ecological apocalypse is looming large. This is thanks to their core values, i.e., their belief in the intrinsic value and equality of all lives embedded in their self-sufficient and non-violent lifestyle, their relevant knowledge, practical life skills, and preparedness that are proven to be essential in both pre- and post-apocalyptic times. However, the close examination of Atwood’s portrayal of God’s Gardeners also reveals that the group is far from perfect as there are several elements that warrant debate and criticism. Such a significant finding is similar to that of Jennings (2010) who also observes strong satirical elements in the novel, especially on the part of God’s Gardeners’. In consonance with critics such as Northover (2016), Mohr (2015), and Bahrawi (2013), who see God’s Gardeners in a positive light, this paper further argues that Atwood portrays them in such an ambivalent manner because she acknowledges the difficulty and complexity in the application of ethics in actual circumstances and expresses the opinion that perfect ethics and a morally impeccable human community are still far from being a possibility. This paper’s analysis will try to demonstrate how, despite some of their controversial shortcomings, God’s Gardeners still make survival in post-apocalyptic times possible. Their very survival is the most evident and solid testament to this point.

### **God’s Gardeners’ Environmental Ethics for Survival**

After the virus apocalypse in *The Year of the Flood* humans as a species almost become extinct. Miraculously enough, the seemingly last group of human survivors happens to be God’s Gardeners—an outlawed and outlandish group that was previously thought to have been eradicated by the CorpSeCorps in *Oryx and Crake*. The analysis finds that God’s Gardeners’ relevant knowledge, beneficial values, and well-prepared way of life are what enable them to survive in the apocalyptic times. This section employs deep ecology as a theoretical framework to shed light on God’s Gardeners’ principal doctrines and practices.

With reference to the core principles and eight-point platforms of deep ecology and Naess's Apron Diagram, it further presents how some of God's Gardeners' beliefs bear resemblance to the philosophy of the deep ecology movement.

The philosophy of deep ecology or the deep ecology movement or ecosophy had a Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009) as its pioneer and founder. Other prominent scholars who have made significant contributions to deep ecology include Warwick Fox, George Sessions, Bill Devall, and David Rothenberg. The term "deep ecology" first appeared in 1973 Naess's (2005c) famous article, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary", which refers to the "ecology movement" as cosmology or worldview (p. 2263). Naess critiques Western civilization for its instrumentalization of the natural world on anthropocentric premises. The "deep" ecological worldview serves as a contrast to mainstream environmentalism which he calls "shallow" (Naess, 2005c, p. 2263). Naess claims that this so-called shallow environmentalism is problematized by its inherent anthropocentrism characterized by the conservation and preservation of the nonhuman world merely for the benefit of humankind instead of nonhumans. Simply put, deep ecology is thus denoted as deep because it questions the fundamental assumptions of Western civilization at a more profound level. In general, deep ecologists believe that they are required to live a simple lifestyle so as not to disrupt the richness and biodiversity of the planet. Rejecting a belief in the eternal growth of economic development that is usually indicated by statistics and numerical value, such as Gross National Product, they think it is more important to live with mindfulness and consideration of the environment and nonhumans. They cherish and protect nature not because it has economic value to them but because they are, *de facto*, part of that natural world themselves.

Another important framework relevant to the analysis is Naess' (2005a) Apron Diagram. The Apron Diagram is used to explain how the deep ecology movement is suitable for people from diverse backgrounds and beliefs. It can be divided into four levels. The first level, at the top of the diagram, refers to what Naess (2005a) calls "the ultimate premises or ecosophies" (pp. 2236–2237), which refer to fundamental beliefs through which supporters of deep ecology come together. At this level, the ultimate premises can be any religion or belief system that is compatible with deep ecology as Naess (2005a) observes, "[s]upporters of the deep ecology movement have ultimate views from which they derive their acceptance of the platform, but those views may be very different from person to person and from group to group" (p. 2337). Adam One's incorporation of evolutionary science and different religious teachings is one example of this. At the second level lie the core principles of deep ecology philosophy which are called the eight-point deep ecology platform. Among these eight points, there are four major principles that strongly correspond to God's Gardeners' faith: 1) "[t]he well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman

life on Earth have value in themselves ... These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes;" 2) "[h]uman beings have no right to reduce this richness and diversity [of the nonhuman world] except to satisfy vital needs;" 3) "[c]urrent human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening;" and, lastly, 4) "[p]olicies must therefore be changed" (Naess, 2005b, pp. 2295–2296). The third level of the Apron Diagram refers to "lifestyles and general policies of every kind" (Naess, 2005a, p. 2337). God's Gardeners' peculiar way of life, in general, belongs to this level. Finally, at the fourth level are "particular rules of decisions adapted to particular situations" (Naess, 2005a, p. 2337). This level is illustrated by Toby's courses of action. Based on the Apron Diagram, people from various backgrounds can unite together for mutual environmental causes while having different policies and actions. This suggests inclusiveness, diversity, and plurality of belief in the combined effort toward environmentalism.

At the first level of the Apron Diagram, the ethics of God's Gardeners appears to be a new orientation with the main influences from Christianity. The resemblance between Adam One's sermons and the Bible can be clearly seen. The group believes in the existence of a supreme God who created everything and they refer to the Christian Holy Bible as "the Human words of God" (Atwood, 2013, p. 13). Their founder and spiritual leader, Adam One, tries to create a new religion basing his doctrines and teachings largely on the biblical narratives of the Old Testament, the myth of Creation or Genesis, the Great Flood, and Noah's Ark, the belief in the Original Sin of disobedience, the Fall of Man and the quest for redemption in the Second Coming, to name but a few.

Although Christianity is their chief source of inspiration and influence, God's Gardeners also incorporate a variety of knowledge, such as ancient Greek myths, world religions and science, into their belief system. This is most evident in the celebration and commemoration of their unique canon of saints, each assigned to different days in the God's Gardeners calendar. These so-called saints are originally notable people from diverse fields and eras whose contributions or actions reflect the values which the cult admires and cultivates in its members. In this canon of saints there are scientists, writers, activists and religious figures who are known for their efforts and selfless devotion to the preservation of nonhumans and the environment. Saints in the field of science are, for example, Saint Dian Fossey the martyr (Atwood, 2013, p. 372), an American primatologist and conservationist known for her studies of gorillas in Rwanda who was killed by poachers, Saint Rachel Carson (Atwood, 2013, p. 443), an American marine biologist renowned for her book *Silent Spring*, a landmark work that warns against the harmful effects of pesticides, and Saint James Lovelock (Atwood, 2013, p. 195), an English independent scientist and environmentalist best known for his Gaia hypothesis, which postulates that the Earth functions as a self-regulating

system. Saints who are writers are, for instance, Saint Robert Burns of Mice (Atwood, 2013, p. 372), a Scottish poet, Saint Wayne Grady of Vultures (Atwood, 2013, p. 195), a Canadian writer, and Saint Jane Jacobs (Atwood, 2013, p. 195), an American-Canadian journalist and author. Some are activists, such as Saint Farley Mowat (Atwood, 2013, p. 372), a Canadian writer and environmentalist, Saint Terry Fox (Atwood, 2013, p. 485), a Canadian athlete and activist who raised money for cancer research and Saint Sigrithur of Gullfoss (Atwood, 2013, p. 196), an Icelandic environmentalist who helped preserve Gullfoss waterfalls from industrialization. Saints who are notable religious figures are, for example, Saint Brendan the Voyager (Atwood, 2013, p. 107), an Irish saint and navigator revered by Catholics, Saint Julian of Norwich (p. 507), an English anchorite in the Middle Ages, and Guatama Buddha (Atwood, 2013, p. 195), the founder of Buddhism. The group's celebrated saints of eclectic origins illustrate the plurality of beliefs at the first level of the Apron Diagram.

On the structural level of the novel, Atwood also names some big sections and small chapters of this book after these saints, thereby highlighting certain messages or values in those particular parts. For instance, she entitles the book's final section "Saint Julian and All Souls" (Atwood, 2013, p. 507) to encourage the notion of forgiveness to all beings or all souls. This is congruent with how Toby decides against executing the cruel painballers at least on this particular day. Toby even shares some of the bone soup with them, disregarding what they have done or the fact that they are hostile and dangerous.

Some of the core principles and teachings of God's Gardeners correspond with the second level of the Apron Diagram or eight-point deep ecology platform. First and foremost, one of the absolute rules of God's Gardeners is never to hurt or take lives and to practise non-violence, unless it is truly necessary—that is, when their life or survival is at stake. This is similar to one of Naess's eight points which holds that "humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity [of life forms that have values in themselves] except to satisfy vital needs" (Naess, 2005b, p. 2295). One important instance that displays this value is when Toby's safety is threatened by the pigoons and she still hesitates to shoot them with her rifle for she has been taught that they are "God's Creatures" and that she should "[n]ever kill without just cause" (Atwood, 2013, p. 21). Throughout the novel, Toby tries to abide by this rule. When she really has to kill with justifiable cause, she prays for her target's forgiveness with a repentant mentality.

Related to this principle of no killing is one of the core beliefs in deep ecology which holds that "the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves ... These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes" (Naess, 2005b, p. 2295). In concert with this belief, God's Gardeners place great importance on lives, practise vegetarianism and emphasize love and compassion between living beings that are not restricted to or stipulated by species. The



vegetarian oath to give up meat not only serves to do no harm to other animals or to embrace a healthy diet but also contributes to the preservation of the natural world and food resources at times when food shortage is one of the greatest crises. This way of life that recognizes the intrinsic value in all living beings is a stark contrast to the prevalent anthropocentric ideology in the dystopian world where all lives, be they human or nonhuman, are treated as mere numbers and statistics.

The concept that every life has intrinsic value naturally leads to another key belief of God's Gardeners, i.e., the notion of "fellowship" among all animals (Atwood, 2013, p. 61). That humans have deep bonds at a genetic level with primates serves as a pivotal reminder that they are neither special nor superior to other animals. According to their religion, all are God's creatures. Since humans and animals are all created by the same God, their relationship should be that of friends. God's Gardeners thus go beyond simply respecting other lives. They also encourage love and trust among different species. This idea later proves to be even more important as there are other new kinds of creatures emerging, as a result of genetic technology, such as liobams, pigoons, and rakunks.

In an attempt to attain fellowship between humans and animals, God's Gardeners are taught to pose as the guardians or stewards of God's creatures. This concept is elaborated in the sermon on the Festival of the Arks, in which Adam One retells the biblical story of the Great Flood which God unleashed to cleanse the earth and the tale of the two covenants which God made with humans and all creatures. As Adam One commemorates the multitude of lives lost in the Flood, he praises Noah, who, thanks to his faith and uncorrupted heart at a time when the human race was vile and depraved, was chosen by God, as an exemplary steward, to save some animals by building the Ark. Human responsibility and duty to care for other beings is equated to Noah's divine "task of saving the chosen Species" (Atwood, 2013, p. 108). In this sense, God's Gardeners are equivalent to Noah who continues "Adam's original stewardship" by "keeping God's beloved Species safe" (Atwood, 2013, p. 108). The best illustration of this point is the scene in which Crozier appears to be shepherding the colorful group of fourteen Mo'Hairs while being dressed up in a white bedsheet and with a long staff (Atwood, 2013, p. 462). This also shows that even in the post-apocalyptic time when food is hard to come by, God's Gardeners still do not indiscriminately kill any animal to feed themselves.

God's Gardeners safeguard animals not only in the physical sense but also in the mental sense by storing the names of animals in their minds. In the dystopian world, in which nature has been ravaged by the avaricious human race to near the point of complete exhaustion, God's Gardeners—a poor and oppressed minority—do not possess the means to build an actual physical Ark like Noah's to keep animals safe nor can they physically save the animals from the hands of greedy humans. As a result, instead, they resort to their memory to

be like an Ark that can contain animals in a spiritual and informational form by memorizing the names of the species that have gone extinct and keep them in their hearts and prayers. This is arguably the best action that a small group like them can perform. It does not require money to be good stewards and to support the fellowship between humans and animals. Love and a kind heart are all it takes. Such an effort is an ingenious method of cultivating in them the mindfulness always to think about other beings. In the sermon delivered on Creation Day, Adam One urges the members to extend their compassion and kindness to other animals as he preaches to them to “[s]tretch out your hand towards those gentle eyes that regard you with such trust – a trust that has not yet been violated by bloodshed and gluttony and pride and disdain” (Atwood, 2013, p. 15). This remark reminds humans to be humble and try to re-establish their long-lost connection with the nonhuman world.

The steward’s duty seems anthropocentric and might make humans feel that they are special as the chosen agents of God. To counterbalance that, God’s Gardeners caution against excessive pride and strongly emphasize the value of humility. For them humility means not considering themselves as having a superior status to other species because all lives are of equal intrinsic value. The quality of humility is emphatically advocated in the sermon on the Feast of Adam and All Primates, a special occasion, on which God’s Gardeners acknowledge their primate ancestry—or the fact that humans are genetically descendants of apes rather than being specially created by God from clay after the divine image of God himself. In his sermon, Adam One accepts the scientific explanation of the origin of *homo sapiens* and credits “the long and complex process of Natural and Sexual Selection” (Atwood, 2013, p. 62) or the evolution of species to God. He further claims that, at the end of the day, the evolution of humans is God’s “ingenious device for instilling humility in Man” (Atwood, 2013, p. 62). In short, Adam One suggests that the human genetic connection with primates implies that humans are fundamentally one species of animals, hence nothing special. Adam One then leads his audience to question the human sense of entitlement by asking “why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality, we belong to Everything?” (Atwood, 2013, p. 63) He also stresses that humans have exorbitant hubris resulting in the destruction of the natural world. Humility is once again affirmed near the end of the sermon when Adam One prays “that we may not fall into the error of pride by considering ourselves exceptional, alone in all Creation in having Souls; and that we will not vainly imagine that we are set above all other life, and may destroy it at our pleasure, and with impunity” (Atwood, 2013, pp. 63–64). The belief that *homo sapiens* are far superior to any other beings in the age of scientism and human exceptionalism is merely an illusion and has led humanity toward the path of ruin both for themselves and for other lives on earth. Such a notion of

humility seems to be antithetical to that of Crake who believes that he can change the world as he wishes with scientific knowledge and technology.

Realizing that eating animals and a highly materialistic lifestyle have also greatly damaged the natural world as well as other beings, God's Gardeners also adopt self-sufficiency and non-materialism as their philosophy of life. This proves to be of insurmountable value to the human society of the dystopian world in *The Year of the Flood* because such a way of life may be humanity's only way of redemption in the extremely consumeristic and capitalistic society. Adam One gravely warns against materialistic greed which is one of the root causes of all terrible events in society. To God's Gardeners, worldly possession or wealth is not as important as a simple, meaningful and sustainable life. They attempt to cultivate this value among their members. For instance, on Saint Farley of Wolves or a Young Bioneer Scavenging Day, they lead the children to venture into the pleeblands in order to search for usable leftovers, such as vinegar and oil, bringing those materials to be recycled or made into something that can be used, such as soap, and trading them in the Tree of Life market so that nothing goes to waste.

In addition, Atwood also underscores the importance of the community and collaboration in order for humans to survive and thrive. This emphasis is reflected in God's Gardeners' assortment of members who come from different walks of life and origins. They even accept fugitives who defect from the Compound, such as Jimmy's mother, and help them hide from pursuit by the CorpSeCorps. It appears that in the novel the group has its supporters almost everywhere, either in the open or in disguise, as evidenced by the magnanimous assistance that Toby receives from others in her escape to AnooYoo Spa. This stresses the importance of the united effort of and collaboration between different people with shared values or goals. More importantly, Atwood seems to deliberately make it so that the fateful survivors of the deadly virus are mostly God's Gardeners whose relevant knowledge and eco-centric attitude are vital for survival in the post-apocalyptic time. It is also worth noting that after the human survivors have reunited, they always help one another do the jobs and never let anyone perform alone, especially if the task is risky. For example, Toby decisively accompanies Ren to search for Amanda who has been kidnapped by the painballers and Zeb brings a couple of his comrades with him to track down other members of God's Gardeners whose fates are still unknown.

However, it is clear that just faith, admirable values, and commendable lifestyles are not sufficient to ensure survival in the looming apocalypse. To battle against the ills of society and the corrupted world, God's Gardeners not only cultivate ethics but also give priority to education, especially the pragmatic knowledge and practical life skills that are necessary for survival. The Gardener children are required to attend classes related to practical skills, such as a class called Urban Bloodshed Limitation in which Zeb teaches them how to act in a

situation where a fight breaks out (Atwood, 2013, p. 144). Another example is an Outdoor Classroom Predator-Prey demonstration, in which the students learn how to hunt for food and try the experience of eating the meat of the hunted animals. This class prepares them in case it becomes unavoidable to break the vegetarian oath and consume animal meat in order to survive. During the week of Saint Euell of Wild Foods, the children are brought on an expedition to the Heritage Park to learn how to determine what kinds of plants and fungi are edible. Later, the knowledge and skills from these classes prove to be very useful and indispensable for the survivors. These experiences are one of the deciding factors that explains why God's Gardeners manage to survive but others do not. They have always been living in adversity and are accustomed to difficulties; therefore, when the difficult times arrive, it is easier for them to adapt and adjust. Most people outside the sect, be it in the Compounds or in the Pleeblands, are uninformed and ignorant only minding their own business and indulging in pleasures. As a result, they are completely unprepared for the virus apocalypse and the world after it. Even if these people somehow manage to survive the waterless flood at the initial stage, it is very unlikely that they will be able to survive in the following post-apocalyptic world because they have been too spoiled and are unfamiliar with hardships, unlike the seasoned God's Gardeners. The best proof of this is Jimmy or Snowman, who, despite being safe from the virus, cannot be described as living well, at all.

In *Oryx and Crake* Jimmy slowly sinks into despair as he journeys deeper into his psychological abyss, gradually losing his sanity, starving, weakening and hallucinating for most of the time. On the other hand, in *The Year of the Flood*, Toby and Ren's circumstances evidently incline more towards optimism for survival as they escape from the sweeping destruction of the waterless flood and eventually reunite with their comrades in faith, helping one another out. Such a difference in their condition is due to the differences in their social backgrounds. As a person who grew up in the Compound which limits his perspective of the world, Jimmy struggles to find any possibility that he might be saved or that human society could be improved. In comparison, Toby and Ren have been introduced to more possibilities and a hopeful faith through the group of God's Gardeners which preaches how to live a meaningful life and how to be prepared to face the imminent crisis. In *The Year of the Flood* Atwood apparently invites the reader to take another look at the same occurrences as in her first novel but this time from another angle to find something they might have missed or might not have been allowed to see before from the point of view of God's Gardeners.

That humans may be able to find the way to better themselves is suggested by the development of Toby throughout the novel. Toby changes from a vulnerable soul to one of the strongest and most dependable characters in the novel. Originally, she is just an ordinary woman with an average family. Then

her mother dies from an illness induced by the company. Her father has to give up his small business under economic pressure from the CorpSeCorps and finally commits suicide. Losing her family, home, and identity, Toby has to run away from the authorities and do illegal jobs. She even has to earn a living by selling her hair and her eggs on the black market (Atwood, 2013, p. 38). Worse still, when she settles at the SecretBurger, she becomes the target of sexual harassment and rape by Blanco, who is her boss. At that point, Toby almost loses all hope and the will to live since she has learned that every victim of Blanco will gradually become weaker and die. At this grim juncture, it is Adam One who comes to her rescue. He makes her join God's Gardeners and this changes her life. When Toby first arrives at the Garden, she feels wonder at the almost mysterious nature of the Garden; as she describes it "it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different" (Atwood, 2013, p. 52). This vibrant epiphanic moment is referred to by Adam One as the experience of "being flooded with the Light of God's Creation" (Atwood, 2013, p. 52). At this special moment, it is as if Toby has arrived at her salvation. Here in the base of people normally seen as eccentric, Toby has developed friendships with many people and has become part of a community that strives to live meaningfully. She also gains for herself a kind and trustworthy mentor, Pilar, and reliable guides and protectors, such as Adam One and Zeb. She slowly comes to enjoy the company of fellow God's Gardeners. Here she can also put the knowledge of "Holistic healing" that she has learned at the Martha Graham Academy to use (Atwood, 2013, p. 55). Gradually, she becomes assimilated into the group; as Atwood describes her character, "[s]he didn't really believe in their creed, but she no longer disbelieved" and that "[s]he wasn't quite a Gardener, yet she wasn't a pleeblander anymore" (Atwood, 2013, p. 116). This important transition enables her to find her purpose in life and know that she can contribute to her community by becoming a teacher of the Gardener children and later an Eve, the upper echelon of the organization. Her group in turn gives her protection from her dreadful and ruthless enemy, Blanco. Dependable companions and beautiful companionship are what Jimmy does not have.

Throughout the novel, Toby's actions and decisions are heavily influenced by the teachings of God's Gardeners. As the deadly waterless flood sweeps across the world taking away the lives of most humans, Toby manages to secure herself with preparation taught by God's Gardeners, such as, stockpiling emergency food or "building her own private Ararat" (Atwood, 2013, p. 316). When she is alone in the Spa waiting for other survivors to emerge, she manages to maintain her sanity and positive outlook by keeping track of the day according to God's Gardeners' unique calendar (Atwood, 2013,

p. 195). When her food stock is running out, she prays to Saint Euell (Atwood, 2013, p. 390). She also often hears the imaginary “voices” of God’s Gardeners in her head (Atwood, 2013, p. 6) and intuitively recalls what Gardeners have taught her, which is marked by such phrases as “Adam One used to say” (Atwood, 2013, pp. 390–392), “says the kindly voice of Adam One” (Atwood, 2013, p. 394), “Zeb once taught” (Atwood, 2013, p. 393), “says the voice of Zeb” (Atwood, 2013, p. 394), and “says the voice of Nuala” (Atwood, 2013, p. 423). In the second half of the novel, Toby has significantly morphed into a savior-like rescuer and protector of others as she goes on the quest to save Amanda, her junior fellow from the same group, from the painballers. Toby’s positive changes would be impossible but for her experiences as part of God’s Gardeners. This development is not only beneficial to the survival of the individual but also of the whole community.

Another good example of God’s Gardeners’ positive outlook on the future and strong mentality is Adam One. Adam One’s enthusiasm and faithfulness to his belief permeate all of his sermons. This is perhaps because he is the most devout Gardener whose devotion is unshaken, notwithstanding difficult challenges. Even though his sermons speak of the imminent Doomsday, Adam One does not appear to be pessimistic about himself or his followers. He believes in the chance of God’s Gardeners to survive the waterless flood that will eradicate all the corrupted people. If humanity is no more, it is considered a poetic justice. Humans reap what they sow. Adam One’s mentality remains unshakeable or even optimistic when he realizes that he and his peers have been infected with the incurable virus. In his last sermon he braves his impending death and, with much spiritual conviction, declares: “[i]t is not this Earth that is to be demolished: it is the Human Species. Perhaps God will create another more compassionate race to take our place” (Atwood, 2013, pp. 508–509). From this angle, the hopeless outlook that sees the human race as finished does not necessarily apply to other beings. On the bright side, the doom of human beings might be good news for nonhumans and nature, all of which are of equal importance to God’s Gardeners. Adam One’s narrative, hence, ends with optimism for future survival, no matter whose survival it will be. Such a healthy state of mind which has been nurtured by God’s Gardeners’ beliefs and practices is essential for survival.

God’s Gardeners’ ethics seems to be what humanity gravely needs to embrace in the challenging times when the crisis of global extinction is imminent. Their principles and way of life can be regarded as a better ethical model that people should seriously consider. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood carefully orchestrates the prophetic apocalypse, in which God’s Gardeners, whom many people ridicule as freaks, have emerged as survivors. In contrast, the majority of people who blindly and hedonistically live their lives without any ecological conscience have been cleansed by the waterless flood. For

Atwood, *God's Gardeners*, together with the values and the qualities they hold, seem to be humanity's best chance of survival in the wake of the looming apocalypse. Nevertheless, *God's Gardeners'* are not in the least flawless ideals. In fact, Atwood portrays them in such a debatably well-rounded manner because she wants to convey the one important insight that because they are humans, they are naturally imperfect and fallible regardless of their praiseworthy ethics and morals. When it comes to applying ethics in real circumstances, impeccably actualizing what they preach is not a simple task.

### **Criticisms on God's Gardeners**

Although this paper attempts to offer a reading of *God's Gardeners* in a fairly positive light, in its analysis it also finds that there are many points of criticism of the group. Though *God's Gardeners'* ethics and actions are commendable, they might sometimes appear questionable or problematic. That Atwood presents *God's Gardeners* in an equivocal manner can be felt throughout the novel. This raises a very serious question about the credibility and reliability of this special group of people as some critics, such as Jennings (2010), have also pointed out. However, as this section argues, such an ambivalent portrayal of *God's Gardeners* should be interpreted as pointing to the difficulty in applying ethics in real situations at both individual and organizational levels and to the moral imperfectability of humans. Moreover, it is also possible that Atwood may want to caution against having absolute faith in or extreme adherence to one's beliefs or ideology as this can often prevent one from being self-critical.

Firstly, at the individual level, there are clear differences in the degree of commitment to their beliefs and values. Among the three major narrators, Adam One is the most devout as he is the founder and leader of the organization and his faithfulness remains unwavering from the beginning to the end of the novel. He appears to be extremely earnest in his beliefs and is the backbone of the group when it comes to doctrines. Second to Adam One is Toby. In difficult times or when making a decision, Toby is often found to be recalling the teachings of *God's Gardeners*. Furthermore, she can remember the calendar and the importance of each day and still keeps track of Saint Days according to tradition even after everything falls apart as a consequence of the waterless flood. If this does not prove her firm beliefs, it does prove how the creed has been ingrained in her mind. Even at the very end of the novel when Toby and her friends defeat the inhumane and treacherous painballers, she still decides to spare their lives, in accordance with the forgiveness inculcated by her group. However, Toby is absolutely not a one-dimensional devotee. She often displays her doubts and openly accepts the fact that she is not much of a faithful believer. In her first year as a Gardener, Toby thinks that "she didn't really believe in their creed" (Atwood, 2013, p. 116). Years later Toby still questions her faith as she muses to herself while staying at AnooYoo spa, "[d]o I still believe this [her

faith]?” (Atwood, 2013, p. 4). Toby’s sense of self-doubt is pervasive in the book. The last of the three narrators, Ren seems to be the least committed to God’s Gardeners’ teachings. This is likely due to the fact that she was born to the Compound and only joins the cult later before leaving it after only a few years. As the story unfolds, she does not appear to be maintaining much of Gardeners’ beliefs and practices. Ren’s narrative mostly deals with her reminiscence of the past until her reunion with her peers. Furthermore, according to Ren’s observation and experience, the youngsters do not really care much about the spiritual or religious aspects of their group. Most of them—whether as children or after they become adults—are not as firmly committed to the tenets of God’s Gardeners as Toby or Adam One, perhaps only with the exception of Bernice who is shot dead in the environmentalist protest against the Happicuppa franchise.

On the opposite spectrum of the devout Adam One is Lucerne who runs away from the Compound with Zeb and only stays with the group because she is simply infatuated with her lover not because she truly appreciates their simple lifestyle and eco-centric ethics. Toby describes Lucerne as someone who can remember the slogans of Gardeners but does not internalize them. This is evident when Lucerne confesses to Toby that although “she really believed that Adam One was right about so many things... but really there was a limit and she did not really believe for one instant that slugs had any central nervous system, and to say they had souls was to make a mockery of the whole idea of souls...” (Atwood, 2013, p. 136). Moreover, for Lucerne who cannot really abandon the old materialistic habits of a rich executive’s wife, Gardeners’ ways of life are too outlandish and difficult. This is why once her lover severs the relationship with her, she immediately abandons the group with her daughter and goes back to enjoy her luxurious life in the Compound.

Another serious case of a commitment problem is Burt’s corruption. Disregarding a non-materialistic ethical way of life, one of the leading Adams, Burt the Knob is found to be secretly planting super weeds behind everyone’s back for his personal profit. His action is not only illegal according to the CorpSeCorps’ stipulation but also a direct violation of the cult’s advocacy of non-materialism and self-sufficiency. The revelation of Burt’s crime reasonably brings about further suspicion. It is doubtful whether anyone else knows about Burt, particularly the Adams and Eves. After all even Gardeners children seem to know a bit about Burt’s plantation. In this way, the trustworthiness and the integrity of the group are undermined.

At the organizational level, God’s Gardeners, especially the upper echelon, might be criticized for their failure to actualize their ideal of equality. There still exists the power hierarchy, in which Adam One is at the top holding most authority. Although “Adam One insists that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level,” Toby has observed that “the same did not hold true for the



material one” (Atwood, 2013, p. 54). She then remarks that the organizational structure is actually similar to a “monastery” (Atwood, 2013, p. 55), in which there are ranks and a hierarchy of authority with Adams and Eves as leaders. Another example is that it is uncertain whether the selection of Adams or Eves is democratic or simply exclusively decided by the few leading people in the group since the selection process is not clearly explained in detail. Though there are recurring meetings among Adams and Eves to discuss many things, it seems that Adam One is still the one who retains the authority to make important decisions for the entire community. Furthermore, there seems to be no democratic process in this group’s conflict resolution. Adam One has the final say in the organization so Zeb can only fall out with Adam One when they cannot reach an agreement on what measure they should take against the CorpSeCorps. In a way, Adam One might be viewed as a dictator.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the equivocal portrayal and questionable aspects of God’s Gardeners should not be interpreted as the failure or futility of the environmental ethics they uphold. What should take the blame are the evil tendency of the individual, the fallibility of humans, and the hierarchical nature of an organization that is prone to the corruption of power. Notwithstanding their commendable lifestyle, moral values, and beliefs that are crucial for survival, God’s Gardeners are delineated in this particular way perhaps because Atwood wants to suggest that applying ethics in reality in a perfect manner is extremely difficult or simply impossible. Instead, it is pivotal to approach the application of ethics realistically, avoid the superfluous glorification of any set of beliefs and always think critically with regard to ethical issues. For Atwood, even though such a utopian desire to build an ideal community with flawlessly moral people is too good to be true, it is significant to believe in the hope that a better world is possible. Like God’s Gardeners, we can and should try to improve human society by cultivating environmental ethics, morals, and an ecological conscience.

## Conclusion

At its crux, Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* is a story about ethics and survival. Toby and Ren begin their arduous post-apocalyptic journey with a heavy heart but also with faith, moral values, and the helpful knowledge they receive from the teachings of God’s Gardeners. The close examination of the cult’s tenets, practices and ways of life reveals that the principal factors that enable and empower them to survive are their core values, that consist of the belief in the equal and intrinsic value of all lives, love, kindness, trust for other animals and a non-violent and non-materialistic lifestyle. Other elements crucial for survival are the relevant knowledge and the practical life skills which are keenly endorsed in the educational system of God’s Gardeners. Lastly, via this peculiar group of eccentric people, Atwood underlines the importance of

cooperation and the combined efforts of the community, especially that which shares the same ideals. For humanity to survive, they must help one another. The conspicuous comparison between the solitary and depressed Jimmy and the associated party of Toby, Ren, and other God's Gardeners serves as the most telling evidence. The very final scene of the novel leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness, as if this story has not yet concluded. The ending appears to be open to diverse possibilities and countless imaginations. What lies ahead of Toby, Ren, and other God's Gardeners is not revealed until the publication of the final installment of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*.

It must be noted that even though Atwood may convey humanity's redemptive chance through the ethics of God's Gardeners, she also makes clear that the organization itself is not without flaws. There are some questionable aspects, for example, the genuineness of its members' commitment and the organizational hierarchy that undermines its value of equality. Atwood portrays God's Gardeners in this skeptical manner because she is perhaps fully aware that no matter how wonderful the morals or ethics are, the actual application of them in real life is teeming with complexity and problems. The definitive and perfect set of ethics is wishful and unattainable because humans are fallible by nature. Consequently, for Atwood, God's Gardeners can still serve as a more positive ethical influence for humans in dire times when the natural world is on the verge of ruin because they represent many of the beneficent qualities opposing the destructive trends of her dystopian world—the imaginings that can well become a reality. As human civilization is being endangered as a result of its own actions, the most well-equipped people to avoid death are likely to be God's Gardeners—whether owing to their faith, knowledge, or mentality. Ultimately, it may also be a form of the poetic justice that God's Gardeners survive because they have chosen a hard way of life that attempts not to aggravate the natural world, unlike others who have walked on the path of self-indulgence and thus drowned in the retributive waterless flood they themselves have invoked.

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