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**Investigating transhumanism: the demise of humanism in women's writings: the case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*.**

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**Abstract:**

This article examines the discursive evolution of the immortality archetype, tracing the philosophical dichotomy between Renaissance Humanism (the ideal of Man-as-is) and the Transhumanist aspiration (Man-to-be-overcome). The analysis draws on a theoretical framework that establishes the creation impulse as an act of scientific hubris, focusing on two pivotal female authors: **Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*** (1818) and **Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*** (2003). The article argues that by bridging the gap between technological ambition and human consequence, both novels expose the profound contradiction inherent in the Transhumanist project—the belief that advanced technology should be used to overcome fundamental biological limitations, such as aging, disease, and cognitive limits. This technological aspiration, presented as the ultimate solution to mortality, paradoxically constitutes the catalyst for existential disaster. The comparison of Victor Frankenstein's initial gothic impulse with Crake's radical, globalized vision demonstrates how the quest for the Posthuman inevitably results in the catastrophic subversion of core humanistic values, serving as a unified, two-century-long literary warning against scientific overreach.

**Keywords:** Humanism; immortality; transhumanist; mortality; hubris; consequence.

**الملخص**

تتقصى هذه المقالة التطور الاستطلاعي لنموذج الخلود، متتبعةً الثنائية الفلسفية بين إنسانية عصر النهضة — مثل الإنسان كما هو — وطموح ما بعد الإنسانية للإنسان الذي يجب التغلب عليه. يعتمد التحليل على إطار نظري يحدد الدافع الإبداعي كعمل من أعمال الغطرسة العلمية، ويركز على مؤلفتين محورتين هما: ماري شيلي في رواية فرانكشتاين (1818) ومارغريت أتوود في رواية أوريكس وكريك (2003). تجادل المقالة بأن كلا الروائيتين، من خلال سد الفجوة بين الطموح التكنولوجي والعواقب البشرية، كشفتنا عن التناقض العميق الكامن في مشروع ما بعد الإنسانية، وهو الاعتقاد بأن التكنولوجيا المتقدمة يجب أن تستخدم للتغلب على القيود البيولوجية الأساسية، مثل الشيخوخة والمرض والحدود المعرفية. هذا الطموح التكنولوجي، الذي يُقدم على أنه الحل النهائي للفناء، يشكل بشكل متناقض، المحفز لكارثة وجودية. تُظهر المقارنة بين الدافع الأساسي لفكتور فرانكشتاين ورؤية كريك الراديكالية والعالمية كيف أن السعي وراء ما بعد الإنسان يؤدي حتماً إلى انهيار واضح للقيم الإنسانية الأساسية، وهو ما يمثل تحذيراً أدبياً موحداً على مدى قرنين من الزمان ضد التجاوز العلمي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الإنسانية، الخلود، ما بعد الإنسانية، الفناء، الغرور، العواقب.

## I. Introduction:

The human quest for extended life and enhanced capabilities, a concept now known as Transhumanism, has been a fundamental concern in philosophy and literature since antiquity. From Greek epics to contemporary technological debates, the human being—as the center of the universe and the most complex topic to treat—has consistently been portrayed as aspiring beyond natural limits.

The signs of transhumanist thinking are visible in early literary works, notably *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 1200 B.C.), where a king, fulfilling a glorious life, begins a perilous quest for immortality following the death of his companion, Enkidu. Gilgamesh's journey to unveil the mystery of an afterlife ultimately concludes with the lesson that death is an inevitable, necessary part of the human experience (• Abusch, 2006, pp. 605–622). This epic tradition inspired subsequent narratives featuring strong, God-like heroes such as Hercules and Odysseus, figures who achieved triumphs often at the perceived expense of natural mortality. Later periods saw concrete manifestations of this desire in historical quests for the Fountain of Youth and alchemists' attempts to produce the Elixir of Life. While myth and science are often viewed as distinct, they share a singular, foundational purpose, the preservation of life and the escape from death.

Literature has long served as a cautionary space for such aspirations. It is a well-established motif that the disturbance of the natural balance of life—or hubris—often carries severe consequences. For instance, in Greek Mythology, Prometheus's theft of fire from Zeus and his gift to humanity irrevocably altered the course of human civilization, yet resulted in his brutal, everlasting torment. Similarly, the myth is widely cited as a symbol of technological hubris and the perils of overstepping natural boundaries. (Buckley, 4 Apr. 2025)The literary pursuit of creating a deathless character—a being that can outlive life itself—is, arguably, a form of self-deception regarding the limits of art's influence on reality.

Today, contemporary Transhumanist are directly inspired by the pillars of this literary tradition, attempting to re-create these "deathless characters" through advanced technology (Hughes, 2004). This technological pursuit anticipates the "death of the standard human" and the birth of the Posthuman—a being characterized by a radically prolonged lifespan and enhanced capacities. The figure of the transhumanist character has intrigued writers across various eras and movements, underscoring literature's vital influence on

shaping cultural perceptions of the future. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a foundational text in this dialogue, with the creature laying the groundwork for a technologically and artificially conceived being. This novel, and those that followed, not only featured characters that sought to cheat the inevitable but actively established literary worlds where a posthuman could endure.

In its investigatory agenda, this article analyzes how two pivotal female authors, Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood, engage with the transhumanist landscape and the subsequent ramifications of its utopian ideals. This article contends that by bridging the gap between scientific ambition and human consequence, both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* expose the profound contradiction at the heart of the Transhumanist project, that the technological aspiration to transcend human limits, presented as the ultimate solution to mortality and disease, paradoxically functions as the catalyst for existential disaster. The central argument posits that while Transhumanism may offer the theoretical solution to mortality, its realization in literature often yields contradictory, tragic, and dystopian results. To develop this argument, the article will proceed through four main sections: the theoretical shift from Humanism to Transhumanism. This section will establish the key philosophical and theoretical distinctions between Humanism and Transhumanism. It will then justify the selection of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as essential texts that chart this ideological evolution. Moving forward, the second part will deal with the transhumanist break in *Frankenstein*. Here, this section will analyze Victor Frankenstein's intellectual journey, arguing that his creation represents a decisive abandonment of humanistic ethics and a reckless pursuit of a transhumanist goal. Later on, the article shall explore the ideology of Crake in *Oryx and Crake*. This part will focus on the character Crake and his vision, which manifests as a radical form of technological Puritanism.

In the end, the final section will tackle the core theme of consequences, analyzing how the intended solution offered by transhumanism in both Shelley's and Atwood's works is revealed to be the source of ethical failure and existential disaster.

## **1. The Theoretical Framework: The Literary Transition from Humanism to Post/ Trans- Humanism:**

As previously established, literature holds a significant power when it comes to influencing philosophical discourse. In this regard, Humanism played a vital, foundational role, establishing the philosophical groundwork against which Transhumanism would later define itself. The movement of Humanism, which rose to prominence during the Renaissance, centered on human dignity, potential, and agency, considering humans as the measure of all things. William Shakespeare perfectly captured this sentiment in *Hamlet*: "What a piece of work is man!" (Shakespeare, 2008). Humanism sought to elevate Man, focusing primarily on the world of the living and the gifts of human reason and creativity, rather than a strictly spiritual or otherworldly afterlife (Black, 2004). One timeless writer whose works profoundly explored Humanist concerns is Shakespeare. His characters, such as Hamlet and Macbeth, are celebrated as round characters for depicting the full spectrum of the human condition, the psychological conflicts, ethical choices, and emotional peaks and troughs, which gives Man his tragic dignity. Shakespeare's Humanist emphasis on the study of the full, flawed human experience heavily influenced subsequent literary movements and philosophical currents. Ironically, this very dedication to the inherent value of Man-as-is set the stage for the challenge presented by Transhumanism.

Transhumanism is philosophically and etymologically derived from Humanism, but it fundamentally diverges from its predecessor. While humanists like Shakespeare believed that death is an inherent and necessary part of life, the boundary that gives human experience its meaning and urgency, transhumanism deals with the Posthuman, a human that can 'transcend' natural life and, specifically, avoid the inevitability of death. As some scholars note, posthumanism can be analyzed as a critique of humanism (Ranisch, 2014), challenging the premise that human nature, as currently constituted, is the ultimate measure of value. The intellectual seeds for this challenge were sown in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concurrent with the Enlightenment's faith in scientific progress. The French philosopher Condorcet theorized the eventual extension of human life, stating:

"Would it be absurd now to suppose that the improvement of the human race should be regarded as capable of unlimited progress? That a time will come when death would result only from extraordinary accidents or the more and more gradual wearing out of vitality, and that, finally, the duration of the average interval between birth and wearing out has itself no specific limit whatsoever? No doubt man will not become immortal, but cannot the span constantly increase between the moment he begins to

live and the time when naturally, without illness or accident, he finds life a burden?" (Condorcet, 1979, p. 145)

Although Condorcet suggested Man may never reach absolute immortality, his theory of unlimited progress directly anticipates the technological thinking that now views immortality as an achievable, if distant, goal. This intersection of scientific aspiration and human enhancement is precisely where the relevance to our primary texts begins. The formal term Transhumanism was coined much later by biologist Julian Huxley (1957), who defined it as the belief that: "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically... but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man, remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (Huxley, 1957, pp. 13-17). This concept of Man transcending Man is the crucial theoretical engine for understanding the two worlds examined in this article.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) tackles the creation of the first literary posthuman. Victor Frankenstein's scientific endeavor is a direct, gothic, rejection of Humanist limitations. His act of creation is an attempt to transcend human nature's most fundamental boundary, mortality, making her novel an essential text for tracing the origin of the transhumanist impulse in literature. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004) depicts a world where the transhumanist impulse has become a globalized, corporatized, and realized ideology. The novel's setting and the character Crake's goal to create the perfected Crakers, an enhanced posthuman species, demonstrates the fulfillment of the transhumanist ideal and its apocalyptic social and ethical consequences. The transition from the Humanist concern with the dignity of Man-as-is to the Transhumanist drive for the Posthuman is therefore necessary for this analysis because it provides the ethical scale against which the actions of Victor Frankenstein and Crake are measured and found disastrous.

This philosophical shift found fertile ground in dystopian literature. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) both highlight worlds where technological and political oppression is used to repress individuality, knowledge, and creativity, the very qualities Humanism sought to elevate. In this sense, these dystopias show the "death of the standard human" not through enhancement, but through deliberate dehumanization and psychic conditioning (such as the use of the drug 'soma' in *Brave New World*), thereby demonstrating the catastrophic outcomes that result when the core values of human nature are diminished.

Ultimately, Transhumanism, as defined by Nick Bostrom "a movement that advocates for an interdisciplinary approach evaluating the opportunities for bettering the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology, like genetic engineering and altering what it is to be human" (Bostrom, A history of transhumanist thought, 2005, pp. 1-25), offers a promise for eternity and immortality—an aspiration that literature first conceived and that scientific progress now offers, bringing the literary and scientific concerns full circle.

## **2. Mary Shelley and the Posthuman Creation: Exceeding Human Boundaries:**

In literature, the notion of death exists endlessly. It is in witnessing death, one feels most alive. Mary Shelley is a writer who abandoned realism and anticipated a world beyond Humanism—a world of Transhumanism. A world that alter and perfect the condition of Man through technology. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was perceived as a Gothic horror piece of literature. However, in 1973, Brian Aldiss considered that Shelley's work could be the original first literary work of science fiction (Aldiss, 1973). This story depicts the mad yet brilliant ideas of Dr. Victor Frankenstein and his obsession of having control over death. The story unveils how Dr. Frankenstein refuses to conform to the ordinary norms of science and single handedly bring life to monster. He says:

"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now find it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.

(Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the modern Prometheus.*, 2003, p. 12)

The impressive endeavor, however, produced a frightening sensation in the doctor. The consequences of Dr. Frankenstein's creation depicted the aftermath of what happens when one disrupts the natural equilibrium. As mentioned earlier, celebrating life was what humanists advocated; however, post/trans humanists attempted to defy and transcend life. In this vein, the traces of transhumanism

started to appear and manifested itself in characters that refused to die, and in writers who subconsciously wanted to play God.

Shelley through Victor wanted to grant humans their ultimate desire, to “banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the modern Prometheus*, 2003, p. 122). This allows us to see *Frankenstein* convenient to be treated under a transhumanist lens. In her days, Mary Shelley indeed expressed ideas of enhancing the progress of humanity, and in her novel using technology to achieve this end. Shelley saw a future where humans can transcend life itself and might even defy their mortality. “Searching for a cure for aging is not just a nice thing that we should perhaps one day get around to, it is an urgent, screaming moral imperative” (Bostrom, *The fable of the dragon-tyrant*, 2005, p. 12)

She wanted to deliver the notion that the human condition could be improved through technology. This was an essential turning point for a transhumanist reflection (Ferrando, 2013, p. 27). After a thorough reading of the novel, the female writer had indeed had futuristic visions when it comes to enhancing the human experience and condition. Her novel is loaded with transhumanist traces. Transhumanism was manifested through the creation of a human free from limitations and imperfections of the natural human life such as morality, diseases, and the inevitability of death. Furthermore, humanism and being human diminished with the advancement of technology. Victor’s monster portrayed enhanced physical abilities and traits that only can be found in a post/trans human condition like, resistance to natural extremes and increased strength. These magnified skills were only possible because of Victor’s technological involvement which presented an absolute upgrade of the normal human body. Another trace for a post/trans humanist trace in *Frankenstein* was the assemblage of the monster from different body parts, an act that directly contradicts the natural human state of existence. These mentioned traces have paved the way for the Death of ‘Man’ and the rise of the Post/Trans human Era. Following the footsteps of Shelly, Margaret Atwood as a fellow female writer continued the tradition and sought to explore transhumanism. Atwood lengthy literary reserve investigated the movement in her Maddaddam trilogy, notably her first novel *Oryx and Crake*.

### **3. Margaret Atwood’s Crakers: Genetics vs. Nature:**

Margaret Atwood is a renowned female writer. Like Mary Shelley, Atwood’s novel, *Oryx and Crake*, centers on a character named Snowman. He is a lone survivor in a post-apocalyptic world who reminisces his old life as Jimmy.

He constantly recalls his friend Crake, a bioengineer who created a new human species named 'the Crakers' a hereditarily adjusted species designed to embody a more "culminate" emphasis of mankind' (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 178) and *Oryx*. Through Snowman's flashbacks, the novel explores his past, a boy who grew up in a world during a time of extreme corporate corruption and rampant genetic experimentation. The events in Atwood's dystopia have taken a place in a world that was destroyed by a genetically engineered plague, designed by Crake.

Transhumanist thought was a driving factor behind his ideas. Crake was able to exploit the people's dire desire for an eternity in order to achieve his ultimate transhumanist goal. In this vein, he created his enhanced and immortal posthuman Crakers, and after a thorough analysis of Crake's intentions behind the creation of the Crakers, and Snowman's relationship to them. Consequently, his aim was to have the posthuman as a replacement for the existing humans. The transhumanist recurrent concept in Atwood's novels is the scientists and their forever focus on procuring immortality. They see it as a crucial purpose to improve the human condition. In this, Atwood talks about a society that suffers from "grief in the face of inevitable death ... [and a] wish to stop time" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 344). Immortality, the long-lost hope for humans and the endeavor the scientists seem to want to reach desperately. The myth or immortality was, is and will always be their ultimate achievement and this is depicted in the novel in a conversation between Jimmy and Crake: 'What we're working on is immortality.' 'So is everyone else,' said Jimmy" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 344). This also offers a glimpse of Crake's lost humanity and how he fixates on perfection.

Humans tend to have imperfections, yet Crake wanted to transcend that and achieve a utopia where imperfections cease to exist. Atwood claims that he struggles with empathy, and he tends to fixate on things: "Crake would get fixated on a game, and would want to play it and play it and perfect his attack until he was sure he could win" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 88). Crake believes that human flaws preclude the existence of a perfect society. Thus, he eliminates these features in his Crakers. In the novel, Jimmy, known as Snowman was the sole character who witnessed both the demise of humanism and the rise of transhumanism from a generally conventional society to a progressively administered one by biotechnology (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 133). The Crakers were made by Crake to fulfill his concept of perfect human species, epitomize both the guarantee and the dangers related with transhumanism. They were designed to exclude anything and everything that was negative in the human

nature, such as jealousy and envy. In this vein, Crake would reach his transhumanist objective (Atwood, Oryx and Crake, 2004, p. 170). Through her narrative, Atwood dives into the moral situations related with the idea hubris, the notion of "playing God" with human science. Ergo, it addresses the true price cost of defying nature (Hecht, 2006, p. 84). Savulescu and Bostrom argue that Crake's visions for a transhumanist realm could be seen as brilliant or mad, whether these futuristic endeavors are in service of the human kind or only his obsessions (Savulescu, 2008).

In *Oryx and Crake*, it is believed that technological advancement and genetic engineering are the tools that will give humankind the elixir of immortality, forsaking what was once the core of humanism—emotions and social bonding—qualities that are lost in the new humans called the Crakers. Despite Atwood's constant recognition on how technological advancement can enhance humans' morality, mortality, condition and identity, she still warns on the repercussions might have on human's destiny. This is a common concern between her and Mary Shelley. This is depicted in their respective creators, Victor Frankenstein and Crake, and the price paid for attempting to play God. The results of tampering with nature balance can be dreadful and sometimes unpredictable. It is known that nature always restores its balance. In this revelation, any attempt to exceed its boundaries can be costly, which is the case with *Frankenstein* monster and the Crakers.

#### **4. The Ramification of Transhumanism in Shelley and Atwood's Characters:**

Moving forward, Shelley's novel (1818) *Frankenstein* gave an aspiration to humans who seek immortality. Moreover, Atwood offered a world where death does not exist due to technological advancement and bioengineering. Both novels had transhumanist ambitions, yet the pursuits to deathless existence leads to catastrophic consequences. Victor and Crake remind us of how they wanted to achieve hubris and in this case a scientific one. Both creators were driven by arrogance to circumvent humans' natural condition whilst blind to the long-term ramifications. Victor Frankenstein's transhumanist goal was to conquer death and the limitations of the human body. He created a life through anatomical manipulation. The consequences of his creation were isolation, psychological torment for Victor, and the murder/annihilation of his loved ones and the monster's rebellion: 'I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked

around, I saw and heard of none like me' (Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the modern Prometheus*, 2003, p. 93). *Frankenstein's* creation even dared to defy his creator to the length of giving threats:

Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; - obey!'

(Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the modern Prometheus*, 2003, p. 128)

Victor did not think that his action's consequences would come to such a terrible point. To him, his unique science innovation was a beneficial addition to the progress of science. Nonetheless, the Monster had his own autonomy because he was not just a machine, but a non-human creator acting on his own merits.

Crake in Atwood's novel faced similar consequences. Crake's Transhumanist's vision was to conquer human imperfections such as desire, jealousy, war, and diseases. He attempted to achieve that through Global Genetic Engineering with the Crakers and the creation of the Crake's World. In doing so, Crake disrupted the equilibrium of nature and caused an apocalypse, a near extinction of the human race, ecological disaster, and the creation of a simplistic, vulnerable post-human species 'The Crakers'. Crake's utopia was a failed one. His Crakers were the final product of his madness. Indeed, they were physically improved species, a transhumanist success in a sense. Unfortunately, they were simple and intellectually limited, and dependent on Snowman. Crake's attempt to create a perfect, immortal-like existence resulted in a primitive, post-apocalyptic world. Crake perceives suicide as empowering unlike Snowman: "He couldn't imagine doing such a thing himself, unlike Crake, who said it showed flair to know when you'd had enough" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 2004, p. 96). In the end, Crake chooses to die along with the rest of humanity in a pandemic of his own creation, leaving the world to a new species, the Crakers.

## II. Conclusion:

The extensive analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* confirms that the literary exploration of transhumanism is, at its core, a reincarnation of the ancient myth of immortality. These two literary works separated by two centuries of literary history, present a unified and powerful cautionary archetype: the pursuit of the posthuman ideal, driven by impulsive scientific hubris, inevitably results in the demise of

humanism. Their narratives are not merely works of speculative fiction, but profound literary warnings against the ethical void created when technology seeks to violently disrupt natural creation and moral accountability.

Ultimately, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* provide compelling literary evidence that the modern pursuit of transhumanism is a means to an end and that end is becoming an immortal creature. This is a quest that will inevitably result in the demise of humanism. This article, in its investigatory agenda, establishes the common link through two centuries of women's writing. It is a rejection of scientific hubris. Here, when the creator attempts to conquer the limitations of mortality or imperfection, the ethical vacuum created by that technology generates catastrophic fallout, confirming the persistent warning embedded within these timeless novels and fierce women writers.

Two centuries separate Shelley's laboratory and Atwood's compounds, yet their message is chillingly unified. The attempt to cheat death through technology is merely the reincarnated hubris of the creator. In the end, what Shelley's creature and Atwood's Crakers prove is that the myth of immortality, though perpetually reincarnated in new technological forms which remain fundamentally tragic. These works stand as enduring literary warnings. The pursuit of the posthuman is not liberation from mortality, but a fatal severance from humanity itself.

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