
Eco-Sickness and the Crisis of Belonging: A Study of Solastalgic Symptoms in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

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Article Received: 17/11/2025**Article Accepted:** 18/12/2025**Published Online:** 19/12/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.245

Abstract:

This paper explores the intersection of environmental degradation and psychological distress through the lens of “eco-sickness” in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy. By utilising Glenn Albrecht’s concept of solastalgia—the existential distress caused by the transformation of a familiar home environment—this study analyses how characters navigate a “modern uncanny” landscape ravaged by climate change, corporate hegemony, and genetic engineering. The narrative serves as a critical exploration of a crisis of belonging, where survivors like Snowman and Toby grapple with a profound sense of alienation, survivor’s guilt, and grief for lost biodiversity. Through a close reading of *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*, this study highlights the ethical dilemmas of the Anthropocene and emphasises the intrinsic link between ecological health and human psychological well-being.

Keywords: Eco-sickness, Environmental degradation, Solastalgia, Psychological distress.**Introduction:**

Margaret Atwood’s novels depict the detrimental effects of human actions on the environment. Her works present the complex ethical dilemmas surrounding environmental issues. Margaret Atwood uses her fiction to raise awareness about environmental issues, challenge prevailing attitudes, and inspire a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness with the natural world. Her works serve as a potent reminder of the urgent need for environmental responsibility and the importance of safeguarding our planet for future generations.

Atwood emphasises the interconnectedness of all living things and the delicate balance of ecosystems. Her narratives often feature characters who grapple with their place within the natural world and the impact of their choices on the environment. The *MaddAddam* Trilogy starkly portrays the consequences of climate change, including rising sea

sea

levels, extreme weather events, and the collapse of ecosystems. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* highlight the dangers of unchecked industrialisation, genetic engineering, and the exploitation of natural resources.

Solastalgia, the distress caused by environmental change, is a prominent theme in contemporary literature. The Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term to define “a form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change.” Solastalgia is related to a “modern uncanny” in which the familiar place is now not recognizable because of the transformation made by climate change. It describes the distress caused by environmental change. Many critical studies discuss solastalgia in the context of environmental literature and dystopian fiction.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Ibis Trilogy* explores the environmental and social consequences of colonialism and the rise of industrialisation. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores themes of displacement, environmental degradation, and the impact of war on both the human and natural world. In *Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change*, Glenn Albrecht introduces the concept of solastalgia and explores its psychological and emotional impacts. In another volume, *The Philosophy of Solastalgia*, Glenn Albrecht provides a comprehensive overview of solastalgia, its causes, and its implications for individuals and society. Theodore Roszak's book, *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* explores the connection between human well-being and the natural environment, and discusses the psychological impacts of environmental degradation. In the book, *Eco-Grief: The Emotional Cost of Climate Change*, Ashley Dawson explores the psychological and emotional responses to climate change, including grief, anxiety, and despair. The impact of human activities on the environment and the loss of nature's wildness becomes the theme of *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben. The *MaddAddam* trilogy by Margaret Atwood delves into the psychological and emotional impacts of environmental destruction on individuals and communities.

Characters in the trilogy, particularly those with strong connections to nature like the Crakers, experience solastalgia intensely. The loss of familiar landscapes, the extinction of species, and the degradation of their environment lead to feelings of grief, displacement, and a profound sense of loss. The widespread destruction and loss of life cause significant trauma for survivors. Snowman (Jimmy), as one of the last humans, carries the weight of witnessing societal collapse and the extinction of countless species. This trauma manifests in nightmares, flashbacks, and a deep-seated sense of survivor's guilt.

The loss of loved ones, homes, and the familiar world is a constant source of grief for many characters. They mourn the loss of biodiversity, the destruction of ecosystems, and the erosion of cultural heritage. This collective grief can lead to feelings of despair, apathy, and a sense of meaninglessness. The uncertainty of the future and the constant threat of

danger create a pervasive sense of anxiety and fear. Characters grapple with the fear of starvation, disease, and attacks from other survivors. This constant state of alert can lead to heightened stress levels, insomnia, and difficulty forming meaningful connections.

The destruction of familiar environments and social structures can lead to a loss of identity and a sense of belonging. Characters struggle to find their place in a world that has been fundamentally altered, leading to feelings of isolation, alienation, and a diminished sense of self. The survivors are forced to confront difficult ethical dilemmas in the face of scarcity and the struggle for survival. These moral dilemmas can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and a loss of faith in humanity.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the characters experience solastalgia in various forms. Firstly, it is shown through Jimmy/Snowman's Grief. Jimmy/Snowman, the protagonist, constantly mourns the loss of the old world. He remembers a time of natural beauty, diverse ecosystems, and human connection. The ravaged landscape, devoid of familiar plants and animals, triggers his solastalgia. He longs for the lost world and feels a deep sense of loss and displacement.

Crake, Jimmy's childhood friend, also experiences solastalgia, but in a different way. He sees the old world as corrupted and unsustainable. His solution, the creation of the Crakers, is driven by a desire to replace the old world with a "better" one. However, his actions also contribute to the destruction of the natural world and the displacement of humanity, exacerbating the solastalgia felt by others.

Oryx, a character Jimmy/Snowman encounters in the post-apocalyptic world, is a symbol of the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. She was raised in a world of child pornography and sex trafficking, reflecting the dark side of human civilization. Her experiences highlight the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and human suffering.

Oryx and Crake depict a world where genetic engineering has led to the extinction of many natural species. This loss of biodiversity is a major source of solastalgia for the characters. They mourn the loss of familiar plants and animals and the disruption of the ecological balance.

The post-apocalyptic world depicted in *Oryx and Crake* is a harsh and desolate place. The landscape is barren, the air is polluted, and the remaining humans are struggling to survive. This bleakness contributes to the characters' sense of solastalgia, as they are forced to confront the consequences of human actions.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's characters grapple with the loss of their familiar world, the destruction of the natural environment, and the psychological impact of these changes. The novel serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked human activity and the importance of preserving the natural world.

Solastalgia plays a significant role in *The Year of the Flood*, particularly through the experiences of the characters living in the Crakers' Paradise. They witness the degradation of their once-pristine environment due to water scarcity, pollution, and the encroachment of the waterless. This environmental change disrupts their sense of place and connection to their home, leading to feelings of distress, grief, and displacement.

The Crakers, who have a deep spiritual connection to the natural world, are particularly affected by environmental changes. They experience a loss of solace and comfort in their home environment, which was once a source of inspiration and meaning. This loss of connection to nature can be seen as a form of solastalgia. This anxiety about the end of nature is thus portrayed.

I knew there were things wrong in the world; they were referred to, I'd seen them in the onscreen news. But the wrong things were wrong somewhere else. [...] Everybody knew. Nobody admitted to knowing. If other people began to discuss it, you tuned them out, because what they were saying was both so obvious and so unthinkable. We're using up the Earth. It's almost gone. (Year of Flood, 282)

In addition to the Crakers, other characters in *The Year of the Flood* also experience solastalgia. For example, Toby, who grew up in a world where water was abundant, struggles to adapt to the new reality of scarcity. She feels a sense of loss for the world she once knew and grief for the changes that have occurred.

Solastalgia is a powerful theme in *The Year of the Flood*, serving as a reminder of the deep connection between humans and their environment. The novel highlights the psychological and emotional impact of environmental change and the importance of preserving our planet for future generations.

MaddAddam alternates between the present, in which the survivors of the God's Gardeners sect struggle for survival and learn to share their living space with the Crakers, the genetically spliced animals, and the escaped Painballers (hardened criminals who participated in a violent reality show Painball). It narrates the emergence of a more radical wing of God's Gardeners, that finally splits from the sect and continues to oppose the authorities by means of ecoterrorism. In the end, this radical wing is enticed/extorted by Crake to join his Paradise project – designing the Crakers. Several MaddAddamites survive the plague and reunite with the remaining God's Gardeners in the final novel. Solastalgia is

a prominent theme, particularly in the novel *MaddAddam*. It manifests in the characters' profound distress caused by the environmental devastation and the loss of their familiar world.

As one of the last humans, Snowman experiences solastalgia intensely. The world he once knew is gone, replaced by a desolate landscape devoid of life and beauty. He constantly mourns the loss of nature, the extinction of species, and the destruction of human civilization. His memories of the past, filled with lush forests and vibrant ecosystems, only serve to amplify his grief and sense of displacement.

The Crakers, the genetically engineered children, raised in Paradise, have a deep spiritual connection to the natural world. They experience a profound sense of loss as their environment degrades due to water scarcity and pollution. Their home, once a source of solace and inspiration, becomes a source of distress, leading to feelings of grief and displacement.

While not directly experiencing the environmental changes to the same extent as Snowman or the Crakers, Toby also grapples with solastalgia. She grew up in a world with abundant water and a thriving ecosystem, and she struggles to adapt to the harsh realities of the post-apocalyptic landscape. Her memories of the past, filled with lush greenery and flowing rivers, contrast sharply with the desolate world she now inhabits, leading to feelings of nostalgia and a longing for a world that no longer exists.

As a member of the God's Gardeners, Ren has a deep respect for nature and a strong connection to the land. However, she also witnesses the devastating impact of human activities on the environment, leading to feelings of despair and a sense of responsibility for the destruction. Her experiences highlight the ethical dilemmas surrounding environmental stewardship and the challenges of living in a world ravaged by human-induced change.

Through the experiences of these characters, Atwood explores the psychological and emotional impact of environmental change, highlighting the profound sense of loss and grief that can arise from the destruction of one's home environment. Solastalgia serves as a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness between humans and their environment and the importance of preserving our planet for future generations.

In conclusion, Atwood's trilogy powerfully illustrates the psychological and emotional toll of environmental destruction, highlighting the deep connection between human well-being and the natural world. By exploring the experiences of her characters, she raises important questions about our responsibility to the environment and the urgent need to address the challenges of climate change and ecological degradation.

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