

Context: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) – The Pleeblands

Material

The situation: Compared to the passage in your textbook, this is another of Jimmy's flashbacks, this time in a far closer past when he became an employee in Crake's mysterious bio-project. Before he signed the contract and joined Crake's team, they both made an excursion into the unprotected suburban world bordering on a megacity, because Crake wanted to show Jimmy life outside a compound, which had been the only reality Jimmy had ever experienced until then. Here's Jimmy's account:

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

Before setting out, Crake had stuck a needle into Jimmy's arm – an all-purpose, short-term vaccine¹ he'd cooked himself. The pleeblands, he said, were a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck² and contagious plasm got spread around there. If you grew up surrounded by it you were more or less immune, unless a new bioform came raging through; but if you were from the Compounds and you set foot in the pleeblands, you were a feast³. It was like having a big sign on your forehead that said, Eat Me.

Crake had nose cones for them too, the latest model, not just to filter microbes but also to skim out particulate⁴. The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said. More junk blowing in the wind, fewer whirlpool purifying towers dotted⁵ around.

Jimmy had never been to the pleeblands before, he'd only looked over the wall. He was excited to finally be there, though he wasn't prepared for so many people so close to one another, walking, talking, hurrying somewhere. Spitting on the sidewalk was a feature he personally could skip. Rich pleeblanders in luxury cars, poor ones on solarbikes, hookers⁶ in fluorescent Spandex⁷, or in short shorts, or – more athletically, showing off their firm thighs – on scooters, weaving in and out of the traffic. All skin colours, all sizes. Not all prices though, said Crake: this was the low end. So Jimmy could window-shop, but he couldn't purchase. He should save that for later.

The pleebland inhabitants didn't look like the mental deficient⁸ the Compounders were fond of depicting, or most of them didn't. After a while Jimmy began to relax, enjoy the experience. There was so much to see – so much being hawked⁹, so much being offered. Neon slogans, billboards, ads everywhere. And there were real tramps, real beggar women, just as in old DVD musicals: Jimmy kept expecting them to kick up their battered bootsoles, real bands of street urchins¹⁰. Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry¹¹ from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth. He was gawking¹².

¹ vaccine = *Impfstoff*

² guck = (*inf.*) *Glibber*

³ to be a feast = *ein gefundenes Fressen sein*

⁴ particulate = *Schwebestoffteilchen*

⁵ dotted around = [*here:*] placed here and there in the vicinity

⁶ hooker = prostitute

⁷ fluorescent Spandex = Elasthan, [*here:*] shiny, tight-fitting fabrics

⁸ deficient = retarded

⁹ hawk = sell at the lowest price

¹⁰ street urchin = *Schmuddelkind*

¹¹ far cry = big difference

¹² gawk = stare

From: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. London: Virago Books 2003, pp. 338-339 (427 words)

Tasks

Comprehension

1. Make a list of security measures Crake provides before he and Jimmy enter the pleeblands and sum up Jimmy's sensations.

Analysis

2. Write a character sketch of Crake – how does he act and behave, and what do we learn about him in this brief sequence? Exchange your views with a partner.
3. *Analyse the point-of-view technique used in lines 19-32.

Evaluation

4. *Write an essay about the pleeblands as they are described in this passage.

Must do: 1, 2

Minimum: 3 assignments

* higher degree of complexity

Solutions

Textbook: *Context*, pp. 66-67

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 108-120

Task 1

A list of security measures

- i. Armed car driver
- ii. Protection by "shadowing"
- iii. Short-term vaccine
- iv. Nose cones

Jimmy's sensations: It is Jimmy's first-time experience of the pleeblands, and he records very many impressions of people, their appearances and their habits. He notices how populated they are, so much so that people in all their diversity get very close to one another. They behave differently, e.g. by spitting on the ground, and he notices a wide range of the social spectrum, from the rich ones to the poor and marginalized (e.g., prostitutes, tramps, beggar women). Many of these people have bodies less beautiful than those of the inhabitants of the gated communities. Apart from people, there are many commercials and advertisements: everything seems to be on sale, and cheap – including the people.

Task 2

Crake's character

Crake is in lead of the action and in control of everything. He guides Jimmy through the pleeblands, his precautions demonstrating that the pleeblands are an unsafe, dangerous place. Since he knows so much about it, he seems to have been there many times, although he is much more privileged than the inhabitants. He acts like a very powerful person because he can afford his own "armed driver" (l. 9-10) and other security personell who watch and protect him and Jimmy. At the same time, he seems to be detached from everything in the pleeblands, because he refers to life there as "action" (l. 11), i.e. to him, it has a dramatic, almost unreal quality. The fact that Crake is able to produce his own vaccine (cf. l. 13), as well as his metaphor for the pleeblands as a "giant Petri dish" (l. 14) shows that he must have a scientific, possibly medical background. (154 words)

Task *3

Point-of-view technique

The point of view technique in ll. 21-34 may be identified as Jimmy's, although it is not narrated in the first person, but in the third person. The predominant techniques in which his observations and sensations are presented are called 'free indirect speech' and 'thought report'. The first is defined by the use of the third person, the location of the scene in the past tense, although it creates the impression that the reader is directly involved. This effect is achieved by the accumulation of present participles (ll. 22-23) and the enumeration of visual impressions: "Rich pleeblanders in luxury cars, poor ones on solarbikes, hookers in fluorescent Spandex, or in short shorts, or – more athletically, showing off their firm thighs – on scooters, weaving in and out of the traffic." (ll. 24-27) The passage continues with elliptic phrases which sound like commercial slogans: "All skin colours, all sizes." (l. 27; cf. also l. 30) Jimmy's is a particularly male gaze, focusing on women rather than men, such as prostitutes and beggar women. Apart from these passages describing the pleeblands 'through' Jimmy's eyes, there are a few sentences in which the narrator is easier identifiable, such as in the introductory sentence which mentions Jimmy's name, and presents information about the past which is necessary for the reader, but would probably not flash up in Jimmy's mind in the situation: "Jimmy had never been to the pleeblands before, he'd only looked over the wall." (l. 21) Later, the reader is informed about Jimmy's feelings, such as excitement first (cf. l. 21) and later relaxation and joy (cf. l. 29). The passage ends with the narrator's judgement that Jimmy's observation of the scene is beyond any degree of politeness: "He was gawking." (l. 34) In conclusion, the lines 21-34 are divided into the narrator's thought report along with his evaluation of Jimmy, as he moves through the pleeblands, and the free indirect speech which mirrors Jimmy's more immediate viewpoint. (325 words)

Task *4

Essay on the pleeblands

The pleeblands seem to be a place of physical violence and sickness, forming a contrast to the gated communities of the Compounds where there is a much higher degree of security and cleanliness. Thus, Crake takes various precautions to avoid any of the many possibilities of infection, and he has planned his' and Jimmy's tour of the pleeblands carefully by relying on a heavily armed driver, for example.

If Crake's interest is in protection from evil, Jimmy's first impressions of the pleeblands are characterized by fascination and fragmentation. Jimmy notices disconnected details of the new, unfamiliar reality

around him. His perception is focused on single, unrelated items: "Spitting" on the ground is a habit he notices among the pleeblanders, and he comments on it as something he is not used to, and therefore would prefer to "do without". Next thing he notices are the extremely vehicles of the rich and of the poor, respectively, immediately followed by the dress of the prostitutes and the way they move through the city, and at the end of the passage he notices the rotten teeth of some of the inhabitants. Before this, the focus temporarily shifts from people to things and back, showing that Jimmy also sees the multitude of advertisements: Everything, both objects and people, is on sale; and people consider themselves as 'goods', as well. As Jimmy perceives the pleeblands, his mind can only record a few objects without seeing the whole: "There was so much to see – so much being hawked, so much being offered" (ll. 29-30).

Thus, it may be said that the pleeblands are places of poverty, violence and distress. Although they cannot be considered as slums, because there are rich people with expensive cars as well; therefore, they apparently belong to those people who do not have the privilege to live in gated communities, like Crake and Jimmy who visit and leave them, as they like to. To Jimmy, the whole visit seems to be like a visit to the zoo, where he can go and leave as he likes, and in which he can feel protected because of Crake's advance security measures. The reader does not get any view from a pleeblander, they are only objects to be looked at, and often reduced to single items that characterize them: dresses ("fluorescent Spandex", l. 24) or physical features ("bad teeth", l. 32). All in all, the pleeblands are described as a chaotic, dangerous complex which, if viewed without much emotional empathy with the people, may create in an observer a sensation of enjoyment and relaxation (cf. l. 29). (431 words)