The article I have chosen for my response paper is Coral Ann Howells’s chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* entitled “Margaret Atwood’s dystopian visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*”. In this article, Howells argues that these two novels demonstrate a, “synthesis of [Atwood’s] political, social, and environmental concerns transformed into speculative fiction.” (161) The chapter is situated in a larger context of author’s discussing multiple dimensions of Atwood’s work. Howells’s text specifically outlines Atwood’s two novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1984) and *Oryx and Crake* (2001). While Atwood herself has made it very clear that these works are not to be classified as science fiction, rather they should be considered speculative fiction, they both fall into the general category of dystopian narratives. They represent areas of possibility if our society continues down the treacherous paths that we are currently traversing. There is nothing specifically “other worldly” as would be in science fiction, rather they represent valid contingencies in our somewhat immediate future. There is also the concept of hope at the endings of the novel that allows them to become vehicles for social change, or at the very least necessitate some sort of action based upon the chilling societies that are represented. Howells discusses the two novels as being of the same fabric, that of the dystopian genre, but focuses on how Atwood’s use of distinct differences provides two completely separate accounts. She states:

Clearly, they are very different kinds of dystopian vision, and either one precludes the other. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, centered on human rights abuses and particularly
the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime, is entirely social and political in its agenda, whereas *Oryx and Crake* projects a world defamiliarized not through military or state power but through the abuse of scientific knowledge, where genetic engineering has created transgenic monsters and humanoid creatures in a post-apocalyptic scenario much closer to conventional science fiction. (163)

Howells’s chapter puts an emphasis on the variances between Atwood’s two dystopian novels in both plot and content. More importantly, she discusses Atwood’s reconfiguring of the typical dystopian generic configurations by utilizing different narrative structures. She introduces us to the concepts of *Oryx and Crake*’s Last Man narrative and *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s prison narrative, but essential to Howells is the employment of a female narrator in *The Handmaid’s Tale* versus the typical male protagonist of *Oryx and Crake* that coincides with the majority of dystopian novels. While I do believe that this is important, my focus in this response will instead be on three of the overarching similarities in the novels that Howells briefly mentions: memory and time, storytelling, and the notion of double consciousness. Though she does reference each of these concepts, she does not delve deeply into the importance of each for the individual narratives and what effect they have on the audience of a dystopian novel. What follows in this response is a brief summary of both novels and an analysis of the three key concepts and their significance to the greater meaning of the texts.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is a story of one woman’s survival in an extremely regimented and sexist society of the future. The higher-ups, or Commanders, and their wives are assigned a handmaid if they are having trouble conceiving due to the rapidly declining birthrates of the
civilization. These women, or handmaids, are sent to an education center to learn how they need to behave and what their responsibilities are. They are stripped of their identities and become commodities based on their reproductive abilities. They then literally become property as they are given a new name: “Of” followed by their assigned Commander’s name. In this novel, we hear the story of Offred. She tells us of her daily life in the Commander’s home where she is looked down upon by his wife and the other female servants. She explains the strict rules that she must follow, such as wearing a red cape that covers her entire body or going to the market each day but only if she is with another handmaid and they do not speak to each other. We learn how she and the other handmaids are constantly watched by a secret Police Force called “The Eye” and how they must walk by a wall in town where rebels are hung and displayed to warn away any thoughts of rebellion. Readers follow Offred’s journey in which she develops an illicit affair with her Commander, is blackmailed into a sexual relationship with their chauffeur, and is recruited to join the rebellion group May Day. In the end, Offred’s secrets are exposed and a black van comes to pick her up. The audience is left unaware if it is May Day or The Eyes and whether Offred’s choice to go with them left her safe or dead. We hear this story along with interludes into her memories that recount the fall of democracy, rise of the tyrannical society of Gilead, and her own personal accounts and losses during the struggle.

Like The Handmaid’s Tale, Oryx and Crake takes the approach of recounting the past events through the memories of the main character. The novel tells the story of Jimmy, or Snowman as he has renamed himself in the present. Readers are alongside Snowman for the daily events as he lives in jungle by the shoreline. We slowly come to understand how the world came to be destroyed through sporadic chapters that tell of Jimmy’s life growing up. Society
was run by giant scientific corporations that existed in self-sufficient compounds away from the “Pleeblands”, or the areas of poverty in the rest of the world. Jimmy’s parents were both geneticists in one of the Corps where he grew up. He meets a friend named Glenn (or Crake as he is to be known later on) and they spend their days on the internet watching underground videos of executions, torture, or child pornography. Crake is an extremely smart but odd boy and he and Jimmy have a peculiar relationship that continues into adulthood when Crake becomes the head of a large genetic corporation out of college. He hires Jimmy to do advertising for a new prophylactic pill that he wants to sell worldwide. He also lets him in on a second project that he is working on in which he has created genetically modified humans, or “Crakers” as Jimmy nicknames them. They only have what Crake deems the necessary traits for humanity. They are herbivores, A-sexual, and physically perfect. Crake hires a woman named Oryx, whom the boys had constantly watched in a pornography video when they were children, to teach the Crakers how to survive in a secret, enclosed dome in the Compound. Jimmy falls in love with Oryx even though she is in a relationship with Crake and a love triangle ensues.

Eventually, we come to understand that Crake’s pill was actually a ploy to wipe out the human race. During a confrontation, Crake tells Jimmy that he is immune and leaves him in charge of caring for the Crakers before killing Oryx and forcing Jimmy to shoot him. We also hear of present-day Snowman and his interactions with the Crakers whom he watches over. He is in dire straights and must return to the Compound for weapons and sustenance. After a long journey back and forth, Snowman sees human footprints in the sand and realizes that he is not, in fact, the last human being on Earth. The novel ends with Snowman contemplating the dangers and
advantages of addressing the group and finally deciding it is “[t]ime to go” (*Oryx and Crake* 374).

The concept of time is significant in the creation of both of these narratives. As readers, we can only understand the series of events through a progression of memories, flashbacks, and (in Snowman’s case) a journey back to the starting point. Thus both time and memory become very fluid concepts. They become a way in which the character’s piece together their identities. They rely on their metaphorical journey’s into their past lives in order to cope with their present lives.

Within the first three paragraphs of the novel *Oryx and Crake*, the concept of time, or lack thereof, is revealed:

> Out of habit he looks at his watch-stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is. (3)

Time represents an order to life, complete with structure and organization. In the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, that regulation no longer exists. However, Snowman can not let go of his habits; ones that seem so simple but that hearken back to his past life. This notion sets the stage for the way that Atwood lays out the narrative structure of *Oryx and Crake*. Howells mentions this in her article in regards to the idea of the Last Man narrative in which Snowman has no one to tell his story to:

> Snowman does not tell the story himself in the first person; he is the focalizer, but his story is refracted through an omniscient narrative voice. The novel takes the
form of a third-person indirect interior monologue as it shifts between the fictive present (always in the present tense) and Snowman’s memories of his own and other people’s stories (always in the past tense)… (171).

She goes on to mention that Atwood’s early manuscripts change from first person to a third person narrator and finally settle upon the above mentioned arrangement. While this narrative structure is indeed important to the concept of storytelling, which we will be discussing more in depth in a later section of this paper, it also contributes to the concept of time and memories. In an article entitled, “‘Time to Go’: The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake”, Katherine Snyder writes:

…the narrative alternates in consecutive chapters between the present story of Snowman and the past story of Jimmy, moving forward in a more-or-less linear fashion through each story until the point at which the past ‘catches up’ with the present. While both time schemes move forward in an essentially chronological manner, that of the present in structured around a physical journey backward. Snowman retraces his steps to the place that marked the beginning of the end for humankind as a whole and for him as an individual. (475)

Through this interpretation of the narrative structure, we can further understand the concept of time for Snowman. In order to come to terms with his life in the present, he has to conjure memories of the past. In the novel, Snowman must travel back to Paradice, the place in which the global pandemic was created. As Snyder points out, there are two time-lines which are laid out in the novel – that of Jimmy’s childhood up until the incident and that of Snowman’s survival
after the incident. The two timelines meet when Snowman returns to where it took place and where he is forced to physically reencounter the devastation and destruction.

Since Offred’s world is not post-apocalyptic, time takes on a different role for her character but the function of memory remains the same. As Howells puts it, she “survives in the present by continually slipping back into the past” (166) and “escapes out of time back into memories” (167). Similar to *Oryx and Crake*, the novel utilizes a narrative structure in which flashbacks are extremely important. Offred continuously resorts back to her memories of her past life as a way to cope with what society has done to her. Whereas *Oryx and Crake* is organized into alternating chapters of past Jimmy and present Snowman, Offred presents her memories from the first-person and in a more fragmented way. Within a page, she will go from a description of what she is doing directly into a memory of the past. Sometimes these memories even become manifestations. For instance,

> I step into the water, lie down, let it hold me. The water is soft as hands. I close my eyes, and she’s there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child’s washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine. This is the age she is when I’m in the bath. She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she’s not really a ghost. (63)

Here, Offred is talking about the daughter that she lost when she tried escaping from Gilead at the beginning of the oppression. Her mind wanders so quickly from present into past. These recollections also are of such importance to Offred that they seem real. Remembering her past and keeping it alive are what gets her through life.
As for the notion of time, it is discussed in detail in two articles written on the novel: “Selves, Survival, and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Linda Hansot and “Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Peter Stillman and Anne Johnson. Both of these articles take time to focus upon the idea of Offred’s structured and regimented life and how she is actually required to have downtime, which Stillman and Johnson label as “blank time” (74). I disagree with Stillman’s analysis in which Offred is portrayed as complicit in her abuse and that she is unable to maintain a sense of self during these moments, ultimately becoming an inactive character. Though on the contrary, Hansot notes, “…in the highly routinized existence, when enforced passivity frees her from performing the handmaid’s role, [Offred] undertakes a sustained and silent interrogation of her former and present personae.” (58)

Thus, Offred is using this “blank time” as a way to call back her former life and live through the memories. This is evident in the abovementioned quote from the novel where Offred recalls her daughter in the bathtub. She claims this time as her own and does something that no one in Gilead can stop her from doing, since it is being done inside her head. For Offred, remembering becomes a way to silently rebel against Gilead and, like Snowman, to survive in the present.

Storytelling and language are also extremely prevalent in both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. In both novels, the main character is utilizing language and story telling as a means to come to grips with their current state. It becomes, simultaneously, a means to escape from the life that they live and a way to comprehend life as they know it. Howells brings up a very important point, that of the “dialogical nature of narrative” (168) for both Snowman and Offred’s stories. She discusses the notion strictly in regards to Offred’s tale but I believe it holds just as strongly for Snowman’s. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is speaking to an audience.
Throughout the novel, there are multiple times in which she states that she doesn’t know who will hear her story or what they’ll do with it, but she has to believe that there is someone, at some point, who will hear her. As the epilogue suggests, Offred was right as her recordings were found and put together some hundred years in the future after the fall of Gilead and the entire novel was the recreation of those tapes. Throughout the text, it becomes clear that Offred needs to tell her story more for herself than for anyone else. Like slipping back into memories, she needs to put these things into words and out in a concrete manner in order to come to grips with her situation. Howells put it best when she stated, “Within such constraints [of Gilead’s tyranny] she needs to tell stories if only to herself, as a way of escape from the time trap of the present.” (166)

For Snowman, however, there is a drastic difference in storytelling. For one, the narrative structure, mentioned previously, does not allow Snowman a first person voice. Thus, he is not telling us (the audience) his story, rather it is being told to us by an omniscient third-person narrator. But the question remains, as Howells puts it, “A Last Man narrative poses special problems: how to tell that story, who to tell it, and to whom?” (171). Therefore, it makes sense that Atwood chooses this narrative structure to negate a few of the problems. Snowman is under the impression that he is the only human left, so putting his story down in any tangible form would be fruitless for him. He mentions at a point in the novel that even though making a list would help him to maintain some sense of structure, people only write things down to have them read later and there is no one left to read his words (O&C 347).

Snowman is, however, involved in quite a bit of storytelling to the Crakers. The children come to him and ask him to tell them stories about objects that they have found on the shore line
or in the jungle, about how they came to be and their Creator, and natural phenomena such as the tide or rain. They have very limited knowledge of the world before the incident and rely completely on Snowman to teach them how to survive in it. He has a serious amount of control in this situation, but this relates to another point that Howells brings up in her article, that of the “narrative impulse”. The Crakers, especially the children, look forward to these stories. Howells states,

…the psychological need to talk and to tell, to remember and to imagine (all things associated with narrative impulse) remains in Snowman. […] Through storytelling he teaches the Crakers the rudiments of symbolic thinking. And the Crakers love his stories, which makes us wonder if the primitive human brain is hard wired not just for dreaming and signing as Crake had discovered, but for narrative as well. (171)

Storytelling is something that has been around in societies for longer than we can imagine as a way to communicate and to teach messages of morality and ethics. In a post-apocalyptic wasteland, then, with only one human and a new species, storytelling is fundamentally important to the sustainment of humanity.

Something that Howells very briefly touches upon in her discussion of narrative and storytelling is that of language itself. Both novels put an emphasis on their character’s passion for words. Jimmy always had an affinity for words. In the novel’s depiction of his growing up, he was considered the “words person”. The world represented before the incident was one with the focus on science, and Jimmy never really fit in. He had to go to the Martha Graham Academy, a liberal arts school, and the novel makes it clear that that is not the desired option and
was looked down upon for its futility as those who graduated from there were only useful for propaganda. Words were not valued, science and mathematics were. It was actually Jimmy’s affinity for words that allowed him to advertise and sell the pill Crake created to destroy the world and wipe out mankind, albeit that the fact was unbeknownst to Jimmy at the time.

In her article Howells states, “[Snowman] is telling stories in a desperate bid to reclaim his own identity, ironizing his present situation, and delighting in language and word play. However, there is a new urgency for it is Snowman’s unique task to rescue words from oblivion.” (172) Just like the importance of storytelling post-apocalypse, words take on an extremely important status. Existing in the present as Snowman, not the Jimmy of the past, he realizes that he is tasked with something very crucial: “‘Hang on to the words,’ he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious. When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been.” (68) Snowman has a duty as a former wordsmith to maintain the English language or it will vanish.

Similarly, Offred talks about her love for words on multiple occasions throughout the book. She does this in various ways. For instance, Offred states, “You can wet the rim of a glass and run your finger around the rim and it will make a sound. This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word shatter.” (103) In this case she is utilizing words as a way to describe the complexity of her emotions. She is so entwined in language that she comes to identify with them physically. Also, Gilead does not allow handmaids to read, but her Commander allows her a magazine during one of their trysts and also allows her to play Scrabble. Here she is complicit in breaking the law and, though a small act, rebelling against
society through the use of language. As Stillman and Johnson point out, “Offred delights with words, keeping alive for her the richness of the English language and frequently providing solace and amusement in empty time; sometimes her deconstructions open new paths of meaning, interpretation, and critique.” (75) The intricacies of language and words become a solace for Offred and a way for her to digress from the fear and dread she feels daily. In one example, she says:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.

These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (110)

This quote is taken from Offred as she is sitting down for breakfast on “Birth Day”. These are the days that the handmaid’s are picked up and taken back to their education center to watch and assist in a fellow handmaid giving birth. It is a very stressful situation for all of the women involved, and while it is not something that Offred wants to do, she is forced by the regime. Thus, in this situation we can see that language becomes another escape for Offred. It is a gateway to her past life as well as a way to cope with the present. As she states, these outbursts of the details of words are seemingly pointless. It does not matter what other meanings the word ‘chair’ has, but Offred uses them as aids in her need to digress within herself. Just as Snowman uses it to maintain the civilization of the past, Offred uses it to maintain her sanity.

From both the storytelling and the lapses in time and foray into remembering, the characters become embroiled in the notion of double consciousness. They exist both in the past
and in the present simultaneously and this need for duality comes out of necessity to the
characters. Like they use their memories and telling stories as a way to escape from their
present, they have in turn created for themselves a way to live in both their desired past and their
abhorred present. For Offred she must, “…revisit the selves she summons from disjointed
fragments of the past, establishing in the process points of continuity and discontinuity with the
rudely reduced self she is allowed in the present.” (Hansot 59) Offred conjures images of Moira,
her fiercely strong friend, and her mother, the radical feminist, and lives through past moments
with them while she struggles to exist in the present. She does so, like Hansot states, in order to
frame the “self” that Gilead permits her. In doing so, she creates this fragmented identity and
exists in a state of double consciousness. Howells states, “[Jimmy], like Offred, exists in a state
of double consciousness, working by associative leaps between ‘now’ and ‘then’ in an effort to
escape from a devastated world littered with the wreckage of late twentieth century civilization
reminding him daily of what he has lost.” (172) For this character, he has literally divided
himself into a past (Jimmy) and a present (Snowman). While explaining his choice of a name, he
states: “The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of
blizzards…” (7-8) This is how he feels, where he lives in the past but survives in the present and
has no sense of the future.

For us as readers, Jimmy and Offred also exist in an imagined future creating an even
more complicated notion of triple consciousness which is something that I think is vital to our
understanding of these two novels and must be mentioned. Per the standards of dystopian
genres, their story exists in order to warn us of the dangers in our own society. *The Handmaid’s
Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* depict futuristic universes dissimilar in their modes of destruction.
However, they both exist in a space in which past and present coincide instantaneously. This acts as a mechanism for readers to imagine both our present and our possible future. The conclusion of Howells’s article did not seem solid enough to me as I felt it merely reiterated the fact that these novels were dystopian and reflected Atwood’s fears. While that is true, I believe that Atwood’s utilization of these three motivations—memory/time, storytelling/language, and double consciousness—for our main characters creates in the readers an idea of fluidity and spatial temporality that is important in the gaining of social change.
Works Cited


This response lets you differentiate your product from the competition without slinging mud. Plus, it opens the door for another conversation down the line. Once you've won the prospect's trust, you can start talking about a switch if that's in the buyer's best interest.

2. "At this point, I'm not asking you to rip anything out. At this point in the conversation, the customer might have made it clear that they've signed on the dotted line, and that they aren't interested in purchasing anything from you or your company at this point. But it can't hurt to try to keep the door open. Use this response to keep up a friendly relationship, to establish yourself as a conscientious salesperson, and to keep the lines of contact open."