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A Light in the Dark: A Case for YA Literature Through the Lens of Medical Dystopias

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ABSTRACT

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By examining critical studies of the dystopian genre from Gregory Claeys, Fátima Vieira, and Keith Booker as well as the studies of young adult dystopian novels from Roberta Trites, Kenneth Donnelson, and Sean Connors, I argue that young adult literature (YAL) has literary merit and is worth studying. This literariness stems from a novel's ability to explore complex themes like religion, sacrifice, and societal contracts. I introduce and analyze a subgenre of YA dystopian literature, which I classify as the medical dystopia, a genre that is uniquely positioned to explore the complex moral questions that surround advancing medical technologies and their impact on society. To demonstrate how YAL can deal with the complex ideas inherent to the medical dystopian genre, I analyze Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* and Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion*. The analysis concludes that novels like these do not lack substance and have literary value due to their ability to invite young adults to view the darkness that exists within society from a position of safety and light.

Keywords: adolescents, young adult literature, dystopia, *Unwind*, *The House of the Scorpion*

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In 1954, a surgeon named Joseph Murray transplanted a kidney from one identical twin to his twin brother. While we now have medicine that can prevent organs from being rejected after a transplant, these medicines were not readily available in the 1950s. It was vitally important to find as close a match as possible to prevent organ failure. Murray, knowing the surgery would face criticism due to the young age of the twins, went before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to try to receive approval for the transplant. The court offered a fascinating verdict on the case. "The court approved the donation, ruling that the procedure was in the best interest of the *donating* twin. Were his sibling to die, he would later fault himself, and others, for not allowing him to save his brother's life" (Rothman et al. 26). The court believed that the brother owed his organ to his twin, a small sacrifice to keep his sibling alive. In reviewing this case, Rothman and her cohort explore the concepts of sacrifice and the community. "The court's reliance on the best interest standard, not an easy one to satisfy, reflects a social consensus on the duty to take moderate risks for each other" (26). Cases like this ask: what do we as members of society owe to one another? To examine this and other questions of morality I will introduce and analyze a subgenre of dystopian literature, which I classify as the "medical dystopia." This genre explores the potential effects of advancing medical technologies and the way they influence society. Medical dystopias are uniquely poised to tackle the complex questions associated with science's impact on humankind and mortality; specifically, they enable us to recognize how new technologies, ironically, force us to confront fundamentally human problems of self-interest, sacrifice, and social obligation. In medical dystopias, in other words, new technologies raise very old and, therefore, very human questions.

I will review two young adult literature (YAL) medical dystopias, *Unwind* and *The*

House of the Scorpion, that deal with themes of agency, religion, and sacrifice and compare them to *Never Let Me Go*, a dystopian novel by Kazuo Ishiguro that deals with the same themes. Each of these novels is an excellent example of the complex ideas that can be explored in the medical dystopian genre. I will then show that the complexity of YAL dystopias and their ability to touch on crucial moral questions makes these novels just as literary as their adult counterparts.

Of course, the "literariness" of a novel can be difficult to define. Sean Connors explores the debate of YAL and the definition of "literature." Connors found that The Common Core State Standards argue that "the complexity" of a novel is what matters, specifically the prose and word choice (5). Other critics suggest that literary novels must reflect reality in a meaningful way and demonstrate "high quality of writing" (qtd. in Connors 3), another phrase that is hard to define. Connors certainly acknowledges that "Literature is socially constructed, and, as such, subject to change" (7). Despite this, Connors offers his own definition of literature that is based on his interactions with young adult students, saying literature is something that is capable of "exploring universal themes, evincing a level of artistry, and inspiring, deep critical thinking" (1). For this thesis I will echo Connors' sentiments and argue that the literary merits of YAL come from a novel's ability to explore complex theme—namely religion, sacrifice, and rebellion—in addition to inspiring critical thinking in readers. These elements can all be explored through the unique affordances of the medical dystopian genre.

The Origins of Dystopia

Utopian stories date back as far as Plato's *Republic,* which explores the ideas of an ideal world that is safe for all. The phrase "utopia" was later coined by Thomas More in the 1500s and actually consisted of two neologisms. "More created a tension that has persisted over time and has been the basis for the perennial duality of meaning of utopias as the place that is

simultaneously a non-place (utopia) and a good place (eutopia)" (Vieira 2). Utopic literature sought to explore an imaginary society that was ideal and reflected the best of society. Such stories were meant to inspire hope in readers that, given the right actions, a perfect society might be achieved. Dystopia, a word meaning "bad place," did not come into prominence until John Stuart Mill coined it in the nineteenth century (Claeys 107). While utopic literature serves to inspire hope, dystopias were often meant to evoke menace and despair.

Many different definitions have been given to dystopias, such as "negative utopia, regressive utopia, inverse utopia, or nasty utopia" (Vieria 9). While the dystopian genre can be defined in many different ways, most stories seem to assume that dystopias are often the reverse of utopias, meaning that the societies depicted in such narratives are often wonderful for some, but hellish for others. As Claeys puts it, "There is of course something in the argument that, just as one person's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter, so is one person's utopia another's dystopia. Indisputably, thus, whether a given text can be described as a dystopia or utopia will depend on one's perspective of the narrative outcome." This duality is necessary to create an effective dystopian story. Dystopias differ from "apocalyptic" or "end of the world" stories in that an organized society still exists. This typically involves oppressive or corrupt governments that rule over the lower classes. There exists a delicate sense of order for the more "utopic" portion of society, an order that is maintained by the sacrifices of others who live in what, for them, is a dystopia.

Claeys suggests that dystopian societies often explore a world in which "people sacrifice their individual interest for the common good. Social solidarity trumps selfish individualism" (8). Claey's ideas align with those shared by philosopher T.M. Scanlon, who wrote about the concept of contractualism, which allows for people to pursue their own ideas with the caveat that certain

sacrifices have to be made for the benefit of society (224). However, Claeys further suggests that dystopias distort this idea through "compulsory solidarity" wherein societies are actually forced into these systems (8). There is no agreement made by its citizens to adhere to a certain lifestyle. In many dystopian novels, society has been led to believe that there is no other choice than what they are asked to do.

Much like children's and young adult literature, dystopian literature has long been viewed as a didactic genre, influenced heavily by the authors' ideologies. Indeed, Fátima Vieira says that the main purpose of the dystopian genre is "didactic and moralistic" with the hope to inspire some sort of "moral, social and civic reasonability" in readers (12). Novels like George Orwell's classic and genre-defining *1984* depict societies as a reflection of our own societal anxieties. "If dystopias provoke despair on the part of the readers, it is because their writers want their readers to take them as a serious menace…their true vocation is to make man realize that, since it is impossible for him to build an ideal society, then he must be committed to the construction of a better one" (Vieira 16). These books play on the fears of the readers to create a world that is terrifying by how incredibly bizarre and, paradoxically, familiar it is to readers.

It is important for a dystopia to feel plausible to a degree, as "realism is essential to bring these problems [bleak, fearful, dystopian outcomes] home rather than to estrange us further from them" (Claeys 489). Winston, the main character of *1984,* lives in a society governed by Big Brother. The actions of every citizen are watched closely and even their thinking is monitored by the Thought Police. Winston realizes that his seemingly utopic world is dark and attempts to rebel against Big Brother's oppressive rule, only to be betrayed and sent to Ministry of Love where he is tortured and brainwashed. He realizes, "Of pain you could wish only one thing: that it should stop…In the face of pain there are no heroes, no heroes" (246). Winston and others like

him seek to be the heroes of their society, but there are unfortunately few heroes in adult dystopian literature.

Keith Booker claims that the dystopian genre certainly has literary value, as it is the perfect tool to open readers up to social criticism:

> Such literature gains its principal energies precisely from its literariness, from its ability to illuminate social and political issues from an angle not available to conventional critics…If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre. It lies at the very heart of the literary project. (175-176)

Indeed, the dystopian genre is an effective tool that serves to educate and inform readers across a variety of demographics. It invites critical conversation in a way that might not be as accessible in other genres of writing.

Young Adult Dystopia

Young adult dystopian novels are very similar to their "adult" counterparts. They, too, feature twisted societies and futures with dark outcomes. The main difference between the two, from a publishing standpoint, is the intended audience of a work. YA novels typically feature young protagonists, something that appeals to younger readers. Dystopian young adult literature hit the mainstream following the release of *The Hunger Games* in 2008. The novel became a bestseller and inspired an enduring trend of young female protagonists who must face off against an oppressive government. However, years before *The Hunger Games*, author Lois Lowry released *The Giver*, a book that is often credited for being the first widely popular dystopian YA novel. This novel, published in 1993, features many of the traits seen in its adult counterparts.

The main character, Jonas, lives in a society that appears utopic at first glance. Lowry even presents the narrative in a way that might appear to be a normal lifestyle to the reader. Everyone is assigned a job and the government ensures that the people have everything that they need. Jonas belongs to a typical family with a mother, father, and a sister. Life seems very ordinary for both Jonas and the reader, until Lowry pulls back the curtain. Like *1984's* Winston, Jonas begins to realize that there is a darkness permeating his society. Creativity, emotions, and even the ability to see color are all suppressed by futuristic technology and medicines. The world is bland and features a sameness among all of its inhabitants. At the conclusion of the novel, Jonas decides to restore all facets of reality to his society. In *1984,* Winston fails at changing his own society, but in *The Giver,* a twelve-year-old boy is able to do just that. On the ending of *The Giver*, Lowry says, "Yes, I think [readers] need to see some hope for such a world. I can't imagine writing a book that doesn't have a hopeful ending" (qtd. in Hintz and Ostry xi). Lowry explored the dark realities of Jonas's world but thought that the conclusion and moral purpose of her novel were best served by allowing Jonas to bring his society back to the light.

Perhaps it is possible that YA dystopian novels for a young adult audience serve a different purpose than their adult counterparts. While adults might feel impressed to make a change in their lives to prevent a horrible future after reading something like *1984,* for teens it is more "about what's happening, right this minute, in the stormy psyche of the adolescent reader" (Miller 6). Young readers may see elements of dystopian novels in their everyday lives and relate to the worlds that they find in the dark texts. Adolescents do not need to read adult dystopian novels when there are YA novels specifically designed for young readers at a very particular stage of physical and cognitive development. Scott Westerfeld, author of the popular YA dystopian series *Uglies*, wrote that his dystopian books succeed with young readers because high

school is itself a dystopia (qtd. in Claeys 6). Despite this, young readers are typically hopeful. "Even visions of a world gone mad or the books about cults gone insane leave readers grateful for the world as it usually is" (Claeys 6). Young adults can read about the darkness portrayed in a YA novel and discover the hope that can come from a twisted genre. "In a world hardly characterized by undue optimism, [dystopian novels] offer us hope, not the sappy sentimentalism of 'everything always works out for the best' for it often does not – but realistic hope based on our noblest dreams of surviving" (Nilsen and Donelson 212). By writing with hope in their dystopian novels, young adult authors are then better able to deal with hefty subjects like religion and sacrifice.

For Roberta Trites, one of the defining traits of adolescent literature is "the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (2). Indeed, many YA novels deal with young protagonists who want to find their place in society. By contrast, the dystopian YA novel seeks to defy societal expectations. Like Jonas, many protagonists within the YA dystopian genre are forced to confront the dark expectations of their society which leads them to revolt against the power structure. The novels that I explore in this thesis fall into a subgenre that I call the "medical dystopia," or dystopias that are heavily influenced by the presence of medical technologies that alter humanity and their life.

The Medical Dystopia

In a way, the origins of the medical dystopia can be traced back to the earliest stories of humankind's origins. The creation of humanity has been explored in countless myths, religions, and stories. The Bible tells of the physical, bodily creation of Adam and Eve by the Judeo-Christian God, Greek mythology tells the story of Prometheus who created man from clay, and Chinese mythology tells of Nüwa, the mother goddess, who used yellow earth to create children.

These creation myths that deal with the power to create life or overcome death often act as cautionary tales, as their stories end with punishment or admonishment from deity (Turney 14). Most of these stories erred towards fantastical/mystical elements; it wasn't until the Romantic era that the more "dystopic" elements became present. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; *or, The Modern Prometheus* transformed this creation myth as "Victor does not invoke the aid of the Deity, or any other supernatural agency. He achieves his goal by dint of his own (scientific) efforts" (14). This could mark the first "medical dystopia" where science has developed to the point of intruding upon the dealings of deity. Shelley's novel, and the countless novels that her work has inspired, deals with the ramifications of meddling with the natural order of the world, something that has only become more relevant as technology draws closer to the science imagined in Shelley's novel.

Certainly, technology has seen incredible advancements in the medical field. A study in 2017 found that through a process known as parabiosis, blood could be transferred from young mice to older specimens, which resulted in "reverse symptoms of aging" (Reardon). A handful of research institutions have begun similar trials with human participants. Sergio Canavero, an Italian neurosurgeon claims to have successfully performed a head transplant, reattaching "the spine, nerves, blood vessels, veins and skin from the head to body" (Austin). While the procedures have only been performed on corpses, Dr. Canavero, who many now refer to as a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein, believes it is only a matter of time before he'll be able to transplant a head on a living human. Cases like these raise complicated ethical questions about medical science and its impact on humans. Medical dystopias explore these questions by creating societies defined by advanced medical technologies that are only just emerging in reality.

The medical dystopian genre offers writers the chance to look at the world through a

distorted lens, often twisting issues relevant to society and looking at their dark outcomes. Medicals dystopias like *Never Let Me Go, Unwind,* and *The House of the Scorpion* explore the concept of sacrifice as a dark outcome, specifically the act of taking organs from one individual so that another may survive. These books each explore the complex relationship between the individual and society and challenge ideas of "the greater good" by asking the question: Are we willing to sacrifice one individual so that many may survive? In these novels, the authors turn the sacred nature of sacrifice on its ear by taking away the most important part of being human – the capacity to choose. Sacrifice and questions of morality are heady concepts for anyone to explore, but the best dystopian novels explore the ideas of identity, science, and their role in society unflinchingly.

Society and Sacrifice in *Never Let Me Go*

Kay Sambell asserts that the dystopian genre in general is bleak, but seeks the darkness to create a cautionary tale for the reader. In the adult genre, the endings of many of the most prominent dystopian novels are dark and tragic. Novels like the aforementioned *1984* as well as *Fahrenheit 451* end in tragedy for the protagonists, which Sambell believes is necessary in efficiently portraying a powerful message. "The narrative closure of the protagonist's final defeat and failure is absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia" (165). If a text truly hopes to prevent a possible dark outcome, to truly change, the reader must be forced to face the darkness.

This trend of tragic endings, however, doesn't appear as frequently in young adult dystopian novels. YA dystopias differ from adult dystopias in that they seem "reluctant to depict the extinction of hope within their stories" (Sambell 164). While critics often view this as an evasive tactic so young adults do not have to deal with complex ideas, Sambell believes that it is

instead a "struggle to achieve a new, more fluid style of didacticism in dystopian writing for children" (173). The young protagonists of *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* fight against their society and manage to escape their supposed fate. Each of these novels expertly explores the questions of the morality behind sacrificing youth and how a society, dystopic or otherwise, can be built on a foundation that exploits its most vulnerable citizens. This examination will demonstrate that YA novels like *Unwind* and the *House of the Scorpion* are comparable to *Never Let Me Go* because they deftly explore complex issues with incredible nuance. Unlike their "adult" counterparts, these YA novels open the door to these dystopian futures, and, by leaving on a light, younger readers can better see the cockroaches in the room.

Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is an excellent example of a medical dystopia. It depicts a society that is heavily influenced by the presence of clones and the medical treatments that stem from their existence. While the novel features a handful of traits that might typically be found in YA novels, such as the young age of the characters, the book was marketed for older readers. *Never Let Me Go* is told from the perspective of Kathy H. Though Kathy is thirty-one as she narrates, most of the events focus on her childhood and teenage years. Throughout the novel, Kathy reflects on the important moments of her life, particularly her childhood experiences at Hailsham, her teenage years at the cottages, and her young adult experiences as a "carer." Kathy's friends, Ruth and Tommy, were also raised at Hailsham. Initially, Hailsham seems like a typical boarding school, though the novel quickly suggests that there is something peculiar about the children there. It is later revealed that Kathy and her peers are clones whose sole purpose is to give up their organs through a series of donations. Once these donations are done, the clones "complete," or die. All the clones are expected to live for this sole purpose, giving their lives so that others might be cured of diseases or enjoy a longer life. The world depicted in Ishiguro's

novel deals with the anxieties that surround advancing medical technologies, and the ramifications of things like cloning and improved organ harvesting techniques.

Ishiguro's characters acknowledge that the harvesting of clones was not universally accepted and initially faced challenges, raising questions that many readers might have about the story. Miss Emily, one of the teachers at Hailsham, tells Kathy and her friends about the role of clones in their society:

> Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum. Yes, there were arguments. But by the time people became concerned about…about students, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought into existence at all, well by then it was too late…How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. (Ishiguro 240)

Miss Emily's words reveal the struggles of a society that has seemingly found an answer to their problems. While some were unsettled by the means of a cure, they were all willing to put that aside for the greater good of society. Ishiguro's novel is powerful because it faces these complex questions and does not offer an easy solution to the problem. While readers might balk at the idea of clones being sacrificed, they might also see how this dystopic vision could come to pass. The world feels both bizarre in how foreign some of their ideas are, and terrible because it paradoxically feels like it could happen as well.

One of the most perplexing aspects of *Never Let Me Go* is the way that Kathy and the

other clones seem resigned to their fates. The only glimpse of rebellion that we see is when Kathy and her childhood friend, Tommy, seek rumors of deferment. However, this supposed deferment is just that—a way to put off the inevitable. There is no true sense that their fate can be avoided outright. Perhaps the clones, to some degree, accept the role assigned to them by their creators, and are, like the Biblical Isaac, accepting their fate. From the account given by Kathy, it seems that the clones of that narrative lived a comfortable life. Hailsham provided the children with food, shelter, and an education. Upon reaching their teenage years, the clones were sent to the Cottages. While the conditions were not exactly ideal, Kathy and her friends still enjoyed their time there. “None of us minded the discomforts one bit-it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages” (106). She even described it as “beautiful and cosy, with overgrown grass everywhere” (108). While the clones are expected to clean up after themselves and cook food, they seem to have a relatively peaceful and enjoyable existence there. Kathy recalls “easy-going days drifting in and out of each others’ rooms, the languid way the afternoon would fold into evening then into night” (108). It seems that, for the most part, the clones were well cared for during their lives. Perhaps that’s why society felt justified in sacrificing them. The clones do not volunteer to sacrifice themselves; rather, they accept what their creators have laid out for them. Kathy and her friends all die at the end of the story, quietly accepting their fate, embracing the darkness that permeates adult dystopian literature.

Young Adult Medical Dystopias

Nancy Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) and Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind* (2007) don’t feature revolutions, battles, or teen love triangles that are commonly associated with YA dystopia. Instead they deal with young protagonists who hope to save their own lives in a world that sacrifices the young for the supposed benefit of society—a sacrifice thrust upon the

unwilling. These texts examine the complex relationship between the needs of the individual and the wellbeing of society in ways that challenge our ideas of the greater good. Each novel presents an alternative perspective and explores the role of agency in sacrifice, and exploration that offers a safe space for young readers to approach such complex concepts. While most people in these dystopian societies get to live in bliss, the unfortunate clones and unwinds of the novels dwell in a dystopic nightmare. Despite this nightmare, however, YA medical dystopian novels, including these two, differ from their adult counterparts in the way that they infuse hope in these dark worlds.

Shusterman and Farmer both skillfully handle the crafting of their societies. A challenge that the dystopian or speculative fiction authors often face is convincing readers that their creation could somehow be plausible. While dystopian scenarios might come across as outlandish, they are often grounded in a solid reality. These authors create dystopian societies that explore the ramifications of theories posed by thinkers like Philippa Foot. Foot is famous for creating a popular ethical scenario known as the Trolley Problem. The theory states that a man is riding on a trolley that is rocketing towards five workers on the track. This man can choose to pull a lever that will move the trolley to another track, which would result in the trolley hitting a single man instead (Graham 168). The Trolley Problem asks these questions: How can we justify difficult decisions and what are we willing to do to ensure the greatest good for the greatest amount of people? In *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* members of society are willing to sacrifice the few for the safety and well-being of many. It is a concept that is familiar to our society, yet these stories explore it through a dark lens. The ideas of sacrificing the youth can seem extreme, but Shusterman and Farmer both create narratives that make these worlds feel plausible. These stories examine and warp an all too relevant issue facing the world today. For

example, there are currently thousands of people in need of transplants, and those lucky individuals who are actually able to receive a donation usually have waited 2-3 years (Rothman et al. 25).

While Ishiguro is recognized for addressing these issues in a complex way, YA authors are doing it just as well but for an audience who are more receptive to narratives written specifically for them. These young readers can identify with characters who share their hope and desire for change. Additionally, these YA dystopian novels excel when they draw not only upon society's fears, but the fears that teenagers face in their own microcosm. This is something that Neal Shusterman does exceedingly well in his book, *Unwind*. The story is based on Shusterman's research on organ donation as well as timely issues like abortion, childcare, advancing technologies, and the struggles of young adults finding their own identity.

Unwind

Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* introduces a world that has been shaped by the Heartland Wars. The two sides of the conflict, pro-choice and pro-life, fought over what do with the unwanted and troubled youth of their world. In a dilemma that echoes themes explored by another dystopian novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, "feral children" wreak havoc on society. The War found a compromise by creating the Bill of Life, a measure that would allow for hostile and reckless children to be unwound:

> The Bill of Life states that human life may not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen. However, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a parent may choose to retroactively 'abort' a child on the condition that the child's life doesn't 'technically' end. The process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called 'unwinding.' Unwinding is now a common,

and accepted practice in society. (Shusterman 1)

In this scenario, science had advanced to a point where every part of the human body could be harvested and implanted in others. Thus, unwinding was a way to rid the world of undesirables and give their parts to those in society who are more deserving.

The three main characters in *Unwind* all face the unwinding process but manage to escape at the beginning of the novel. One of these characters, Connor, is a troubled teen whose parents have decided to have him unwound. While unwinding was devised in response to "feral" teens that were involved in criminal acts, it becomes clear that Connor merely misbehaved at home and didn't do well in school. His parents grew tired of dealing with his antics and thought his life would be better lived in a "divided state" (5). Shusterman creates a fascinating society that aims to solve several problems with one cure. As is the case in our own world, *Unwind's* society is in dire need of organs. Unwinding offers a solution that also eliminates the problem of unwanted or troublesome children. "Moreover, by imagining a dystopian world in which the process of forced organ donation is justified with the definition of adolescents as unproductive, idle troublemakers, the novels present organ transplantation as a means of suppressing young adults…it converts troublemakers into 'useful' and valuable members of society" (Wohlmann and Steinberg 27). The terrible actions are justified because they serve to help the rest of their society. Unlike *Never Let Me Go, Unwind* gives us strong protagonists who fight against the system and provide hope that, in actuality, humans would never really allow this dark future to happen. The fight for agency is a critical part of this narrative and is something that is glaringly absent from the lives of Kathy and her friends.

Unwind offers a very direct reason as to why society would allow the practice of unwinding: unwound children are technically still alive because technology enables all of their

body parts to continue living. When another of *Unwind's* main characters, Riza, is told that she is to be unwound, a lawyer for the state attempts to calm her. "It's not dying, and I'm sure everyone here would be more comfortable if you didn't suggest something so blatantly inflammatory. The fact is, 100 percent of you will still be alive, just in a divided state" (24). However, there are also some deeper societal compromises at play here. In her analysis of *Unwind,* Susan Louise Stewart explores the concepts of sacrifice and scapegoats:

> Since adults (and children, too, but mostly adults) benefit because they are the recipient of organs taken from the unwinds, one might wonder if adults are actually sacrificing anything -a paradox of sacrifice…Perhaps, then, the communal glue is one of complicity as adults, who know better, send children to their deaths as a way to end violence. If all participate, all are guilty and paradoxically, none are guilty. (164)

The ideas of sacrifice presented in *Unwind* share similarities to T.M. Scanlon's theories of contractualism. Scanlon explored the way that a society determines right from wrong. He wrote that "an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by a set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement" (153). This contractualism allows for people to pursue their own ideas, with the caveat that certain sacrifices have to be made to the benefit of society. "If we can prevent something very bad from happening to someone by making a slight or even moderate sacrifice, it would be wrong not to do so" (224). Through this lens, if a society as a whole comes to accept something as lawful and right, can it truly be considered wrong? *Unwind* offers no simple solutions to the problems of society. While a reader will (hopefully) see the horrors in the practices of unwinding, Shusterman refuses to offer any easy fix to the problem. Though the main characters may escape their fates, unwinding continues throughout society as a

whole. The open-ended nature of the ending is hopeful but invites the readers to participate in a complex conversation about sacrifice in society.

Additionally, Wohlmann and Steinberg suggest that YA dystopias, i.e. medical dystopias, speak to the insecurities and fears of their young audience. *Unwind* is "a particularly interesting representation of organ transplantation because, in their status as young adult fiction, the novels draw on established literary conventions, such as the trope of identity formation…The *Unwind* novels embed organ donation within adolescent struggles to develop an embodied self and social awareness" (27). Young adults are incredibly conscious of their body and its changes, so the medical dystopias speak to the anxieties that youths have in crafting their own identity.

The Faith of *Unwind*

YAL has long been known for pushing boundaries and dealing with taboos. While difficult topics continue to be explored in YA novels, there seems to be one last topic that many YA authors are reluctant to broach. Patty Campbell states that "Faith and belief in God seldom appear in traditional form in novels for teens" (xiii). Indeed, many of the most recent popular books in YAL steer clear of the topic altogether. However, *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* both feature main characters who are driven by their religious commitment, something that is not present in *Never Let Me Go.* The decisions of characters like Lev Calder in *Unwind* and Matt in *The House of the Scorpion* are continuously informed by their faith, a rarity in the genre.

Lev Calder, one of the three primary protagonists in *Unwind,* belongs to an unnamed religious group that practices the act of "tithing" their children. Lev, the tenth child of his family, is chosen as a religious offering to be unwound. Unlike unwinds like Connor or Riza, tithes are viewed as selfless and holy because of their sacrifice. For most of the story in *Unwind,* Lev

seems eager to fulfill his task and offer his life so that others may live. These tithes are the closest the novel gets to the standard representation of a willing sacrifice as seen in biblical stories. This donation of organs aligns perfectly with concepts of religious sacrifice, as Christians have long drawn connections between organ donation and the teachings of sacrifice in the Bible. (Mongoven 90). *Unwind* warps this particular concept of sacrifice, creating a society that flourishes because of the sacrifices of others. "The sacrifice of the young, whether explicit or implicit, is frequently woven into novels of dystopia; in fact, it is often part of what makes them dystopian narratives. Sacrificing the young for the good of the community makes these kinds of narratives simultaneously striking and horrifying…it translates into an economy of tragedy (Stewart 162). These are big topics for books that are often looked down upon as an extension of children's literature, but both unwaveringly delve into the complexities of religion. Interestingly, the other unwinds (and many members of society) look upon the tithes and members of this faith negatively as they are unable to understand why the other children would willingly offer their own lives. "The [unwinds] hate the tithes the way peasants despise royalty" (Shusterman 273). Indeed, in this way *Unwind* seemingly conforms to Campbell's idea that religious figures are "presented as despicable in direct proportion to the degree of their ecclesiastical commitment" (1). This idea, however, is complicated by Pastor Dan, one of the pivotal characters of *Unwind*

At the beginning of *Unwind*, Shusterman introduces Pastor Dan, the leader of Lev's local church. Initially Dan, like many of the other characters present in Lev's life, seems supportive of the tithe. However, when Lev's journey to the donation center is interrupted by a roadside accident, Dan urges the young boy to run away from his unwinding (37). This act causes Lev to doubt his faith, something that continues throughout the course of the narrative. While Lev's religion seems to conform to Campbell's ideas about YA depictions of religions being a

"negative force in the plots" (38), Dan's act pushes Lev to reconsider his faith and his ability to choose. However, Shusterman avoids decrying faith as a whole, instead offering a fascinating view of faith and religion. At the conclusion of the novel, Lev asks Dan if he has lost his faith completely. Dan responds, "No…just my convictions. I still very much believe in God—just not a god who condones human tithing" (Shusterman 329) Rather than give up religion entirely, Lev comes to realize that he, too, wants to believe in God, just not the God that he has been raised to believe in. He tells his mentor and friend, "I never realized that I had that choice" (329). Shusterman deftly explores the complexities of belief and religion and trusts his young readers to understand these complex ideas, something Nancy Farmer does as well in *The House of the Scorpion.*

Creation and Creator in *The House of the Scorpion*

The House of the Scorpion tells the story of Matteo Alacrán, a young boy who discovers that he is a clone of El Patrón, the powerful Lord of Opium (a country in a futuristic North America). Matt is raised and pampered by El Patrón believing that he will one day become the next Lord of Opium. Upon reaching his teenage years, however, he discovers that his organs will one day be harvested to extend the life of his "original." Like *Unwind*, *The House of the Scorpion* is a YA medical dystopia that explores religion, sacrifice, and what it means to be alive. However, *The House of the Scorpion* is uniquely situated to explore the concept of the soul and what makes a human human. Connor and the other main characters of *Unwind* are labeled as "unwinds" due to their actions. Due to the nature of his creation as a clone, Matt is a pariah of his society as many believe that he does not have a soul, and he is often called an animal due to his unorthodox creation.

In the world of *The House of the Scorpion*, the embryos of clones are grown inside cows.

As such, clones are denied the rights of "normal" humans. "The law is very clear. All clones are classified as livestock because they're grown inside cows. Cows can't give birth to humans" (226). Indeed, while Matt is treated moderately well inside the confines of El Patrón's estate, the world is not kind to the clones. Other children near the estate tell Matt that he was "puked up by a cow," (81) and a servant woman on the estate tosses him into a room full of sawdust and chicken litter because "that's what dirty beasts get to live in" (42). Society fears the technology that created clones as something unnatural and unclean. This fear turns to hate when the poor see how Matt, a "beast," is given a life of luxury that they will never know.

About midway through the narrative, Matt escapes the clutches of El Patrón through the help of his bodyguard and closest friend, Tam Lin. Matt wonders how he will survive in the real world if everyone knows that he is a clone, at which point Tam Lin tells him, "No one can tell the difference between a clone and a human. That's because there *isn't* any difference. The idea of clones being inferior is a dirty lie" (245). Indeed, Farmer works throughout the novel to make it abundantly clear that Matt is like any of the other children, if not more kindhearted than most. The story manages to explore the complexities of finding identity in a world where "what it means to be human has never been more flexible, manipulated or in question" (Ostry 221). Elaine Ostry believes that these kinds of narratives are imperative for young adults, despite the seemingly difficult subject matter, because it reflects the posthuman age that could very well be their future. Indeed, "the trope that all young adult literature has in common is the search for identity" (224), so young adult readers might be the most prepared to interact with these sorts of issues.

While *The House of the Scorpion* deals with futuristic posthuman ideals, it also draws inspiration from and interacts with religions of the past. "If Farmer wants to explore what we

consider human today, and reconsider what we will consider human tomorrow, then she must come to grips with the creation myths that so deeply underscore what it means to be human at all" (Kerr 104). Throughout the novel Farmer references Catholicism and the Bible, drawing comparison between Matt's unnatural birth and the stories of Genesis. At one point in the novel, Matt attempts to attend a Catholic service but is scolded by the priest, who calls him an "unbaptized limb of Satan" (159). The church and society as a whole have a stigma against clones, believing them to be abominations that are no better than animals. Despite being rebuffed from a local church, Matt continues to explore religion with the aid of his friend, Mariá. She tells him the unfortunate "truth" of her church. "You don't have a soul, so you can't be baptized. All animals are like that. I think it's unfair and sometimes I don't believe it" (159). Like Shusterman, Farmer juxtaposes two very different views on religion. The church as a whole seems cold and removed, but the members of the church are filled with kindness and hope for a deity that represents goodness. Readers are again given the opportunity to see both the merits and the downfalls that come from religion, once again showing that YA dystopian novels are not afraid to broach "the last taboo."

Continuing with Genesis imagery, *The House of the Scorpion* also explores the dynamics between creator and creation. Matt learns about his existence as a clone but believes that he has a purpose other than offering his organs to his "original," the crime lord known as El Patrón. Matt is literally created in the image of his creator. The novel reveals that most people who can afford to create clones inject them with a serum that removes all brain function, essentially creating mindless bodies meant to host organs. However, Matt is given an education and a life of luxury, as the minds of El Patrón's clones are "always left intact" (4). While this led Matt to believe he had another purpose than the typical clone, it was El Patrón's way of justifying his actions. When

the time comes for Matt's surgery, El Patrón tells his clone, "'I created you, Mi Vida, as God created Adam…Without me, you would never have seen a beautiful sunset or smelled the rain approaching on the wind…Mi Vida. You *owe* me" (234-235). This is further confirmed when Matt discovers that he is not the first clone to be raised for the slaughter. "You poor fool. El Patrón had seven other clones exactly like you, each one educated and believing he was going to run the country…" (238). El Patrón wanted all of his clones to live full lives with art and education, for this was the payment that they received in exchange for their organs and lives. It also acts as a means to feed the old man's narcissism. "The patriarch takes immense joy in seeing his younger self growing up" not out of kindness, but "for his own amusement" (Kerr 109). The life is loaned out to the clone but is later reclaimed when needed.

As mentioned previously, the religious faithful are often willing to make sacrifices for their God, their creator, often with the belief that offering a sacrifice will in turn earn God's favor. As artificial beings, are clones then similarly indebted to man, their creators? Like Matt, Kathy and her friends in *Never Let Me Go* do not work jobs or have too many responsibilities outside their role as organ donators. They are given all that they need by some power (the exact funding is never disclosed) but are asked only to do one thing in return. As children the young clones are told by Miss Lucy, "Your lives are set out for you…you'll donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided" (Ishiguro 73). Like many powerful dystopian novels, *The House of the Scorpion* and *Never Let Me Go* are able to take noble ideas like sacrifice and twist them in dark ways. These works explore a twisted societal contract between creators (man) and creation (the clones), and the idea that these people "owe" their lives to their creators. The difference between

these two novels is that Matt revolts against his creator and fights for his own agency, something Kathy is unwilling or unable to do. The YA medical dystopias show young readers that they have the ability to choose. This message is especially powerful for a demographic that often feels powerless in their own lives.

Additionally, the entirety of El Patrón's family, save one, became prideful and believed themselves equal with the gods, creating and taking lives however they saw fit. El Patrón's grandson, El Viejo, is a direct contrast to the rest of the family. While most of the Alacrán family used their wealth to extend their lives to unnatural lengths, El Viejo refused to take the lives of clones. "El Viejo was the only good man in this family…He accepted what God gave him, and when God told him it was time to go, he did" (234). Unlike his grandfather, El Viejo has grown fragile and senile with age, yet Farmer portrays him as a truly noble person.

Nancy Farmer is able to combine the futuristic ideas of post humanism with ancient scripture's creation myth. She introduces readers to moral struggles that may seem foreign but, upon inspection, are all too familiar to many young readers. *The House of the Scorpion* refuses to shy away from the role that religion plays in discussing sacrifice and morality, something that interestingly cannot be said of its "adult" counterparts.

Conclusion

The study of dystopia is the study of potentialities – what might the world look like in the future? How will technological advancements change our perceptions of mortality and what it means to be human? The novels *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* both explore the roles of agency, religion, and sacrifice in a way that is relevant and approachable to young readers. Unfortunately, while the societies in these novels try to benefit as many people as possible, they share an inherent flaw in their methodology: their sacrifices are not their own. As Dennis Keenan

said, a sacrifice is something that needs to be selfless (1). The clones and the unwinds in these stories are stripped of their choice and are thus forced to give their lives for others, creating conflict and division. A potentially utopian ideal of saving and prolonging lives turns dystopic due to the lack of agency, making sacrifice vanity.

Books like *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* show that young adult literature does not lack substance and certainly has literary value. Young readers can learn from characters like Lev and Matt about faith. They can examine the role of sacrifice in their own lives and reflect upon how their own societies function. Characters like Connor show that young readers have a voice that can certainly lead to change. And most importantly: YA medical dystopias invite young adults to view the darkness of society with a lens of optimism. These books unapologetically tackle difficult issues that lead young readers into very dark places. They show the pain and suffering that comes from dystopian societies, societies that have many similarities to our own. They examine the complicated ethics of growing medical technology, ethics that have no easy solution, and invite readers to become involved in the conversation. However, unlike their adult counterparts like *Never Let Me Go*, the medical dystopias explored in YAL often leave on a light that will lead readers back to safety, back to a place of action and hope.

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