

SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF DYSTOPIA IN NEAL SHUSTERMAN'S *UNWIND* SERIES

INTERPRETACIÓN SOCIOLÓGICA DE LA DISTOPIA EN LA SERIE *UNWIND* DE NEAL SHUSTERMAN

Debora Vladimirova Velkova

University of Valencia, Spain

develvla@alumni.uv.es

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0823-5906>

Received October 5 2024 / Revised Version Accepted October 9 2024

How to cite Velkova, Debora. "Sociological Interpretation of Dystopia in Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* Series." *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*, vol. 31, 2024, e8581. <https://doi.org/10.17561/grove.v31.8581>

Abstract

Dystopian literature's capacity to mirror societal fears and ethical issues is especially clear in young adult fiction, where these themes resonate with a generation confronting complex challenges. Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series (2007-2014) is a prime example, delving into the commodification of human life through the controversial practice of unwinding, where teenagers are harvested for their organs. While existing research covers various aspects of the series, the relationship between bodily autonomy and institutional control deserves further exploration. This paper offers an analysis of *Unwind* (2007-2014), focusing on the characters' struggles against societal norms and oppressive systems. Using sociological frameworks, particularly Giddens' Structuration Theory, the discussion examines how the characters' resistance highlights the interplay of power and agency in a dystopian setting.

Keywords: sociological imagination, structuration theory, dystopian literature, social production, social structure.

Resumen

La capacidad de la literatura distópica para reflejar los miedos sociales y los dilemas éticos es especialmente evidente en la ficción juvenil, donde estos temas resuenan con una generación que enfrenta desafíos complejos. La

serie *Unwind* (2007-2014) de Neal Shusterman es un claro ejemplo, ya que profundiza en la cosificación de la vida humana a través de la controvertida práctica del desmembramiento, donde los adolescentes son desarmados para utilizar sus órganos. Aunque la investigación existente aborda diversos aspectos de la serie, la relación entre la autonomía corporal y el control institucional merece una exploración más profunda. Este artículo ofrece un análisis de *Unwind* (2007-2014), centrándose en las luchas de los personajes contra las normas sociales y los sistemas opresivos. Utilizando marcos sociológicos, en particular la Teoría de la Estructuración de Giddens, la discusión examina cómo la resistencia de los personajes destaca la interacción entre poder y agencia en un contexto distópico.

Palabras clave: imaginación sociológica, teoría de la estructuración, literatura distópica, producción social, estructura social.

1. Introduction

Dystopian fiction has long served as a reflection of society's deepest fears, portraying exaggerated versions of political, social, and technological failures. Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series (2007–2014) exemplifies this genre by presenting a future where human life is commodified through the legal process of 'unwinding' in which teenagers are disassembled for their organs. This paper situates *Unwind* within the broader context of dystopian literature such as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *1984* (1949), *Divergent* (2011), *The Maze Runner* (2009), and *Legend* (2011). In *The Hunger Games* (2008), state control is enforced through the ritualized sacrifice of young people in a televised death match, a critique of government overreach similar to *Unwind's* focus on the commodification of human life through organ harvesting. *Divergent* (2011) examines how rigid societal structures define individuals' roles based on predetermined categories, much like *Unwind* critiques societal control over the fate of teenagers. *The Maze Runner* (2009) portrays young people trapped in a labyrinth controlled by an unseen authority, mirroring *Unwind's* themes of surveillance and institutional manipulation. Meanwhile, *Legend* (2011) explores genetic modification and strict social stratification, resonating with *Unwind's* depiction of institutional power and bodily control. Finally, *1984* (1949) provides a foundational exploration of totalitarianism and surveillance, themes that underpin *Unwind's* narrative of institutional oppression and rebellion.

The significance of this topic lies in understanding autonomy and the limits of state control, resonating with ongoing ethical and political

debates about reproductive rights, personal freedoms, and surveillance in the modern world. By framing the narrative within dystopian fiction, Shusterman critiques the mechanisms of power that dehumanize individuals for the sake of societal order. This paper hypothesizes that the *Unwind* series (2007-2014) presents a dynamic interaction between societal structures and individual agency, where characters are both constrained by and actively resist their dystopian environment. The central research questions guiding this analysis are: How does *Unwind* depict the tension between individual agency and societal control? In what ways do the characters' actions challenge or reinforce the oppressive social structures they navigate? How do sociological concepts of power, agency, and social reproduction inform the characters' resistance?

The *Unwind* series (2007-2014) is set in a chilling dystopian future where a civil war over reproductive rights leads to the "Bill of Life," a law that allows parents to retroactively "abort" their teenage children by having them 'unwound'. In this process, teens are surgically disassembled, and their organs and body parts are harvested for transplantation, ensuring that they technically "live on" in others. The story follows three teens—Connor, Risa, and Lev—each marked for unwinding for different reasons: rebellion, lack of resources, and religious duty. As they flee the system, they confront not only their society's dehumanizing practices but also their sense of self-worth and survival. Shusterman explores the moral and psychological complexities of a world where life can be legally fragmented, raising profound ethical questions about individual rights, freedom, and what it means to be truly "alive."

This paper argues that Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series (2007–2014) illustrates the tension between individual autonomy and societal control, as characters resist the oppressive structures that dictate their fates. Using Giddens' Structuration Theory, this analysis will demonstrate how the characters' actions challenge these structures, highlighting the interplay between personal agency and institutional power. The analysis will explore how societal structures enforce unwinding and institutional control, as well as the various resistance mechanisms exhibited by the characters in response to these oppressive forces. By utilizing a close reading approach, this study aims to contribute to the discussion of how dystopian literature can offer insight into real-world social dynamics, particularly the tension between individual autonomy and institutional authority.

2. Dystopian literature and sociology

Apocalyptic imagery can be traced as far back as 1000 BC in Cohn's analysis of societal decay, particularly in *The Prophecies of Nefertiti* (Cohn 54), which critiques the disorder and crime overtaking Egyptian society: "the traditional social hierarchy and traditional social and familial bonds have disintegrated: (...) the great no longer rule the land" (Cohn 54). The Greek term *apokalypsis* means "unveiling," or revealing humankind's fate (Cohn 163). Dystopian works are deeply rooted in such grim environments, and a pivotal moment in modern society can be considered the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda against the United States. This event not only transformed American politics and society but also reshaped social perceptions of danger (Baccolini and Moylan 24). Budakov noted that the term 'dystopia' initially appeared in *Utopia: Or, Apollo's Golden Days* by Younger in 1747 as *dustopia*, referring to an unhappy place: "Unhappy life! Scarce known to Fame; / DUSTOPIA was its flighted name," which later evolved into 'utopia' (Budakov 86). The term resurfaced in 1868 during an address by John Stuart Mill in the British Parliament, where he described proponents of certain British policies as "cacotopians" or "dys-topians," critiquing them as unfavorable for practical implementation (Mill 248). However, Negley and Patrick observed that 'dystopia' was often framed as the opposite of 'eutopia' (ideal society), with a satirical connotation (Negley and Patrick 291). In 1970, Marcuse argued that claims of the "end of utopia" were historically and intellectually tied to the concept of dystopia (Marcuse 15). He contended that the transformation of society into a dystopia was plausible, marking an end to utopia, and further claimed that technological and environmental changes could break continuity with history, suggesting a stark division between a free society and an unfree civilization, effectively reducing prior history to prehistory (Marcuse 62). For Marcuse, utopia could only emerge through this radical break with the past, when a social reform initiative defies natural principles (Marcuse 63). He also highlighted the emergence of new human needs, which, for many in capitalist societies, no longer included freedom as a vital necessity (Marcuse 65). The aftermath of totalitarianism brought further scrutiny of dystopia by thinkers like Karl Popper. In 1950, Popper, drawing on the work of historian Jacob Talmon, asserted that the utopian drive is essentially dystopian, as it often involves attempts to create a superior society through harsh behavior control, ultimately leading to a police state (Popper 57). The dystopian subgenre in American literature gained prominence during social crises like the Pullman

Strikes and the Haymarket Affair, reflecting growing disillusionment with utopian ideals like equality, the abolition of private property, and faith in technology. These works critiqued the notion of human perfectibility, instead portraying societies where equality under tyrannical rule still fell short of being just or humane (Burgos Mascarell and Martínez López 37).

Sociological imagination, a term coined by C. Wright Mills, refers to the ability of individuals to understand how their personal experiences fit within broader social and historical contexts, thereby helping them better understand themselves (Mills 5). According to Brewer, two key points are crucial for understanding Mills' view of society: first, there is a continuum between private and public life, with both constantly influencing one another; as a result, individual problems can become societal issues and vice versa. Second, sociology should be used to break down the barriers between personal and social life to prevent personal decisions from harming others (Brewer 319). Seeger and Davison-Vecchione argue that dystopian fiction, unlike utopian fiction, is grounded in empirical social reality, reflecting the interplay between individual life and its social environment (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 5). Bauman, in his analysis of Orwell's *1984*, described it as "an inventory of the fears and apprehensions which haunted modernity during its heavy stage" (Bauman 26). Dystopian fiction reflects the principles of sociological imagination in two ways: by connecting literary characters to significant historical events, allowing readers to see the broader societal implications, and by encouraging readers to apply these insights to their own lives, prompting an understanding of the individual-society relationship (Mills 5). Therefore, dystopian fiction serves as a bridge between phenomenology and the historical context of a given society.

3. Antony Giddens's Theory - Structuration Theory

Giddens developed the theory of structuration to address the dualism in sociology, focusing on the interplay between agents and structures. This theory posits that subjects and structures influence one another through social practices enacted by individuals using their knowledge and tools in everyday interactions. Agents unintentionally create new forms of social life by redistributing rules. A key aspect of Giddens's work is the duality of structure, emphasizing the interaction between structure and action rather than merely explaining how human actions are constrained by social institutions like education and religion. He introduces double hermeneutics, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between social actors

and the systems they create. Rooted in Marxist praxis, Giddens argues that individuals can change their lifestyles and environments through social production. He cites Marx's idea that people create their history under existing circumstances. Hermeneutics, or the interpretation of knowledge within a society, is crucial for understanding how agents perceive actions. Giddens distinguishes between "structure" and "structures." First, laws are not the only entities involved in the production and reproduction of social systems, but also resources. However, to define what 'structures' are, we must look at institutions. It must be remembered that agents produce the structural properties. Rules and resources are based on the production and reproduction of social actions and, simultaneously, are the means of reproduction of the system. To fully grasp Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, it is essential to contextualize his ideas within the broader sociological framework established by key theorists such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Michel Foucault, who each offer critical perspectives that enhance our understanding of the interplay between agency and structure.

Max Weber's analysis complements Giddens by introducing the concept of rationalization, emphasizing how modern societies are shaped by bureaucratic structures that can constrain individual agency through formal rules (Weber 78). While Giddens underscores the dynamic interplay between agents and structures, Weber's notion of the "iron cage" highlights how individuals may become trapped in these rational systems, limiting their freedom. Durkheim offers another perspective through his concept of social facts, asserting that these facts exist independently of individuals and impose constraints on behavior, which contrasts Giddens's emphasis on the flexibility of social structures (Durkheim 15). Durkheim's analysis of collective consciousness demonstrates how shared norms and values create stability within societies, reinforcing the idea that certain structures persist regardless of individual agency.

In contrast to Giddens's focus on agency, Michel Foucault's theory of power provides a more critical lens, emphasizing the pervasive influence of power within social systems. In works like *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduces the concept of disciplinary power, which controls individuals through surveillance and normalization (Foucault 170). This power is embedded in institutions and daily practices, effectively constraining individual actions even as they seem to operate freely within society. Foucault's idea of biopolitics further expands this notion, showing how entire populations are regulated through social institutions and policies

(Foucault 141). Where Giddens emphasizes the ability of agents to influence social structures, Foucault reveals the often-hidden mechanisms that limit this agency, offering a stark contrast to Giddens's more optimistic view of the agent's role in societal transformation. Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu adds depth to this discussion with his concept of habitus, which explores how social agents internalize the norms, values, and practices of their environments (Bourdieu 83). These internalized patterns guide behavior and perceptions, often unconsciously reinforcing existing social hierarchies. While Giddens focuses on the dynamic process of interaction between structure and agency, Bourdieu's theory illustrates how these internalized dispositions contribute to the reproduction of social structures.

The interplay of these theories creates a nuanced understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, acknowledging both the transformative potential of social practices and the constraints imposed by societal power dynamics and internalized social norms. Through this framework, we can better understand the complexities of social life, particularly in the context of contemporary challenges to individual autonomy.

4. A sociological approach to dystopia in *Unwind*

One central theme of the *Unwind* series (2007-2014) revolves around social production and reproduction, particularly through unwinding. This practice involves the dissection of teenagers and the transplantation of their body parts to other recipients, effectively 'recycling' them to serve others' needs. Such commodification mirrors the dehumanization of youth within the dystopian society. Applying sociological imagination to this narrative highlights how unwinding symbolizes the societal cost of maintaining existing power structures and underscores the connections between personal experiences and larger social forces. The characters' struggles for survival and autonomy reflect the wider social issue of an authoritarian government exerting control through a brutal unwinding system, reducing individuals to mere spare parts for societal benefit. Their acts of rebellion illustrate the reciprocal relationship between personal decisions and overarching societal structures—a core element in the sociological analysis of *Unwind* (2007-2014). This invites readers to reflect on how societal norms and structures influence and constrain individual choices.

The *Unwind* series (2007-2014) also provides a compelling lens for understanding social structure and structuration. The dystopian world is

marked by a rigid hierarchical structure, with institutions like the Juvenile Authority wielding tremendous power over individuals' lives. However, the existence of black-market networks and underground resistance illustrates how social structures are continually challenged through human agency. Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration posits that individual actions can reshape social structures, exemplified by characters like Connor and Risa, who disrupt existing power dynamics by resisting unwinding and exposing systemic injustices. This aligns with Giddens' idea that social structures are not static but constantly evolving due to individual actions.

Moreover, the unwinds are positioned as expendable resources, stigmatized by society, and excluded from the norm. They face systematic isolation, creating an atmosphere of prejudice and discrimination. The narrative explores how various groups are positioned with one another, particularly those in power and those marginalized. Through sociological imagination, readers gain insight into how societal categorizations and expectations shape the characters' identities and interactions, prompting reflection on how perceptions and biases influence individuals' lives and opportunities.

5. Social production and reproduction in *Unwind*

Powerful institutions like the Juvenile Authority and Proactive Citizenry exert significant control over the characters' lives, dictating the rules they must follow. The characters' interpretations of these structures and their attempts to navigate and resist them highlight the dynamic interplay between social structures and individual agency. Reproduction serves as a mechanism of control, where the government exerts authority over life through unwinding. The legal system in *Unwind* reduces individuals to mechanical entities, stripping away autonomy and creating a future where humans are treated as programmable resources. The absence of societal resistance highlights the erosion of personal freedoms, painting a "bright" future where reproductive rights are systematically ignored. The novel critiques how unchecked state power can dehumanize individuals, reducing them to mere resources while denying their dignity.

The concept of unwinding mirrors real-world ethical dilemmas surrounding reproductive technologies, such as organ transplantation and abortion. Some view unwinding as ethical, believing it allows fragmented lives to benefit others. This justification parallels arguments for organ transplantation, where the act of saving lives can overshadow concerns

about consent. The act of being unwound profoundly affects personal identity, challenging notions of ownership and selfhood. As individuals are fragmented and their parts shared, their identities become dispersed, destabilizing the concept of personhood. Characters facing this fate are stripped of agency, as their bodies are redefined as replaceable parts. Additionally, Shusterman's depiction of market-driven logic critiques the ethics of treating human life as a commodity. By comparing bodies to products, the novel prompts reflection on how capitalist systems can exploit individuals, reducing them to tools for profit. The unwound bodies serve as a metaphor for real-world exploitation, questioning whether economic value should dictate the worth of human life. Through these themes, Shusterman challenges readers to consider the moral complexities surrounding reproductive rights, identity, and the consequences of a society that prioritizes state control over individual dignity.

5.1 Legal and Social Control

The Bill of Life governs much of the society in Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series, enacting legislation that controls the very essence of life and death. The Bill dictates that a child's life is inviolable from conception until the age of thirteen, but between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, parents can retroactively "abort" their children through a process called unwinding (Shusterman *Unwind* 1). This legal framework epitomizes the power of institutional control, allowing the government to regulate life and death within a morally dubious system. Unwinding enables the harvesting of organs and body parts from the "unwound" child, all while maintaining the child's life in a distributed form.

The Juvenile Authority is the primary institution tasked with enforcing these laws. Their role goes beyond simple enforcement; they regulate the unwinding process and manage the fate of children whose parents or the state have chosen unwinding. The Juvey-cops, agents of the Juvenile Authority, are responsible for apprehending these teenagers, making them literal enforcers of the state's control over individual destinies (Shusterman *Unwind* 9). Though typically equipped with tranquilizer guns, they resort to lethal force in critical moments, such as during the Happy Jack Harvest Camp incident and the Graveyard standoff, where institutional power was threatened by resistance (Shusterman *Unwind* 127). These extreme measures underscore how legal control is closely tied to social control, with the state using violence to maintain order and compliance.

In *UnWholly* (2012), the reader learns that the Juvenile Authority is secretly controlled by Proactive Citizenry, a corporate entity that operates behind the scenes, manipulating social structures to its benefit (Shusterman *UnWholly* 76). This hidden power structure suggests that the laws supporting unwinding are not just about maintaining social order, but about maintaining a profit-driven agenda that exploits human life. By codifying these practices into law, the government not only controls the bodies of its citizens but also perpetuates a system that commodifies human life. The constant surveillance of potential Unwinds further reinforces this control. Teenagers at risk of being unwound are placed under strict monitoring, ensuring that they cannot escape or resist their fate. This is vividly depicted when Connor, Risa, and Lev—the protagonists—are constantly under the watchful eyes of authorities. In one scene, aware of the police presence nearby, Connor skillfully orchestrates a ruse to blend in with students, showing the extreme caution required in a society where any misstep can lead to capture (Shusterman *UnWholly* 60). The role of surveillance in maintaining institutional power is a recurring theme throughout the series, emphasizing the tension between individual freedom and institutional authority.

While the legal framework appears absolute, resistance emerges within the system. Characters like Connor, Risa, and groups like the Whollies challenge these laws by advocating for change. The term “Whollies” is a deliberate rejection of the negative labels imposed by society, such as “AWOL” or “Unwind.” As Hayden explains, the Whollies reclaim their identity to resist unwinding and fight the system that dehumanizes them (Shusterman *UnWholly* 76). This theme of resistance highlights the tension between institutional control and personal autonomy. It demonstrates how individuals and collectives can challenge and resist oppressive laws, even when faced with overwhelming institutional power.

Ultimately, the Bill of Life and the Juvenile Authority represent the broader societal structure in the *Unwind* series, where the government exerts immense control over personal choices. The tension between social control and individual resistance reflects the ethical and moral dilemmas that arise when institutions prioritize legislation over human rights (Shusterman *UnDivided* 23). As the protagonists navigate this oppressive world, their actions expose the cracks in the system and offer a glimmer of hope for autonomy in a world dominated by legal and social control.

5.2 Harvest Camps

Harvest camps, often referred to as unwinding facilities or the Chop Shop by the Unwinds, are sanctioned clinics where individuals designated for unwinding are prepared for the process. Each camp has a unique atmosphere, yet all are designed to create a deceptive sense of positivity for the youth undergoing unwinding. These facilities are typically situated in picturesque locations, intended to project an image of comfort and reassurance, with meticulously maintained grounds resembling those of a resort. Bright pastel colors dominate the décor, intentionally avoiding red to prevent associations with anger, aggression, and blood.

Several harvest camps are mentioned throughout the series, each with its distinct characteristics. These include Twin Lakes Harvest Camp, Happy Jack Harvest Camp in Arizona, Wood Hollow Harvest Camp, Cold Springs Harvest Camp in Nevada, MoonCrater Harvest Camp in Idaho, Horse Creek Harvest Camp in Oklahoma, Pensacola Shores Harvest Camp, Mousetail Divisional Academy in Tennessee, and the Lady Lucrezia, a mobile camp aboard an Antonov AN-225 Mriya plane. Happy Jack Harvest Camp, located on a pine-covered ridge in northern Arizona, epitomizes the ideal harvest camp. It offers calming forest views that transition to the stunning red mountains of Sedona to the west. The boys' dormitory is painted light blue with green accents, while the girls' dormitory features lavender with pink accents. Staff members wear comfortable shorts and Hawaiian shirts, except for the surgeons in the medical unit, who don sunshine yellow scrubs. A barbed-wire fence, concealed behind a hibiscus hedge, secures the camp, creating an illusion of safety.

Unwinds see buses arriving at the front gate daily but do not witness the departing trucks, which leave via a back route. The typical stay for an Unwind is about three weeks, although this duration varies based on blood type and market demand. Similar to life outside, the exact timing of one's unwinding is unknown; however, exceptions exist. For instance, members of the band who play atop the Chop Shop when new arrivals are brought in may stay until they are nearly eighteen. The Unwinds are divided into 'tithes' and 'terribles,' with tithes engaging in different activities and not undergoing the physical and aptitude tests that terribles do. Tithes wear white silk outfits, in stark contrast to the blue and pink uniforms worn by terribles, fostering animosity from the terribles towards the tithes.

Throughout the series, several characters actively resist and defy the laws surrounding unwinding, challenging the flaws in the legislation and engaging

in acts of rebellion against the established system. Their actions reflect a rejection of the legitimacy of these laws and a desire for social change. Connor, Risa, and Lev question the moral and ethical implications of the Bill of Life, viewing it as an unjust law that violates human rights. For instance, young members of society, such as Risa, are acutely aware of the law's wrongful application: "Risa can't listen anymore, so she shuts them up by saying what they don't have the courage to say themselves. 'I am being unwound.' [...] 'Change?' yells Risa, 'What do you mean 'change'? Dying is a little bit more than a change'" (Shusterman *Unwind* 23). Moreover, the Juvenile Authority's presence in harvest camps underscores its role in the entire lifecycle of an unwind, reinforcing the control and surveillance that permeates these facilities. The harvest camps epitomize the Juvenile Authority's oppressive control, presenting unwinding as a commodified process masked by deceptive positivity. While these facilities create an illusion of safety, they highlight the ethical dilemmas of a society that prioritizes legislative power over human rights. The divisions between tithes and terribles foster resentment, fueling the resistance led by characters like Connor, Risa, and Lev. Their defiance against unjust laws reveals the potential for change, emphasizing the power of collective action against institutional oppression.

5.3 Control and Surveillance

Teenagers who are at risk of being unwound may be placed under strict monitoring and surveillance to prevent them from escaping or evading capture. This constant oversight reinforces the authority of the institution and the power dynamics within the society depicted in the series.

In Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series (2007-2014), surveillance is a pervasive element that shapes the behavior of characters, particularly those on the run like Connor, Risa, and Lev. The constant threat of being monitored by authorities forces them to meticulously manage their actions, often engaging in deceptive behavior to avoid capture. This theme is vividly illustrated in a scene where the characters, aware of a nearby police presence, carefully stage a ruse to blend in with other students. As a school bus approaches, Connor, fully conscious of the potential surveillance, initiates the act by saying, "C'mon, you guys—we're gonna miss the bus again!" He deliberately keeps his back to the police car to avoid drawing attention, a calculated move that underscores the tension of living under constant watch (Shusterman *Unwind* 60). In that moment, Lev's exaggerated attempt to "act natural," with "wide eyes and arms stiff by his side," highlights the psychological

impact of surveillance on individuals, particularly how it affects their sense of safety and normalcy (Shusterman *Unwind* 60). The scene illustrates how pervasive monitoring forces individuals to continuously perform normalcy to evade detection, demonstrating the oppressive nature of the surveillance state within the series.

Surveillance influencing survival strategies is particularly evident in the way the Admiral manages the Graveyard, a sanctuary for runaway Unwinds. The constant threat of external surveillance necessitates strict rules and covert behavior to avoid detection. As described in the text, while “spy satellites can catch the activity,” distinguishing the movements of Unwinds from other data is less certain, providing a thin veil of security (Shusterman *Unwind* 197). This situation underscores the precarious nature of their refuge and the ongoing need to remain hidden.

“You arrived here by necessity. You stay here by choice. From way up there you can’t see that some of those grounded jets are occupied. Thirty-three, to be exact. Spy satellites can catch the activity, but catching it and noticing it are two different things. CIA data analysts have far more pressing things to look for than a band of refugee Unwinds. This is what the Admiral’s counting on—but just in case, the rules in the Graveyard are strict. All activity takes place in the fuselage or under the wings, unless it’s absolutely necessary to go out into the open. The heat helps enforce the edict” (Shusterman *Unwind* 197).

This statement underscores the deliberate concealment efforts undertaken to avoid detection. Using grounded jets as living quarters for the Unwinds serves as a physical barrier against aerial surveillance, showcasing a strategic adaptation to the surveillance environment. Moreover, the passage notes that “the heat helps enforce the edict,” indicating that environmental factors are leveraged to maintain control and reduce exposure (Shusterman *Unwind* 197). This blend of natural and regulatory measures underscores the comprehensive nature of surveillance and control within the series. It reflects how societies under intense surveillance often resort to extreme measures to maintain autonomy and evade detection, illustrating the constant tension between visibility and invisibility, where the Unwinds’ survival depends on their ability to navigate and manipulate the surveillance systems around them.

In *UnWholly* (2012), the role of surveillance extends into the characters’ resistance efforts, highlighting how both sides of the conflict utilize technology and strategic oversight. The passage describes various roles within the resistance group, including Trace, who is the “head of security”

and Connor's "strategic adviser," indicating a structured approach to defense and intelligence within their ranks (Shusterman *UnWholly* 95). This setup underscores the importance of surveillance not only as a tool of oppression by authorities but also as a means of survival and resistance. Trace, always the first to arrive, is head of security and Connor's strategic adviser. Hayden is the master of the ComBom, running computer and radio communications, monitoring the outside world, police frequencies, and all communication with the resistance. He also has a radio station for the Whollies, with a signal that barely reaches half a mile. He calls it "Radio Free Hayden." There's a big bruiser of a girl everyone calls Bam, who is in charge of food services. Her real name is Bambi, but anyone who calls her ends up being treated by Risa in the infirmary. There's Drake, a rural kid who is the Sustainability Boss, which is just a fancy term for the guy who runs the farm, or the Green Aisle, a concept entirely developed by Connor. The food produced there has often alleviated hunger pangs when ADR food shipments have been too small or nonexistent (Shusterman *UnWholly* 95).

This intricate system of internal surveillance and external monitoring is vital for the resistance's sustainability. The passage illustrates a broader commentary on the dual nature of surveillance: while it can be a tool of control, it also serves as a necessary means of organization and protection against oppressive forces. In the context of *UnWholly* (2012), the use of surveillance by both the authorities and the resistance highlights the pervasive nature of monitoring in this dystopian world, where both sides leverage it for strategic advantage. This dual-use scenario emphasizes the complex dynamics of power and control in the series, where surveillance is a critical component of the struggle for autonomy and safety.

5.4 Institutional Resistance

Despite the overwhelming power held by institutions like the Juvenile Authority, resistance arises from individuals and organized groups who reject the moral and ethical foundation of unwinding. The underground organization known as the Whollies, first introduced in *UnWholly* (2012), symbolizes this resistance. The Whollies actively disrupt the unwinding system by providing refuge for runaway Unwinds, helping them evade capture, and fostering a spirit of defiance against institutional control (Shusterman *UnWholly* 76). Their existence showcases how individuals can resist even the most entrenched power structures, reflecting the tension between societal order and individual freedom.

The Whollies are not just a band of rebels—they are a collective whose identity is rooted in resisting the labels imposed on them by society. As Hayden explains, “AWOLs” and “Unwinds” are derogatory terms meant to strip them of agency. By calling themselves Whollies, they reclaim their humanity and their right to exist on their own terms (Shusterman *UnWholly* 76). This act of naming is significant; it represents a form of linguistic and social resistance against the institutional power that seeks to define them by their fate.

In *UnDivided* (2014), this resistance reaches its peak as the movement against the Juvenile Authority grows. Characters like Connor, Risa, and Hayden take center stage in organizing large-scale actions to disrupt the unwinding system. One of the most pivotal moments is the planned rally on the National Mall, symbolizing a collective stand against unwinding laws. Hayden’s rallying cry illustrates the urgency of their fight “Whether we have ten in our uprising, or ten thousand, we need to make our voices heard. Or the next time someone hears your voice, it might be in someone else’s throat” (Shusterman *UnDivided* 285). This moment reflects the increasing stakes of their rebellion. The introduction of the Parental Override Bill, which would allow the Juvenile Authority to forcibly unwind children without parental consent, becomes a flashpoint in the narrative. Hayden’s message not only informs the resistance but also galvanizes it, urging everyone to recognize the gravity of the situation and to engage in active opposition. The potential enactment of the Parental Override Bill threatens to solidify the Juvenile Authority’s power, making it imperative for the resistance to act decisively. This episode reflects the broader conflict within the series, where institutional forces seek to maintain control and order at the expense of individual autonomy, and where resistance becomes a necessary means of preserving fundamental human rights. This large-scale resistance highlights the growing momentum against entrenched institutional power, showcasing the possibility of change through collective action. Hayden warns that if the resistance fails, the government will gain even more power to control the lives of teenagers “Friends, it is with deep, deep regret that I inform you that the Parental Override Bill has just been passed by the House of Representatives and is now on its way to the Senate... if we don’t do something to stop it” (Shusterman *UnDivided* 284).

The resistance, however, is not just about organized movements like the Whollies. It is also deeply personal for characters like Lev and Miracolina, whose evolving views on religion and sacrifice play a crucial role in their

defiance. Lev, raised as a Tithe, initially believes that his unwinding is a religious duty, but as he gains more life experience, his beliefs shift. He begins to see the unwinding system as fundamentally unjust and orchestrates a plan to blow up Happy Jack Harvest Camp, marking a significant turning point in his personal resistance (Shusterman *Unwind* 237, 283).

Miracolina, another character deeply influenced by religious ideology, also undergoes a transformation. Born to be unwound in order to save her brother, she initially believes that her sacrifice is a righteous act. However, over time, she comes to reject this belief, realizing that her life has value beyond the role her parents assigned to her (Shusterman *UnWholly* 31). These characters illustrate the personal stakes involved in resisting institutional power, as they challenge the beliefs and systems that once defined their lives.

In the end, the series portrays resistance not just as a collective movement, but as a deeply individual journey. Whether through organized rebellion or personal awakening, the characters in the *Unwind* series embody the struggle against a society that prioritizes legislative and institutional power over human dignity. By the conclusion of *UnDivided*, the movement against unwinding has gained significant momentum, showcasing the potential for change when individuals and groups come together to challenge unjust systems (Shusterman *UnDivided* 285).

5.5. Hermeneutics

In terms of ecclesiastical hermeneutics, the first glimpses of religion in *Unwind* can be found when Lev's Tithing party is celebrated (Shusterman *Unwind* 30). At this time, we learn about a religious group called Tithe, whose core belief is that parents send their children to be unwound in an attempt to fulfill their fate and duty in God's eyes. Within the Tithe community, children are constantly reminded that they are special and that their sole purpose is to serve God: "You're special," his parents always told him. "Your life will be to serve God and mankind" (Shusterman *Unwind* 31).

Throughout the series, we witness the evolution of Lev's beliefs. Initially, he compares himself to the biblical figure of Moses: "When Lev talks about religion and the stroked baby to Risa and Connor when they saved a baby: 'Moses,' says Lev, 'Moses was put in a basket in the Nile and was found by Pharaoh's daughter. He was the first stroked baby, and look what happened to him!'" (Shusterman *Unwind* 72). However, his perspective changes over time due to his life experiences outside of his home and his parents' manipulation. During his stay at the Graveyard, Lev's vision of life transforms, as sacrificing

himself in the name of God is no longer his primary goal. Consequently, he devises an elaborate plan to leave the Graveyard and blow up Happy Jack Harvest Camp (Shusterman *Unwind* 237, 283).

In the harvest camps, religion is intertwined with the social and spatial distribution of children. For instance, Tithes and Terribles are treated differently, as they engage in different activities and wear distinct clothing. Tithes are assigned white silk outfits, while Terribles wear blue and pink uniforms, leading the other members of the camps to regard Terribles as lower class and Tithes as royalty. Religion and sacrifice are unmistakably related, and several characters exemplify this connection. For example, Miracolina is heavily influenced by her parents' beliefs, but by the end of the fourth book, her perspective on life and religion diverges from her upbringing. At the beginning of her storyline, we learn that she was born to save her brother from a degenerative disease by donating her organs, which means her life is inevitably devoted to sacrifice (Shusterman *Unwind* 31). In a heated argument with her history teacher, she confidently asserts that once she has been sacrificed, her soul will go into the hands of God. However, her teacher challenges her beliefs, noting that her sect, a variation of Catholicism, considers suicide a mortal sin, which is contradictory (Shusterman *Unwind* 212).

From her teacher's arguments, we learn that the Tithe religious community is rooted in the initiatives of wealthy families and corporate leaders aiming to promote unwinding as a calculated strategy for profit (Shusterman *UnWholly* 206). Similarly, Bella's family brainwashed her into believing they had established an accord with God, claiming that without her, her brother Mateo would not survive (Shusterman *UnWholly* 169). The concept of false agency plays a crucial role in understanding Tithe's actions; they believe they can choose the date of their unwinding, which leads them to think this decision has always been theirs: "That's why they let us choose. So it's our decision, not anyone else's" (Shusterman *UnWholly* 39).

In the creation of Camus, Roberta ensures he has a spiritual connection with religion since his body consists of parts from children of various faiths. Consequently, he envisions his first communion, bar mitzvah, and bismillah ceremony, recalling relatives associated with the Greek Orthodox Church and traditional Buddhist funerals. He can pray in nine different languages and to various gods, including Jesus, Allah, Yahweh, and Vishnu (Shusterman *UnSouled* 218-219). However, the Catholic Church does not fully endorse his creation, and they do not hold him accountable for

either his actions or his existence, as they lack a clear position on unwinding (Shusterman *UnSouled* 219).

Shusterman deftly intertwines religious themes with the ethical complexities of unwinding, offering profound commentary on how faith and doctrine can shape individual identities and societal norms. Characters such as Lev and Miracolina illustrate the transformative journey from religious indoctrination to personal enlightenment, questioning the morality of using faith to justify such a controversial practice. The series challenges readers to reflect on the broader implications of religious and ethical beliefs in contemporary society, advocating for a deeper understanding of human agency and moral responsibility.

6. Conclusion

The growing popularity of young adult dystopian fiction has fostered critical analysis across various sociological, ethical, and political dimensions. Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series, depicting a future where human life is commodified through unwinding, explores the tension between individual agency and societal control. This study applies Giddens' Structuration Theory to examine how characters resist the rigid societal structures they inhabit while being shaped by them. *Unwind* illustrates this tension through the characters' ongoing struggle against institutional forces like the Juvenile Authority and Proactive Citizenry. While Connor, Risa, and Lev attempt to assert their agency by resisting unwinding, their actions are constrained by a system designed to maintain power over individuals.

Thus, *Unwind* effectively portrays a dystopian society where personal autonomy is restricted and occasionally fleetingly reclaimed. The characters' resistance—manifested through escape, rebellion, and survival—challenges oppressive social structures but achieves only partial success. Although they disrupt certain elements of the system by exposing injustices, their victories are often limited by the entrenched nature of institutional control. This dynamic reflects Giddens' notion that social structures are not static but continuously shaped by human agency, even as these structures exert immense power over individuals.

The *Unwind* series offers a profound commentary on the pervasive control wielded by institutions such as the Juvenile Authority and Proactive Citizenry, exploring how societal norms and laws manipulate individual destinies. Through the characters' struggles with identity, morality, and self-worth, Shusterman illustrates the tension between individual agency and

institutional power. The series' portrayal of surveillance, control, and rebellion reflects a broader commentary on the oppressive nature of such systems, where even the most resistant individuals must navigate a complex web of authority. By examining these structures through Giddens' Structuration Theory, we see that the characters are not passive victims but active agents who resist and challenge societal norms. The Juvenile Authority, Proactive Citizenry, and the mechanisms of unwinding serve as social structures that marginalize individuals while being reproduced through routine practices. However, the characters' resistance—through escape, rebellion, or creating alternative power structures—highlights the complex interplay between agency and structure.

Shusterman's incorporation of religious themes, particularly through characters like Lev and Miracolina, deepens the ethical and moral complexities of unwinding. Their journeys from indoctrination to personal enlightenment challenge readers to critically assess the role of faith and societal expectations in shaping human actions. Ultimately, *Unwind* serves as a powerful reflection on the tension between autonomy and control, urging readers to contemplate ethical implications of governance, institutional power, and human agency within dystopian and real-world contexts.

Finally, sociological concepts of power, agency, and social reproduction are integral to the characters' rebellion. The societal structures in *Unwind*, from legal frameworks to religious justifications, act as mechanisms of control but also create conditions for individual acts of defiance. Characters like Connor and Risa embody this duality; their personal decisions challenge the system while revealing its vulnerabilities. Yet, the persistence of unwinding and the survival of institutions like the Juvenile Authority underscores the enduring strength of societal power and the complexities of enacting true social change. Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* series illustrates the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal control. The characters' struggles against dehumanizing practices offer a compelling commentary on the potential for resistance within oppressive systems, while the limitations of their victories underscore the pervasive influence of institutional power. Future interdisciplinary research could expand on this analysis by examining how *Unwind* relates to real-world discussions about bodily autonomy, particularly regarding organ donation and reproductive rights. Additionally, studies could investigate how young adult dystopian fiction shapes societal attitudes toward government authority and individual freedom.

References

- Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Routledge, 2003.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Retrotopia*. Polity, 2017.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Brewer, John D. "Imagining the Sociological Imagination: The Biographical Context of a Sociological Classic." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2004, pp. 317–333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00022.x>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2023.
- Budakov, V. M. "Dystopia: An Earlier Eighteenth-Century Use." *Notes and Queries*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2010, pp. 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjp235>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2023.
- Burgos Mascarell, Andrea, and Miguel Martínez López. *El Ocaso de 'Koinonia': La Distopía en la Literatura Norteamericana*. Universitat de València, 2024.
- Cohn, Norman. *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press, 2008.
- Dashner, James. *The Maze Runner*. Delacorte Press, 2009.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Free Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995.
- Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Polity Press, 1984.
- Lu, Marie. *Legend*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*. Penguin, 1970.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Edited by John M. Robson et al., Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965–1991.
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 1959.

- Negley, Glenn, and J. Max Patrick. *The Quest for Utopia*. Henry Schuman, 1952.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. Harvill Secker, 1949.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton University Press, 1950.
- Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2011.
- Seeger, Sean, and Daniel Davison-Vecchione. "Dystopian Literature and the Sociological Imagination." *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 155, no. 1, 2019, pp. 45–63. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513619888664>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2023.
- Shusterman, Neal. *Unwind*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007.
- Shusterman, Neal. *UnWholly*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2012.
- Shusterman, Neal. *UnSouled*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2013.
- Shusterman, Neal. *UnDivided*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2014.
- Talmon, Jacob. *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. Secker & Warburg, 1960.
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press, 1978.
- Younge, Lewis Henry. *Utopia: Or, Apollo's Golden Days*. George Faulkner, 1747.