

## **Transhumanism, Language Education and Young Adult Literature: Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* Trilogy**

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### **Abstract**

Transhumanism is a future perspective that seeks to constantly enhance humans through technology. Forecasting that the speed of technological development will drastically increase in the upcoming decades, its proponents believe that the transition from humans to posthumans is looming on the horizon. Such posthuman beings, whether they are cyborgs, artificial life-forms, or biologically improved humans, would have considerably longer life spans, improved cognitive abilities and more control over their emotions. As transhumanist concerns are highly pertinent to the future of humankind, it is of importance that these issues are also addressed in (language) education. This article, which argues in favour of language education practices that emphasize identity construction, relationship building, creativity, (self-)critical reflection and engagement with complex sociocultural issues, aims to illustrate how young adult literature can be harnessed to invite critical engagement with transhumanist ideas.

While young adult fiction predominantly addresses the negative effects of biotechnology and artificial intelligence on humankind, more recent publications also draw attention to their enabling qualities. This is the intention behind Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy, which the author deliberately conceived as a utopia. By analysing this book series, the authors demonstrate that these novels give students ample opportunity to acquaint themselves with and critically discuss transhumanist and posthuman concerns. In addition, engagement with these novels invites reflection upon the meaning of life, the political organization of future worlds, and the dystopian underbelly of a utopia, which on closer inspection seems less desirable than what one might assume.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism; artificial intelligence; young adult literature; language education; teaching literature; Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy

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### Introduction

Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* comprises three young adult novels set in a future where humans have become potentially immortal and where an AI (artificial intelligence) rules over planet Earth. The scenario portrayed in the series addresses central transhumanist concerns. Transhumanism is a future perspective, which so far has received little attention in language education. However, its concerns are highly pertinent to the future of humankind, and its repercussions may alter language learning practices. We argue that transhumanist perspectives, therefore, should be a central topic in (language) education, both as course content and as a shaping influence on language learning. As regards course content, young adult literature has repeatedly engaged with transhumanist issues. As a concrete example, Shusterman's trilogy addresses important philosophical, ethical, political, and technology-related topics. It invites debate on how people want to live their lives in the future and what the role of technology will be in future life-worlds.

As a recently developed approach to life, some explanation is in place to introduce the notion of transhumanism; therefore, its relationship with humanism, its central characteristics and its different manifestations will be discussed at the outset. Next, language education will serve as a perspective to reflect upon transhumanist implications for language teaching and learning. (Young adult) literature is viewed as an integral component of language education, and its diverse contributions to transhumanist debates will be briefly addressed. In a concluding section with a

practical orientation, the focus is on Shusterman's trilogy with particular attention given to the first novel in the series, *Scythe* (2016).

### **Transhumanism**

Transhumanism is a future perspective for human and posthuman existence, where human life-forms are constantly enhanced through technological innovation. It is inclusive of different approaches, cutting across academic disciplines both in the humanities and sciences, plus finding expression in non-academic fields such as politics, the arts, literature, film, and computer games. In the following, the concept will be introduced by showing its overlap with Enlightenment humanism and by discussing its technological and ideological concerns. Moreover, different versions of transhumanism will be highlighted, one of them aiming for ultimately replacing humans by sentient machines.

### **Humanism and transhumanism**

Enlightenment humanism believes in the centrality of humans on planet Earth and beyond. Yuval Harari (2017, p. 223) states that 'whereas traditionally the great cosmic plan gave meaning to the life of humans, humanism reverses the roles and expects the experiences of humans to give meaning to the cosmos'. Moreover, Enlightenment humanism is a secular philosophy looking for rational explanation. Other hallmarks concern the belief that humans have a free will, and that they should aim for better control over natural danger and their bestial instincts (Hughes, 2004, p. 165; Loh, 2018, p. 19). In addition, Loh (2018, pp. 18-20) refers to the notion of 'humanitas', the altruistic and philanthropic potential of humans. She adds that for humanists cultivating this potential is an important but formidable task.

Transhumanists have repeatedly emphasized their affinity to Enlightenment ideals. For example, James Hughes (2004, p. 165) argues that 'transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural "afterlife"'. Similarly, Max More (2013, p. 10) states that 'transhumanism continues to champion the core of the Enlightenment ideas and ideals – rationality and scientific method, individual rights, the possibility and desirability of progress, the overcoming of superstition and authoritarianism, and the search for new forms of governance – while revising and refining them in the light of new

knowledge'. Finally, transhumanists have reaffirmed the centrality of humans and their technological creations on this planet.

However, there are also significant differences between Enlightenment humanism and transhumanist perspectives. While for Enlightenment humanists like Peter Strasser (2020, p. 10) human qualities such as idealism, empathy or love include a spiritual, machine-independent dimension, some transhumanists see human existence as reducible to information patterns, and thus as technologically reproducible (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 5). While for Enlightenment humanism education marks the path towards progress, transhumanists turn to technology to enhance human abilities and correct human deficiencies. Thus, while human nature remains a given in humanist philosophy, the *trans* in transhumanism indicates the desire to overcome human biological and cognitive limitations through technology. Such enhancement can lead to the creation of new life-forms, who may well replace humans altogether (Moravec, 2000, p. 4).

### **Transhumanism: Technological, ethical, and ideological concerns**

Transhumanism was first introduced in the early 1990s. For Max More (2013, p. 3), one of its founding fathers, transhumanism brings together technological and ethical concerns. On the one hand, transhumanism aims for accelerating human evolution through new technologies. On the other hand, More's definition includes an ethical dimension as he argues in favour of taking measures to prevent the misuse of technological innovation.

In ideological terms, James Hughes (2004, pp. 202-03, 217) distinguishes between libertarian and democratic transhumanist perspectives. While libertarians believe in the free market and minimal regulation of technological innovation, democrats have made a case for substantial government intervention in the interest of social equality, democratic governance, and protection against technological abuse. Some major libertarians have shifted opinion in recent years. For example, Max More, who used to champion a libertarian sociopolitical programme, now argues in favour of an 'open society' informed by democratic principles (More, 2013, p. 5).

The aims shared by libertarians and democrats include the promotion of enhancement technologies which allow for longer life spans, higher intelligence levels, more happiness and better control over human and environmental deficiencies. In its extreme form, transhumanists go as far as wishing to rewrite the human genome to abolish suffering and to extinguish humanity's destructive impulses (Pearce, 2007). In more moderate forms, transhumanism is discussed as a

continuation of already happening bodily and mental modification. In other words, health-promoting interventions such as artificial hips, implants like pacemakers, robot arms or the use of performance-enhancing drugs represent first steps towards creating transhuman, cyborg-like beings.

Considering the transhumanists' belief that the speed of such development will dramatically increase in the decades to come, they foresee a future where humans will ultimately become posthuman beings who would then no longer be comparable to humans as we know them. Nick Bostrom (2013, p. 29) in his essay 'Why I want to be a Posthuman when I grow up' refers to 'three central capacities: healthspan, cognition and emotion', and according to his definition 'a posthuman being [is] one who has at least one of these capacities in a degree unattainable by any current human being unaided by new technology'.

### **Heading for the posthuman**

The posthuman as the direction for future development is a perspective welcomed in transhumanist philosophy (Nick Bostrom) and in AI- and robotics research (Hans Moravec, Raymond Kurzweil). Leading transhumanist scientists like Raymond Kurzweil and Hans Moravec believe in the exponential rise of technological progress, which before long will make machines independent of their human and transhuman engineers. A central concept here is that of the *Singularity*, which refers to the moment when machines no longer need humans to self-develop, and where the direction of their development can no longer be foreseen (Kurzweil, 2005, pp. 7-9). In this scenario machines replace humans, and thus may become their evolutionary successors.

Indeed, there is controversy about whether transhumanism and the posthuman should be grouped together. Janina Loh (2018, p. 31), for example, thinks otherwise, and uses the term *technological posthumanism* for posthuman life-forms. According to her, transhumanism is focussed on technologically enhanced humans, while technological posthumanists aim for sentient machines ultimately replacing humans. Moreover, Loh stresses that transhumanists by and large believe in individuality, while technological posthumanists follow a collectivist agenda, where in its most radical manifestations 'technology will eradicate people's differences', making irrelevant the need 'for multiple languages, for multiple cultures ... even for multiple personal meanings' (Istvan, 2019, p. 164). Contrary to Loh's distinction, the editors of *The Transhumanist*

*Reader* (More & Vita-More, 2013) have subsumed the trans- and the posthuman under the banner of transhumanism. We have followed their approach because the trans- and posthuman share important characteristics, namely the valorisation of technology and of humans and their successors as key players on planet Earth and beyond.

Having mentioned Loh's typology, another posthumanist concept should be addressed, which Loh (2018, p. 31) introduces as *critical posthumanism*, a radically different perspective opposed to Enlightenment humanism, transhumanism and technological posthumanism. Critical posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti (2013) or Katherine Hayles (1999) radically decentre humans, reject market-capitalism and argue in favour of a postcolonial political (world-)order. Because of our transhumanist focus this perspective is excluded from our further discussion.

### **Transhumanism and Language Education**

For language education, engagement with transhumanism has two main foci. First, as a 'hot' issue it merits attention as topical content. Secondly, new technologies also impact language learning and teaching. For language education such development can undermine some of its key principles, which include capabilities permitting engaged, creative and (self-)critical use of symbolic systems in the interest of cosmopolitan conviviality and democratic society-building.

#### **Language education**

The term *language education* refers to approaches where language learning is interlinked with sociocultural issues. A key concept here is that of 'symbolic competence' as suggested by Claire Kramersch (2009, pp. 199-201). Such an approach draws attention to '... the construction of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, values through the use of symbolic forms' (Kramersch, 2009, p. 7). This concept is based on a semiotic definition of culture, where culture is synonymous with the sign systems and signifying practices used by humans to give meaning to their life-worlds (Delanoy, 2020, pp. 19-20). Language, being one of these sign systems, therefore, is inextricably interwoven with all the factors impacting the constitution of human life-worlds, technological innovation being one of them.

Transhumanists argue that machines are likely to replace humans in the majority of jobs in the next 20-40 years (Moravec, 1999, p. 6; Istvan, 2019, pp. 163-64). For Harari (2017, p. 317), teaching will also be affected by such development, and he argues that digital teachers can

surpass humans in terms of patience, availability, and individualized feedback. However, transhumanists also refer to limitations of existing machines that may well remain insurmountable in the decades to come. Hans Moravec (1997, p. 8) states that in terms of interaction, humans still are far superior to intelligent machines. Max Tegmark (2018, p. 133) argues along similar lines, and in his career advice for young people he suggests focussing on areas where 'people, unpredictability and creativity' play a central role. Yuval Harari (2017, p. 107) adds that since machines have no feelings, 'sensation and desire' will remain the domain of humans in the foreseeable future. Claire Kramsch (2009, p. 191) makes a case for educational practices that '... offer precisely what the computer cannot do, namely, reflect on its own symbolic and virtual realities'.

The concept of language education advocated in this article builds on language acquisition theories with a strong focus on the sociocultural implications of language use. For example, David Block (2003, p. 64) and Bonny Norton (2013, p. 50) criticize approaches reducing language learning to a mere exchange of information about an already familiar world. In a similar vein, Claire Kramsch (2009, p. 189) argues that 'traditionally, language education has emphasized the referential or instrumental uses of language and the way it expresses conventional meanings'. Such an approach robs language and language learning of its power to co-shape new life-forms. Such an approach is too static for a 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), where change is the norm, and where new solutions have to be found to unprecedented environmental, economic and sociocultural challenges. In a digitalized world, therefore, language learning as trivial information exchange may well render humans as language teachers unnecessary. Viewed in this light, the future of the profession may well hinge on a notion like that of symbolic competence, permitting creative and critical engagement with human life-worlds.

As language educators, we welcome technological advances permitting identity construction, relationship building and complex problem solving across borders as long as they serve a democratic, critical, cosmopolitan, and ecological agenda. For example, online communication platforms like *Microsoft Teams*, *Zoom* or *Big Blue Button* permit translocal conferences, thus opening up new opportunities for global conviviality. Moreover, judicious use of self-study programmes like *Duolingo* can support self-directed language learning and serve a multilingual agenda by stimulating interest in a variety of minority languages. On the other hand, we are critical of practices where new media contribute to the creation of echo chambers and

social division. In addition, programmes like *Duolingo* are informed by a language learning philosophy where sociocultural issues and critical thinking are excluded, and where a simple logic of right or wrong plus carrot and stick is used to structure learning processes. In contrast, we argue in favour of language education practices with emphases on identity construction, relationship building, creativity, (self-)critical reflection and engagement with complex sociocultural issues. Such an approach requires the use of learning materials permitting such engagement, literature being one of them.

### **Literature as a resource for language education**

Our understanding of literature goes beyond the printed word and canonized texts, thus including oral forms, songs, films, music videos, literature for children, hypertext literature, or computer games (Delanoy, 2007, pp. 285-89). Such a wide-ranging concept is in line with Kramsch's notion of symbolic competence, with its focus on multiple, interacting sign systems. Moreover, this concept builds on reader response criticism and its notion of aesthetic communication. Such a perspective implies playful affective and cognitive engagement with secondary worlds, where emotional involvement is accompanied by (self-)critical reflection (Bredella, 1996, pp. 2-5; Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 27, 37). Such a perspective gives literature a prominent place in (language) education because of literature's depiction of concrete life-worlds and complex content, and its invitation to feel and think beyond the accepted and given (Delanoy, 2018, pp. 142-48). Finally, such a concept is humanist in approach with its belief in the power of education to further critical thinking, solidarity and responsibility towards others and the environment. Let us add that this humanism subscribes to the principles of critical cosmopolitan schools, thus going beyond Western-European models (Delanoy, in press).

In literature the depiction of trans- and posthuman worlds has long been the domain of science fiction in its various forms (novels, films, music videos, computer games, etc.). The notion of posthuman life forms, for example, is not a recent invention, as can be seen in the case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where a hybrid being combining human and animal parts is created with the help of what was then state-of-art technology (Broglia, 2017, p. 36; Yaszek & Ellis, 2017, p. 72). This being turns out to be an uncontrollable monster, and Dr Frankenstein's attempts to play God are criticized in the novel.

Indeed, a negative portrayal of trans- and posthuman life-forms is common stock in literature. According to recent criticism (Lagrandeur, 2017, p. 22; Smelik, 2017, p. 110-11), there is a long list of films offering such portrayal. Lagrandeur, for example, refers to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Matrix* and the *Terminator* series and argues that in all of these films the cyborg or robot becomes a threat to humans and is finally outsmarted by human superiority. The same can be said of children's and young adult literature, where, according to Victoria Flanagan (2014, p. 2), 'an anti-technology representational paradigm ... has prevailed since the 1980s'. Young adult novels like Lois Lowry's classic *The Giver* (1993) or the more recent *The Uglies* (2005) by Scott Westerfield would fall into this paradigm with their negative portrayal of new technologies and their defence of the individual as the main corrective. However, Flanagan also refers to recent texts, where writers offer a less lopsided perspective, by showing potentialities of technological innovation for personal and sociocultural development. Two of the young adult novels discussed by her are Mary E. Pearson's *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* (2009) and Robin Wasserman's *Skinned* (2008). In both cases young women suffer fatal accidents which can be repaired with non-human materials (biogel, a mechanical body), brain-boosters and mind-downloading. As cyborgs, the protagonists must re-build and re-negotiate their personal and sociocultural selves, thus developing new creative and critical abilities.

With Flanagan (2014, p. 186) we believe that a technophobe approach to transhumanism is insufficient. If new life forms and machines are only presented as a threat, their potential benefits are blended out. Moreover, such a focus does not do justice to the range of perspectives offered by texts with a transhumanist and posthuman focus. Inspired by Flanagan, therefore, we started looking for new young adult novels with a utopian rather than a dystopian approach.

In our search we came across Neal Shusterman's *The Arc of a Scythe* trilogy, including the young adult novels *Scythe* (2016), *Thunderhead* (2018) and *The Toll* (2019). In a 2019 interview with the author, Shusterman explicitly states that with this series he wishes to break with the dystopian approach. When he began with the first novel (*Scythe*), his idea was to start with a vision where 'the world goes right, where we get all the things we want' (Shusterman, 2019). In the following, Shusterman's approach will be examined more closely. This includes debate on whether this utopia can really offer a desirable perspective for future worlds.

### Neil Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* Trilogy

In the following, the focus is on Neil Shusterman's the *Arc of a Scythe* series. First, the transhumanist and posthuman aspects included in the trilogy will be investigated. Secondly, the trilogy's potential for English language education will be discussed with particular attention to the first novel in the series – *Scythe*.

#### Transhumanist and posthuman aspects in the *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy

The *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy, which takes place approximately 200 to 300 years into the future, is based on the premise that a benevolent artificial intelligence called the Thunderhead has managed to solve nearly all of humanity's problems, which include poverty, climate change and mortality. People can now 'turn the corner', repeatedly resetting to a younger age, and after deadly accidents or incidents, they are brought back to life in revival centres. Furthermore, both physical and mental suffering have been eliminated through the manipulation of biochemistry. 'The Thunderhead gave us a perfect world', one of the characters writes, adding that 'the utopia that our ancestors could only dream of is our reality' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 62).

And yet, in this perfect world that we can only dream of, a certain quota of people still must die every year, in order to balance population growth. This gave rise to a new profession and institution called the 'Scythedom', an elitist club whose lethal members ('scythes') enjoy a privileged, nearly royal status in society. Burdened with the task of selecting and 'gleaning' (killing) innocent people, they are said to be enlightened and compassionate, upholding high moral and ethical standards. Their profession is viewed as a vital and sacred service to humanity, a form of charity even, and consequentially, they are above the law and separate from the rest, sometimes referring to themselves as the 'new royalty' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 308).

The *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy thus introduces us to a world with two completely separate branches of government, one with a monopoly on life, the other with a monopoly on death. First, there is the Thunderhead, the incorruptible, benevolent, and all-knowing artificial intelligence, which has but one purpose: to sustain humanity. Ruling the globe in a dictatorial manner, with complete surveillance and its own police force at its disposal, any form of democracy is absent. However, the immortals of Shusterman's world do not seek the right to cast a vote. After all, the Thunderhead rules purely in their interest, and provides them with indefinite lives of pleasure and

unconcern. Moreover, due to its compassionate ear and excellent parental skills, many develop a close, personal relationship with the Thunderhead.

This AI was originally created by humans but can now self-develop without human intervention. In other words, Kurzweil's notion of the Singularity has become a reality here. Furthermore, the *Arc of a Scythe* series introduces a specific scenario for what might occur to humanity if an artificial intelligence has potentially unlimited power. Tegmark (2018, pp. 166-68) outlines twelve possible scenarios, one of them being the benevolent dictator, in which all forms of suffering are eliminated, and a 'single benevolent superintelligence runs the world and enforces strict rules designed to maximize its model of human happiness' (2018, p. 168). Of course, from an educational viewpoint committed to democratic rule this raises the question of such a system's desirability. Contrary to our position, this is a political system in which humans have no stake whatsoever.

The second pillar of government is formed by the 'Scythedom', an institution created and run by humans, plus existing outside the Thunderhead's sphere of influence. Scythes have their own law consisting of ten highly simplistic 'Scythe Commandments', the first one being: 'Thou shalt kill', and the last one: 'Thou shalt be beholden to no laws beyond these' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 75). They must attend conclave three times a year and wear rings which, when kissed, provide others with immunity from gleaning for one year. Accustomed to wearing their colourful robes wherever they go, they are easily recognizable in public where their appearance evokes fear and awe. From a historical perspective, they bear a rather close resemblance to the mythological Grim Reaper. In medieval fairy tales, Death was 'a figure in hooded black cloak, his hand gripping a large scythe' (Harari, 2017, p. 25). According to transhumanist thinking, humans die due to technical problems, such as heart failure or malignant cell mutation, to which technical solutions can be found (Harari, 2017, pp. 25-6). In the *Arc of a Scythe*, the Thunderhead has found all the technical solutions and humans no longer die due to technical glitches, but in order to prevent overpopulation, the Grim Reapers have returned, bringing the medieval fairy tales to life in this futuristic utopia.

The question remains, however, whether Shusterman's world is in fact a utopia since the majority of its immortal inhabitants seem to live meaningless and passive lives. It is undeniably true that, equipped with at least two 'posthuman capacities' (Bostrom, 2013, p. 28), they can avoid the 'pain and despair that so seasoned the Age of Mortality' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 347).

However, they cannot experience true joy or happiness either. These posthumans may live forever, but they are such an incurious people that one may wonder whether they are living at all. Nevertheless, in the manner of their thinking and behaviour, the humans of *Scythe* are not all that different from present-day mortals, perhaps because the third posthuman capacity, cognition, which includes memory and reasoning, has not changed significantly. One of the characters, Scythe Curie, seems to suggest that people are still in a transitional phase when she writes that 'we are still so close to the Age of Mortality'. She then wonders whether with significantly longer lifespans, boredom may become unbearable, thus giving humans even 'less of a reason to live limitless lives' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 152). The *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy thus also examines the consequences of posthuman capacities and raises the question what it means to be human in the first place.

### Teaching the *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy

Although the novels of the trilogy – *Scythe*, *Thunderhead*, and *The Toll* – are connected and build on one another in terms of plot, the first novel can be read as a standalone, providing a degree of closure in the end. As the title suggests, it focuses strongly on the scythedom, and it is through the eyes of two young adults, Citra and Rowan, that the reader is invited into this exclusive, elitist institution. The only way of becoming a scythe is through an apprenticeship, and *Scythe* follows two such young apprentices, both chosen by an established scythe, as they learn the profession and are honed in the ways of *gleaning*. While attending conclave, they soon learn that not all scythes subscribe to a high moral code, and that there exists a power struggle within the scythedom between those who glean with compassion (the Old Guard) and those who glean for sport (the New Guard).

Furthermore, the book includes journal entries by renowned and established scythes who reflect on their profession. Especially the entries by Old Guard Scythe Curie provide a rich resource for teaching as she frequently asks ethical questions, compares the age of mortality to her age, and reflects on the meaning of life and on some of the consequences of trans- and posthumanism, such as the disappearance of artistic endeavour, the loss of ambition and of belief systems linked to an afterlife. For instance, she writes: 'I think about religion, and how, once we became our own saviors, our own gods, most faiths become irrelevant. What must it have been like to believe in something greater than oneself?' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 126). Many of these

journal entries and the questions raised in them provide promising material for student discussions and essays.

We consider the first part of the trilogy as particularly suitable for language and literature teaching. First, its protagonists, Rowan and Citra, are relatable, ethical and likable, and, therefore, one could argue, fine role models for young adults. As Shusterman depicts the world of *Scythe* through these two characters, he can effectively weave in themes that are relevant to young adult readers, such as coming of age and first love. Secondly, the book is a page-turner; it has a fast-moving plot, which includes star-crossed lovers and a clear-cut struggle between two opposing forces. Undoubtedly, with its 443 pages, the length of the book may pose a challenge. However, due to Shusterman's accessible language and the division of the text into five parts, these obstacles can be overcome, especially when combined with reading tasks and activities, permitting a part-by-part approach.

The same, however, cannot be said, in our opinion, about the other two parts of the trilogy. *Thunderhead* has 515 pages and *The Toll* 631, but more problematic is that especially the last novel introduces a new cast of characters, to some extent moving away from the two main protagonists, and combines many different, rather complicated plot lines. *Thunderhead*, it should be noted, does provide many possibilities for teaching. As the title indicates, this novel focuses on the artificial intelligence and gives insight into how it runs the world. Just like the scythes share their thoughts through their journals, the reader now gains access to the mind of the Thunderhead, and these entries invite discussion of topical issues, amongst them that of a global world order.

For instance, in one of the entries, the Thunderhead explains how 'much of the world has become homogeneous' as a consequence of a 'unified planet' (Shusterman, 2018, p. 145). This comment links back to Istvan's claim that technology will erase people's differences, removing the need for diversity in languages and cultures (Istvan, 2019, p. 164). However, understanding the 'need for variety and social innovation', the Thunderhead has established on its homogeneous planet seven Charter Regions 'with laws and customs different from those of the rest of the world'. In Nepal, for example, employment has been abolished, which 'has resulted in a substantial rise in altruistic and charitable endeavors' (Shusterman, 2018, p. 145). Consequently, in Nepal 'social status is not measured by wealth, but by one's compassion and selflessness' (p. 145). In this particular entry, the Thunderhead gives the readers material to reflect on different

political and social systems. Other entries examine its leadership and the decisions that were taken as regards surveillance, the welfare system and social homogeneity/heterogeneity. Moreover, the highly self-aware AI, which is a paragon of humanistic philanthropy, reflects on its own nature and being, and compares and contrasts itself to human nature and God.

In the light of a critical cosmopolitanism, the novels' understanding of multiculturalism, however, does not go far enough. While such a cosmopolitanism welcomes diversity, it also encourages sociocultural interpenetration (Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2014, p. 13) and 'interconnectivity' (Delanty, 2009, p. 188), thus going beyond the mere co-existence of different life-forms. Moreover, with its setting (North America), its youth cult, its predilection for sensationalism and stardom, the dominant lifestyle in the *Arc of a Scythe* series is Western in approach, while a critical cosmopolitanism aims for de-centring Western models (Chakrabarty, 2008). To our mind, such a critical cosmopolitanism, which widely overlaps with critical concepts of global citizenship education (Andreotti, 2014), provides an important sociocultural foundation for future-relevant practices of language education (Delanoy, in press). The novels, therefore, fall short of such a perspective in their outlook on global conviviality.

Finally, *Thunderhead* does not provide closure like *Scythe* but ends with a cliff-hanger. Of course, this may also have positive consequences. Students may, for instance, be motivated to read the final part, which would expose them to another 600 pages of the English language. Nonetheless, for reasons already explained, engagement with the first novel as a class reader is suggested by the authors of this article. As for *Thunderhead*, the AI's entries can be added as mandatory reading, while it remains optional to explore the actual book chapters.

### Teaching *Scythe*

Suggesting *Scythe* as a shared read in the classroom, of course, depends on the students' level of language proficiency. Indeed, the learners we have in mind are upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English. Yet, the novel is rich in potential for scaffolding the reading process. For example, some of the 40 journal entries at the beginning of each chapter can be explored before the actual reading. Here, the students can be given a set of entries to choose from, the number depending on the learners' language proficiency and interest. Or the students are invited to browse through the text themselves and to self-select some entries before discussing them in pairs and groups. As a follow-up, all the five entries of the first part (*Robe and Ring*) can be read by

everybody to build up motivation to engage with the full text (70 pages). Then, some of the other four parts could be skimmed with only some bits read intensively before a more detailed exploration. Furthermore, to avoid excessive demands, students may not have to read all the parts. Finally, all classroom discussions can be scaffolded through modified interaction, with language input provided by the teacher and the more proficient learners.

As stated above, content-wise the novel provides ample opportunities for addressing a wide range of themes and topics. As pre-reading work, students can be invited to imagine a utopian and dystopian future where new technologies play a central role. While reading the book, they are then asked to pay attention to utopian and dystopian elements in the story and argue whether the world portrayed is desirable or not. For instance, students may have to consider whether immortality is a utopian or dystopian element or perhaps both. Furthermore, *Scythe* can be used as a resource for discussions about human happiness plus the purpose and meaning of life. In various places, the novel addresses these issues by reflecting on the consequences of gaining immortality and biochemical happiness, suggesting that through eliminating death and suffering life loses some of its meaning and turns humans into beings with nothing to aspire to. It is in fact primarily the scythes, the sole distributors of death, who still find purpose in their lives, which is one of the reasons why Rowan agrees to an apprenticeship. He is furthermore attracted to the idea of acquiring membership in a small, elitist club as he feels insignificant, having been born in the middle of a large family spanning many generations, another consequence of immortality. In the narrator's words: 'He was loved, but only as one among a group of other beloved things' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 53).

Thus, through the lives of the novel's characters, students can be encouraged to think about the causes of their own happiness. Is it buying new clothes, being on social media, playing sports, getting a good grade, engaging creatively, solving a problem? And what does boredom mean to them and how do they handle it? In line with transhumanist theories, the immortals in *Scythe* have gained happiness through the manipulation of human biochemistry, solely exposing themselves to pleasant sensations. However, many psychological and philosophical theories claim that – paradoxically – the pursuit of increasingly more happiness is actually the cause of people's unhappiness and that accepting and being unbothered by negative sensations is the key to eliminating suffering (Harari, 2017, p. 34-48). Therefore, transhumanist theories about happiness can be compared and contrasted to other concepts in classroom discussions.

Thirdly, *Scythe* is useful in teaching ethics and morality. In many ways, *Scythe* presents a world of binaries: the incorruptible Thunderhead stands in stark contrast to the corruptible Scythedom, which is again divided into the Old and the New Guard with a clear distinction between truly honourable and despicable scythes. However, on closer inspection, the borders between good and evil also begin to blur when Rowan has to join the ranks of the villain (Scythe Goddard). Furthermore, there is a cruelty that can be found within even the most enlightened of scythes. In the first scene of the novel, Scythe Faraday visits Citra's home and she and her family assume that one of them is going to be gleaned. After making them serve him dinner, Faraday grabs the largest, sharpest knife in the kitchen, and only finally reveals that he will glean the neighbour. 'But she was not yet home,' he says, 'and I was hungry' (Shusterman, 2016, p. 21). What is intended as a humorous comment can also be interpreted as unethical and a gratuitous abuse of power. This also raises the question whether scythes should be bound to laws beyond their ten commandments.

To conclude, engagement with *Scythe* gives students ample opportunity to acquaint themselves with and critically discuss transhumanist and posthuman concerns such as immortality, the biochemical regulation of sensations, and the creation of super-intelligent plus sentient machines. At the same time, it invites reflection upon the meaning of life, the grey areas between a seemingly clear opposition between good and evil, the political organization of future worlds, and the dystopian underbelly of a utopia, where life for the majority of the population has no deeper meaning. The narrative make-up of *Scythe* permits gradual exploration of the text. While *Scythe* has been suggested as a shared read, the other two novels in the trilogy have been recommended as optional reading. Finally, whether Shusterman has succeeded in creating a utopian transhumanist scenario remains doubtful. The loss of purpose and democracy seem to us too a high a price to pay for potentially limitless lifespans and lives bereft of physical pain. In addition, the dominance of a Western lifestyle flies in the face of a critical cosmopolitanism, which to our mind should be included in future-relevant perspectives for language education.

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