

How do the authors of “Dry” portray the impact of an environmental crisis
in the behavior of people?

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Foreword

There is no doubt that nowadays climate change is having a dramatic and probably irreversible impact on all aspects of our life. From our diet to our workplace and even how we relate socially, the environmental crisis is leading to a complete change in our mentality and lifestyle.

Acknowledging the central role played by the global environmental situation in our society, the focus of the present extended essay is to explore how the dystopian novel “Dry” by Neal and Jarrod Shusterman reflects the changes triggered by a dramatic drought at multiple levels, paying special attention to how this natural disaster affects family life in their day-to-day relations and how this challenges society by questioning collective social responsibility to deal with such an unexpected catastrophe.

Regarding its structure, this essay is integrated by eight main sections. First, a contextualization of the environmental crises that affect contemporary society will be made. Secondly, the authors of the novel will be introduced briefly before focusing on the dystopian genre to which the novel “Dry” belongs. In the next section, it will be explained how the genre choice fits with the purpose and target audience of the book, young adults. Subsequently, a summary of the book and analysis of the characters will follow. Then the focus will shift toward the authors’ style and format choices to build the characters and show the impact that the drought crisis has on them. Finally, the extended essay will conclude with a reflection upon how this literary genre can help us imagine a possible path to face the current environmental disasters.

Keywords: Behavior, drought, dystopia, environment, Shusterman.

1. Environmental context

It is no secret that the environmental situation continues to get worse everyday and that the natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more dangerous, as climate change advances and the weather becomes more extreme than it ever was.

Climate change is a natural cycle of our planet and it cannot be stopped, but it can be slowed down. However, the only way to do so is by not destabilizing the environment, and by placing the protection of the environment before our short-term economic interests, something that some governments struggle to do, as they would rather have a successful economic system than contribute to the wellbeing of the planet.

A clear evidence of this wrong management of priorities is that the 21st century is being marked by major environmental disasters, multiple earthquakes, including the 2010 Haiti earthquake that, with a 7.0 magnitude, took the life of over 200,000 people, hurricanes, such as Hurricane Katrina which struck the USA in 2005 destroying everything in its wake, or droughts, such as the biggest water crisis in Somalia in the past 60 years, which started in 2017 (*ACNUR*, 2017).

In a similar way, a recent massive flood in Valencia, Spain, resulted in the deaths of 224 people and extensive property damage. Ultimately, many people lost their financial stability. The inhabitants of Valencia were not warned about the dangers, and although it is unclear who is to blame, one thing is undeniable: these deaths and much of the damage could have been prevented had there been better preparation. This serves as a clear example of how environmental conditions are changing and why we must be prepared for what lies ahead.

It is undeniable that the younger generations are living in a completely different reality to that of previous generations. Judging by the current situation, it is hard to imagine that these problems could be reversed and erased from the future. The novel *Dry*, which will be analyzed in the present extended essay, portrays a dystopian world which in view of the current environmental affairs is not so far away from the world we live in, focusing on younger people's perspectives.

Set in California, which is one of the states in the USA more often hit by severe droughts and without a clear or specific date, the events in *Dry* take place in a not so distant future from us, which allows us to view this novel as a warning for what could happen if we do not change our habits, take environmental problems seriously and try harder to stop climate change.

2. The authors

The authors of the novel, Neal and Jarrod Shusterman, are a father-and-son duo who have written several books together. Among them, we find novels such as *Roxy*, *Gleanings*, *Unbound* and *Dry*. Both writers have published different books both individually or in collaboration with other authors. Neal, a New York Times bestselling author, has written novels like *Scythe*, *Challenger Deep*, thanks to which he was granted the National Book Award for Young People's Literature in 2015 for (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n. d.). As for his

son Jarrod, he has published a book called *Retro* which he co-wrote with his partner Sofia Lapuente.

These two authors typically write their novels with movie adaptations on their minds. For this reason, they usually include very detailed descriptions of the scenes in their novels in order to create more visual effects. As a matter of fact, *Dry* is currently in the process of becoming a movie with *Paramount* and *Game Changer* is expected to become a *Netflix* show.

The vast majority of their work consists of dystopian novels based on different problems that affect the world nowadays. Which is one for the main reasons why their books are so appealing to young adults. Neal and Jarrod Shusterman highlight current issues that will affect our lives in the future. Truth is, the dystopian genre has gained a lot of popularity over this past decade, especially among teenagers, because, unlike older generations, young people are more used to these news about problems, and we have a greater chance to fix, prevent or prepare ourselves for them.

3. The dystopian genre

Cambridge dictionary describes the word dystopia as “*a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened*” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Most dystopias follow the same themes like totalitarianism and oppression, technological control, surveillance and privacy invasion... (Youvan, 2024). Some of these circumstances appear in *Dry*, such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, loss of individualism, exploration of hope and resilience or the manipulation of reality and truth.

Dystopian literature highlights current extreme problems, how they may evolve, and their potential consequences. It encourages readers to think critically and reflect on the future

of the world. As Youvan (2024) states, “*Dystopian narratives offer critical commentary on the human condition and the structures that shape our lives.*” This also prompts readers to reflect on our behavior and the way in which society is structured.

4. Target audience and purpose of the authors

Dry is addressed to middle-grade and young adult readers because it shares the characteristics of common young adult fiction and it tells the story of a group of teenagers, some more rebellious than others, living adventures in a hostile world.

The story is narrated from different teenagers’ points of view and it contains coming of age themes such as discovering who you are, falling in love, challenging authority as in the example of Kelton challenging his parents or Jackie challenging her family and institutions, or standing up for your values and beliefs as Alyssa does.

As a dystopia thought for teenagers, it differs from the adult novels of the same genre. According to Laura Mill, “*the youth-centered versions of dystopia part company with their adult predecessors in some important respects. For one thing, the grownup ones are grimmer (...), Because authors of children’s fiction are “reluctant to depict the extinction of hope within their stories, Sambell writes, they equivocate when it comes to delivering a moral”* (Miller, 2010, p.3). Miller’s point is that whereas adult dystopian novels, like *1984*, depict a hopeless world with the intention of making the reader aware of the future consequences of human behavior if changes are not implemented, dystopian novels for young teenagers, like for example *The Giver*, have a hopeful ending and consequently remedial action is seen not so necessary. This is only partially true in *Dry* because, at the end of the novel, life comes back to normal, yet some remains of the crisis are still visible in society; while some people struggle to move on with their lives, others continue as if nothing had happened. Children’s

dystopias start to look grimmer, because “*for young readers, dystopia isn't a future to be averted; it's a version of what's already happening in the world they inhabit*” (Rothman, 2022).

The main purpose of the novel is to warn us about a crisis that is already happening in many places around the world but we seem to ignore. The reason it is directed towards teenagers is because we can still change, we will be the ones to face the consequences of the actions of the human kind and we not only need to try to help our planet and avoid running out of water, but we need to be prepared for the catastrophic unavoidable crises the world will face in the next few years. Even though we have gone too far, and some of the damage cannot be repaired, we can prepare ourselves for the consequences, giving our society a better chance to survive an environmental crisis.

In this sense, the novel frames itself within a series of modern dystopian novels that address the problem of climate change, teenage and adult fiction, like “*The Ministry for the Future*”, by Kim Stanley Robinson or the post-climate-change novel “*The new Wilderness*” by Diane Cook. In his article *Can Science Fiction wake us up to our climate reality?*, Joshua Rothman asks us these questions “*Is it possible to be reshaped by fiction, so that we can respond more readily to reality?*” and talking about one of these books “*Silent Spring*” by Rachel Carson, says “*The book tries to do what a news report can't. It wants to offer us the experience of crossing the pass before we cross it – to give us a feeling for the routes we might take.*” (Rothman, 2022). That is exactly what *Dry* does, give teenagers a sense of the challenges they might have to face in the future before they become too real for them.

5. Summary of the novel

The story of *Dry* by Neal Shusterman follows the lives of five teenagers over the course of one week during a devastating catastrophe known as the 'Tap-Out' a severe drought that causes all water resources to be cut off. As a result, the inhabitants of California are left without communication, dehydrated, and helpless. The Tap-Out drastically changes their daily lives, forcing them to confront survival in a world where basic resources are no longer available. This event becomes a turning point for the characters, shaping their actions and relationships as they navigate the chaos.

The first character to appear is Alyssa, a highschool student that lives with her parents, her uncle, who they called Basil, her little brother Garret (who is part of the group) and their dog. They have a peculiar family as neighbors, the McCrackens. Kelton McCracken is another one of the five adolescents around whom the novel revolves. His parents seem to be prepared for any catastrophe. Alyssa doesn't seem to trust Kelton at first, but accepts his help when he offers to give them water.

When the drought starts, Alyssa's uncle leaves to take care of his ex-girlfriend and her parents go to the beach to try to get water from the desalination machines the government had placed there, strangely, they never come back. Meanwhile, the McCrackens stay at home and enjoy the water they kept in a tank. Kelton tries to help Alyssa, but his father is extremely selfish and refuses to let anyone access their water. Although his mother feels some kind of empathy towards them, his father imposes himself over her.

The day after Alyssa and Garret's parents leave, the brother and sister decide to go to the beach to look for them accompanied by Kelton. Once they get there, they are shocked to see that the desalination machines had been destroyed, that there were some "bumps" on the beach that could be dead bodies, and that there was no trace of their parents. Later, on their

way back home, they stumbled upon a gang beating an older man for his car and his water. Seeing those events take place, Alyssa tries to defend the man and when she fails, Kelton pulls out his gun but is unable to shoot it. That is the moment Jacqui, a mysterious girl that had seen the scene, appears out of nowhere and manages to get hold of the gun and the old man's car keys. Kelton manages to convince her to take them home promising her antibiotics to treat an infected injury she had.

Back home, the neighbors are starting to become organized to face the crisis. Alyssa decides to attend one of their meetings and takes a few bottles of water to distribute among the neighborhood association, but this decision backfires when the neighbors start fighting for the water and she has to escape leaving Kelton's bag there, which was a clear sign that she got it from the McCrackens. The tragedy unfolds when that same night the neighbors organize a riot to try and take the water from the peculiar family's house. Seeing the imminent threat, Kelton's father grabs his gun to protect his family and himself and accidentally kills his other son, who just happened to be returning home that night. The neighbors start invading the McCrackens' house, which forces the teenagers to leave. While they are leaving, Kelton tries to shoot at his neighbors but, luckily, Alyssa knocks him down with a picture frame before he kills someone.

The group formed by Alyssa, Kelton, Jacqui and Garret run away to Uncle Basil's ex-girlfriend's house to check on him as well as try to find some water. Once they get there they find their uncle, severely dehydrated, and his ex-girlfriend, extremely sick from drinking bacteria-containing water. The group needs Basil's truck, but he had sold it to a boy who lived in a house up the hill in exchange for water. They go there to try to buy the truck back and find yet another teenager that goes by the name of Henry. This kid had been selling a water bottles for outrageous prices and refused to give them the truck at first, but quickly

realized that he was running out of water and electrical power, so he makes a deal with them. Henry united the group in their adventures in exchange for lending them his truck.

The group, now composed of five adolescents, heads out for the shelters that are being set up, hoping they would have water and medicines, but, with no GPS signal, and all the highways blocked off, they get lost. Suddenly, they run into a group of soldiers from the military. The soldiers stop them and find a bag of weed in their car and, since they are all minors, they are taken to an evacuation center and the soldiers confiscate their car and water. The group quickly realizes that if they stay there, they will die, so they manage to get the car and the water and escape.

The next chapters focus on the characters rethinking all the decisions they had taken along the way and reflecting upon their current situation. This overthinking leads to multiple conflicts within the group and threatens its unity while also facing many of the obstacles provoked by the *'Tap-Out'*.

The novel ends with what they call "The new normal". Everything goes back to the way it was previous to the *'Tap-Out'*, water access is restored and Alyssa and Garret's parents come back, apparently, their mom was taken to the hospital and their dad had been sent to jail. However, some things have changed, but not for everyone. Many people have died and while some have become environmentally conscious and have taken drastic measures to save water, others continue ignoring everything that has happened and go on as if it hadn't happened.

6. Characters' analysis

The book is divided into six parts, where the different characters' perspectives are revealed, to show how they perceive the water crisis and the way their age, background and

personalities determine how they act and cope with it. Each of the five members of the group has their own strengths and weaknesses that will be highlighted during the '*Tap-out*'.

The main characters' testimonies are interrupted by snapshots, which are usually short pieces of news around different characters, who, in a way, are directly involved and affected by the water crisis. These snapshots are probably introduced to offer a more objective vision of the problem.

Alyssa Morrow is described as someone who cares very much about her family, but does not trust people easily, which often comes out as stubbornness. However, because of her maturity, she takes a certain leadership role in the group. Her younger brother, **Garrett**, is described as a little kid, and even though he has an active role in all the adventures, his voice is not shared with the readers until the end, probably showing how he has matured during the novel.

Their neighbors are a peculiar family, the McCrackens. **Kelton McCracken** is a central part of the group along with Alyssa and Garrett. Alyssa describes him as a rather introverted person, sometimes egotistical, probably because of the controversial behavior his father has during the crisis.

There are two more characters in the group, **Jacqui Costa** and **Henry**. Both of them are lone wolves; she has no family, friends or home, and is constantly moving from one place to another breaking into people's houses, whereas Henry is a secretive person, the last one to join the group. He seems to be some kind of businessman, even though he is just a teenager, he managed to get amazing deals out of the water he was selling, but took advantage of people in need of water. Overall, Henry is portrayed as a lonely person, who is extremely selfish but intelligent at the same time. In a similar way Jacqui is also described as stubborn and lonely, two qualities that make her weak at teamwork, but brave in dangerous situations.

These qualities are present as both advantages and disadvantages. The novel highlights how they challenge the characters, showing how these traits, though potentially detrimental in normal situations, can become assets during events like the *'Tap-Out'*.

Consider, for example, Jacqui, an independent woman portrayed as fearless yet lonely. It is implied that her lack of parental care forced her to become this way. She often uses her skills for criminal acts, like breaking and entering: *"Add locksmith skills and a keen ability to keep a low profile, and I trip into the lap of luxury on a regular basis."* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.119). Although this ability allows her to live in luxurious homes undetected, it is neither ethical nor without risks (*"Being on my own over the past two years has brought me close to being a victim of human trafficking, and closer to being dead"* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.125)), making it ultimately detrimental. However, when the *'Tap-Out'* unfolds, the concept of ethicality is distorted and Jacqui's distinctive traits suddenly become an advantage to her: *"And then I finally see Jacqui. She's running towards us, And she's carrying the AguaViva box!"* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.231), Jacqui used the ability to keep a low profile she mentioned earlier to sneak the box of water bottles the authorities had taken from the group out of the government facilities.

In contrast to Jacqui's bold independence, Alyssa's deeply rooted mistrust presents its own set of challenges and advantages as the *'Tap-Out'* unfolds. As mentioned earlier, Alyssa is quite mistrustful which can be damaging to her social relationships as it is shown in the early stages of the novel in her relationship with Kelton: *"as if this whole water crisis excites him in some sick way (...) I'm still skeptical about allowing people to help"* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.23) , she didn't trust him at first, and if she hadn't been forced to do so by the crisis, she would have never got to know him and realize she liked him and their relationship would have never existed. Nevertheless, this inevitable sense of mistrust can be beneficial for her, as seen on page 132, where Alyssa and Garret encounter their dog at their

home not knowing how much he had changed: *“behind us the dogs have started barking, and I can’t tell if they’re pushing us into the street, or just chasing us from their territory. (...) That Kingston, a dog that under any other circumstance would have been loyal to the end, made an instinctive choice for his own survival.”* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.132), Alyssa quickly realizes that they won’t be able to trust their dog anymore and pulls her brother away from the dogs, saving him from a certain death.

Building on this theme, Kelton faces his own unique struggles, with traits that initially appear harmful but ultimately prove invaluable during the *‘Tap-Out’*.

Earlier, the growth of the character Garrett was mentioned, however, he is not the only one who changes, every character undergoes a transformation of their personality as a result of the extreme situations they face. The characters are forced to become adults overnight.

As a matter of fact, one of the reasons why they have to play an adult role is the disappearance of actual adults. On one hand, Alyssa and Garret’s parents suddenly go missing after leaving their home in search of water. On the other hand, although Kelton’s parents are prepared for the situation, their obsession and selfishness have forced their son to fend for himself, and find a replacement for his family in the group. Jaqui and Henry are two enigmatic characters surrounded by a cloud of mystery who appear out of nowhere, maybe a projection of what Alyssa, Garret and Kelton might end up being: selfish, deceiving, and ruthless.

This premonition may be disturbing, but it makes a very clear statement, a warning about how life shapes a teenagers personality. It is clear that this novel is directed toward adolescents, especially the ones who have never been in a situation where their life was at risk. We, teenagers, tend to take things like water for granted, because we have always had it, and we never question what the world would be like if we ran out of it. Water is a finite resource; it can and will deplete over time.

The novel criticizes modern societal values and shows our main weaknesses as a community, selfishness and ignorance. However, it also shows the way these traits might be beneficial for us in a world where everyone is willing to do anything to survive. It is obvious that Henry and Jacqui are quite selfish, but the book leads us to believe that their personality has been affected by a lack of parental care, loneliness, and the need for survival.

7. Formal Aspects, building character through style choices

James Wood in his book *How fiction works* says: “*The common idea is that there is a contrast between reliable narration (third person omniscience) and unreliable narration (the unreliable first-person narrator, who knows less about himself than the reader eventually does)* (Wood, 2009). *Dry* is narrated mainly in the first person. Each of the five members of the group narrates the events from their perspective. This means that the reader has a bunch of unreliable narrations that complement each other, creating a kaleidoscopic view of the story.

For instance, we get an idea of how Kelton is by what he says and thinks and the choices he makes, but our image of him is complemented by what other members of the group think of him. We first meet Kelton through Alyssa’s voice and she described him as:

your not-so-typical red-headed geek next door. Most kids of his strangeness are content killing zombies with an Xbox controller, but not Kelton. He prefers to spend his time practicing aerial reconnaissance with his drone, shooting critters with his paintball gun (.....) It’s like he never matured past sixth grade, so his parents just bought him bigger and bigger toys....., as if this whole water crisis excites him in some sick way (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.23).

So he is a kind of weirdo, immature kid.

In the next chapter Kelton describes his family:

my dad told me there are three types of humans on this planet (.....) Basically, the Sheep are the defenseless majority who are completely unwilling to acknowledge the inevitability of real danger, and trust the system to take care of them. Next you've got your Wolves. The bad guys who abide by no societal laws whatsoever but are good at pretending when it suits them (...) thieves, murderers, rapists, and politicians, who feed on the Sheep (....). And lastly, you have people like us. The McCrackens. The Herders of the world (....) we represent the balance between the two. (....) we are the select few with a power of choice, and when the real danger arises, we'll be the ones to survive (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.33).

So we learn that he was brought up in an Apocalypse-fearing family that only believes in individualism and self-reliance, and think of others as inferiors.

However, the choice of tone in the description is ironic, exaggerated (*"completely unwilling to acknowledge"*(Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.33)), giving the idea that he might not completely share his dad's vision of the world. Finally, Jacqui, the homeless girl, gives us another vision of Kelton *"Kelton is the man with the antibiotics. That is unless he is lying. But I don't think he is. He is honest to a fault. The kind of honesty that could get him killed"*(Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018, p.127).

We also can see how Kelton evolves through the novel. Near the end of it, Kelton seems to share his father's pessimistic view: *"we can't let ourselves be herded and corralled like sheep", says Kelton. 'This is how all starts. This is the beginning of the end.'"* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018). This vision will help him and the group to survive.

The authors use only the third person narrator, which is commonly thought to be more reliable, in the snapshots. This is intended to give the impression of a more objective source of information. These snapshots are narrated in the form of brief reports of what people are

living at different times and places during the crisis. They resemble short scenes in a film. This way we have a wider view of how people are reacting to the crisis.

Finally, by using informal language and the novel's very characteristic format, offering the main character's perspectives, the authors manage to make the novel relatable for adolescents. This way, they make sure that the message gets through and really makes us think twice about our actions.

8. Conclusion

In the last few years, a lot of dystopian novels have been published. Said novels are specifically addressed to young adults with Climate Change as a background. This is a clear sign of the growing concern and anxiety about the future among young people.

The dystopian genre is, on the one hand, appealing to young readers and, on the other hand, it allows the authors to convey a serious warning about the consequences of not taking the necessary steps to slow down the process of climate change. The dystopian novel might be a more powerful tool than news reports.

The novel *Dry* is a clear example. The authors show through the voices of different teenagers the impact that a severe drought could have in our society, especially in developed countries that are not used to water restrictions. These teenagers represent different common traits that can be found in people and the authors put them in critical situations to show how these traits can become assets or obstacles to overcome a crisis. They are not flat characters, they are round, mobile, and the authors achieve this by having multiple first-person narrators giving their own version of the events, reporting what others say and do. "*We can tell a great deal from a character by how he talks, and whom he talks to - how he bumps up against the world*" (Wood, 2009).

Going back to the question that inspired this essay about the way in which the authors portray the impact of natural disasters on people's behavior. This essay can conclude that the characters' relations and behavior change throughout the novel based on need. Alyssa lets Kelton in because she needs his help and ends up getting to know him despite her initial bias against him. Another example of personal evolution is represented by Jacqui who joins the group as a lone wolf and ends up adapting to the cooperation style of the rest while they also adapt to her. Similarly, when Henry joins the adventure, he only shows interest in himself, which, eventually, changes based on the need for cooperation. In general terms, we can see how all the teenage characters are forced to mature due to the circumstances, because they have to confront unknown situations that push them to their limits.

This novel opens the reader's mind and switches the main focus on environmental crises. While we all worry about the consequences the events might have, the novel revolves around the way humans act regarding those events. It has definitely changed my perspective on the future and our society, as well as reminded me of the environmental issues that affect our world on a daily basis and those that will affect us in the near future. And if this novel has had such an impact on myself, it will certainly influence other teenagers' perspectives.

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