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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Utopian and Dystopian Traits in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*

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**| ABSTRACT**

Some critics are of the opinion that when a rigid system of punctuality, precision, and accuracy is used in a particular society; a version of perfection may be attained in that society. In spite of these characteristics, the objective of this article is to illustrate how a meticulous reading of contrary images in a literary work as Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is required to attain a comprehensive view about that society under discussion. Both facets of the same story are to be considered to reach a better understanding of the depicted plot. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to highlight not only the positive or utopian traits, which seem to be dominant in the society of *The Giver*; but also the negative or dystopian ones, which are somewhat recessive. The method in which this is done is by adopting a careful reading of the primary textual evidence, *The Giver*, along with the analysis of plentiful useful and relevant secondary sources that tend to shed light on the eventual and profound overall image of that society. The findings of the article mainly stress the belief that one is not to hastily "judge a book by its cover"; as truth is inferred in the details, and that only after he / she reconsiders all the motives, causes, effects, and motifs that a sound understanding of *The Giver* is finally attained. Since literature is at times a depiction of life, the importance of this article lies in the fact that a good reader of literary works, does not only recognize "the white" or "the black"; but also "the gray" as a lot of "the gray" does exist in any society with varied degrees.

**| KEYWORDS**

*The Giver*, utopia, dystopia, society

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### 1. Introduction

Ever since the existence of man on this planet, stories have been told and retold over the passage of time to deliver carnivals of meanings that are related whether explicitly or implicitly to his life. Stories initially have been transmitted orally by storytellers through word of mouth, the ultimate objective of which is either to entertain listeners by arousing feelings of empathy, sympathy, and relevance; or to instruct listeners as a particular moral is learnt or inferred towards the end of these stories. However, stories are presented nowadays in published versions to readers not only to present numerous aspirations, dreams, and expectations; but also to warn against certain fears, hauntings, and intimidations.

Details of diverse stories are created to make one story distinctive from another by shedding light on a specific issue of profound importance in the view of the author. Nonetheless, it is not only the details in a story that are of paramount significance but also how the story itself is being told. This, in turn, provides each prominent author with his / her distinctive style. These details accumulate to build up motifs that become strongly rooted in stories at large such as success, achievement, and love on one hand; as well as failure, loss, and fear on the other.

### 2. Problem of the Study:

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Societies are governed by their individual systems to be mainly one thing and not the opposite other. No doubt there is room for improvement in every society as there are issues that can be constantly dealt with and amended. But strongly alleging conformity and discipline when that is not the case in a particular society causes one to think of the double-standards and hypocrisy that that society suffers from. The problem in the society of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) is that at the time it appears to be such a pleasant, peaceful, and orderly one, it is rather a dull, twisted, and unmerciful society where everything is preplanned and taken care of by the Committee of the Elders. This Committee that no one knows a lot about literally thinks of everything on the part of the citizens, who are obliged just to execute its instructions without even a second thought. This Committee is responsible for putting the regulations in the society by giving itself the right to interfere in the minutest detail of the life of each citizen of that society. The idealist image that the Committee of the Elders likes to promote pertaining to their society is a result of its direct control of the lives of the citizens of that society. Consequently, with meticulous attention to causes, effects, and motives; it becomes eventually evident that the utopian traits that are offered on the part of the Committee of the Elders come along dystopian traits as well.

### 3. Significance of the Study:

A lot of authors shed light upon precise motifs throughout their stories. These main ideas happen to become exhausted in certain epochs of time. For instance, many stories focus on either colonialization, feudalism, or classism in a particular time and place. Thus, dichotomies are also presented in stories depending on a multiplicity of sentiments and perspectives. The value of offering the readership with contradictory traits in relation to the same society invites one to think beyond the literal meaning of the story. This, in fact, suggests a sort of balance that provides a more realistic and comprehensive depiction of the society under discussion.

In other words, it is as if one is looking simultaneously at different sides of the same coin. Therefore, the significance of this article is to show how Lowry's *The Giver* is able to present a somewhat different theme combining the good and the bad, the desired and the rejected, the beautiful and the ugly in relation to the same society. Only then, an interestingly combined illustration of the two extremes; the utopian and dystopian traits of the same society, are portrayed. This combination is quite bizarre yet intriguing as a perfect image of an ideal society is depicted at times, whereas a dauntingly frightening image of the same society is underscored at others. It is as if one is looking through a magnifying glass at this society, which is located in a glass globe that reflects diverse shades of meaning at the same time of observation depending on which end one is looking through.

### 4. Methodology:

Lowry's *The Giver* is a Newbery Award-winning novel due to its literary style and interesting parallel depictions of the story it offers. *The Giver* depicts a story of a society that appears, on the superficial scale, to be a somewhat ideal society. But with meticulous observation, it starts to offer a totally contradictory image. Textual evidence of the primary source along with analysis of secondary sources will be adopted as the methodology of this study to enlighten essential aspects of the topic under discussion.

### 5. Review of Related Literature:

The term "utopia" was coined in the sixteenth century by Thomas More, an English social philosopher, statesman, and noted Renaissance humanist (Sargent, 1975). More first used the term as the title of his fictional work published in the same century. The word "utopia" comprises of the Greek word *topos* or "place", while the *u* is equivalent to *ou* in Greek which means "not". Put together utopia stands for a "nowhere place". Thus, the depiction of More's utopian society gives the positive impression of an idealized society governed by perfection in the sphere of fantasy (137). A utopian society based on the depiction of More is a detailed image of an ideal future society (Efstathiou, 2021). This image of perfection becomes a sought objective by all societies aspiring idealism. Thus, a society becomes tenacious of a particular superior standard of behavior that it would like to implement on its citizens through the adoption of excessive control over them (Claeys, 2010). With such a turning point of dominance, this society changes from being the dream of others to the nightmare that others wish to run away from (108). Only then a society turns from the optimistic version or utopia to its pessimistic version or dystopia.

The term "dystopia" was first used in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mills, an English philosopher and member of parliament; who is regarded to be one of the most influential thinkers in the history of classical liberalism (Newgard, 1, 2011). The concept of dystopia became frequently used in the twentieth century in response to devastating world events as World War One (Scholes and Ostenson, 2013). In contrast with earlier fictional utopian societies that promise a glorious future, dystopian fictions describe societies where negative social forces have the ultimate supremacy. Consequently, a specific society is categorized to be a dystopian one when it becomes a sort of a dictatorship due to the lack of individual freedom (Akman, 76, 2015).

### 6. Discussion:

The story unfolds with the presentation of a somewhat advanced society that is governed with a strong sense of precision and decorum. From the very beginning, it offers the sense of pleasant familial relations shared among the members of the family of the twelve-year-old protagonist, Jonas. The engineered world of Jonas starts off as a utopia of some sort but rapidly deteriorates due to its lack of personal choices and preferences (Hanson,45, 2009). Indeed, early on in the story, one realizes how observant

the society is of rules, methods and orders; giving the impression of the constant implementation of what is right and proper. But with careful reading, one comes to the conclusion that these rules, methods, and orders control how a person ought to live among his family unit, behave with others, conduct his job, and even think. Here, the initially formed positive impression begins to alter.

The situation becomes even more complicated with the existence of a voice that speaks through a speaker to the members of the society when the need arises. Everyone ought to abide to whatever instruction is given by that voice as it represents an authoritative entity that is not to be either questioned or doubted. Again, this starts to present one with an uncomfortable feeling especially after the early episode of sharing emotions and feelings among the family members. The sense that that episode gradually offers is not that of supporting love among the family members, but rather a sense of helplessness and inevitability. This, therefore, becomes alarming as the positive image of the community starts to waver. In fact, the issue of the "release" of the Pilot-in-Training, who has made a wrong turn as he misread his navigation instructions is quite alarming:

NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message, as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Jonas had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure (Lowry, 3).

The tone transmits a lot of decisiveness and affirmation, proving that something frightening is about to take place in relation to the Pilot-in-Training. As it is human to err, it is normal for humans to make mistakes and to learn from them, but evidently, this society is not tolerant at all of any mishap or mere wrongdoing. The whole idea of training means that one is in the process of mastering what he is being trained for through regular practice. But ironically, there is no margin for mistake in this society, which proves that it does not tolerate giving the benefit of the doubt. This shows that this society, that appeared to be a modern utopian one at first glance, is also simultaneously the opposite.

As the story continues, it is inferred that the voice represents the perspective of the Committee of the Elders that is in charge of basically everything in the community. The Committee of the Elders is the entity that puts the rules, appoints assignments, and decides when, how, and whom is to be released. In other terms, the Committee of the Elders decides and the citizens implement. No one of the citizens has the right to be a key-player in that process of decision making. However, citizens in a utopian society can influence the administrative decisions that have a direct impact on their lives. Citizens can even at times run for a position in which they could actively participate in decision making regarding the overall society. But in a dystopian society, power is centralized, and citizens from certain social backgrounds have easier access to positions than others (Karhu and Ridanpää, 131, 2020). Once any verdict, regardless to whom or about what, is released by the Committee of the Elders; it is to be taken extremely seriously and with high regard. Evidently, the Committee of the Elders decides to construct a society based on its own vision of idealism. Consequently, they initiate family units comprising of four members: The father, the mother, the son, and the daughter. The Committee of the Elders pick and choose each member and then place him / her along with three others in the same dwelling place in spite the fact that they are not biologically related. This happens to be a stark departure from what is defined by a family in the first place. That is why every member of a family is looked at as part of a "family unit". However, nothing really – not even a surname – ties these members together. So as the Committee of the Elders structures an entire society based upon what they find fit, rather than on blood relations as usual, makes this society very strange.

A dystopia is a bad society that becomes the antagonist, which works against the protagonist's aims and desires. As a result, a dystopian society results in the protagonist's loss of his civil liberties and the control of his reproductive freedom, at the time that his living circumstances become under constant surveillance (Adams, 2011). This is exactly the case that is portrayed in Jonas' community. To illustrate, the Committee of the Elders is observant of all of the citizens regardless of their gender, age, or family unit. It is because the Committee of the Elders puts everyone under the microscope that it determines the assignments of all of the citizens in the Ceremony of Twelves.

The Committee of the Elders constantly enjoys manipulating the minds of its citizens as it is always observant of a set of rules proclaimed in the Book of Rules. The Committee of the Elders in that book has thought of everything relating not only to a citizen's material environment, but also to his emotions, whims, and desires. It is worth mentioning here that as soon as a society is in control of a citizen's affections and reproductive freedom, it then turns into a disturbingly oppressive dystopian society (Adams, 2011). To illustrate, the Committee of the Elders in that book states: "STIRRINGS MUST BE REPORTED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE PLACE" (47). Hence, the treatment of these "stirrings" is to compel citizens to take a daily pill in order to suppress their emotions of infatuation. This clear violation of one's own personal freedom shows that this society is indeed a twisted version of a dictatorship that interferes in one's very personal zone.

In fact, after *The Giver* was awarded the John Newbery Medal, which is granted in recognition of the most distinguished contribution to American Literature for Children, some families and educators called for the banning of the novel due to the enormous amount of negativity that it eventually spreads (Yildirim, 2017). This makes a lot of sense as the amount of deprivation in Jonas' community is unbelievably frustrating and depressing. To start with, citizens are prevented from touching. Touching is an integral part of human behavior specifically from the moment of birth till the moment of death. Normal people need to touch others and to be touched by others as an expression of human intimacy originating from an individual's personal and private space (Routasalo, P. and Isola, 2016). Nonetheless, touching is not allowed in Jonas' society probably in order to prevent the existence of strong social ties among citizens that may become difficult for the Committee of the Elders to break.

The idea of prevention at large in Jonas' society is suffocating as well as crippling. For instance, citizens are prevented from seeing color! Seeing everything in only black and white is very dull. It gives the impression that the spirit of life is sucked out as there are no shades of diverse colors. As an associated feeling or emotion is evoked in the brain during the process of perceiving colors, life in the story is presented as very basic and mundane rather than colorfully meaningful (Billmeyer and Saltzman, 1981). The human eye perceives color as a stimulus in the form of light and the brain further processes that perception with a number of sentiments known as color emotions. The reason why color is not allowed for the citizens to see most probably relates to the intention of the Committee of the Elders to suppress feelings and emotions in the society. Even though Jonas realizes that there is a change in the apple, he is incapable of understanding what that change exactly is. After detecting color, he examines the apple thoroughly and even asks Asher if he sees any change as well:

But suddenly Jonas had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had – well, this was the part that he couldn't adequately understand – the apple had *changed*. Just for an instant. It had changed in mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand, and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about the apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then thrown it again to Asher. And again – in the air, for an instant only – it had changed (30).

Based on the above, it is only the Receiver of Memory, who is allowed "the privilege" to see color. But even when Jonas is allowed that glimpse of color, he was perplexed as he did not know what was happening to the apple. This preoccupies him since he takes that same apple back home for further investigation using a magnifying glass "waiting for the thing to happen again" (31), but to no avail.

Citizens are deprived of memory under the pretext that it is for their own protection from chaos. When Jonas asks the Giver about why citizens are not given access to memory, the former informs the latter that that is because memories pave the way to wisdom. The notion of wisdom plays a central role in the understanding of individual development (Grossmann, 233, 2017). No doubt, it is not in the interest of the Committee of the Elders to have citizens capable of individual advancement. Consequently, they are deprived of accumulative knowledge recalled through memories. The situation now becomes dangerous as citizens in the community live their lives day by day. For instance, these citizens lack the feelings of pain, warmth, fear, and celebration as they are denied the recollection of any relevant experience of the sort. Citizens in this society are exploited as they are perceived as mere robots existing in the community only to fulfill precise functions to sustain the perseverance of the society. This is a blunt act of marginalization that degrades and dehumanizes these citizens. In fact, the Committee of the Elders is against empowering the citizens in any regard. For instance, the committee does not allow them access to books. A main reason of the refinement of citizens in general is their gained knowledge from reading as they become well informed. But that is the precise reason why the Committee of the Elders does not allow the citizens to have access to books.

Ironically enough, there is nothing personal about Jonas' society. The citizens are denied any means of individualism as they are obliged to adhere to orders and to lead "[t]he life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without color, pain, or past" (207). There is no room for preferences, choices, likings, or even self-expression. Even the names of citizens are given by the Committee of the Elders in the Ceremony of the One, before which they were viewed just as numbers. It is indeed a cruel society that has no shade of genuine humanity as it lacks true compassion or sincere solidarity.

## 7. Findings:

Once Jonas comes to truly comprehend what is meant by "release" in the community after approximately a year of training, he realizes that he cannot take it anymore. He comes to understand that he cannot coexist in such a fabricated reality in such a twisted structured society. He becomes overwhelmed with a sense of intimidation and resentment towards this society that he starts to recognize he simply does not belong in despite his privileges.

Hence, he takes matters in his own hands to seek a normal future with potential. He eventually decides on escaping this prison-like society. But he cannot do it on his own. He tries to convince the Giver to come with him, but he is incapable of doing so.

Nonetheless, he helps him to come up with a proper plan by equipping him with the much needed memories of strength and courage. The giver also tries to equip Jonas with memories of escape, but he is incapable to do so as this mission of escape is an unprecedented one. Jonas wants to go to Elsewhere and the Giver helps him to do so as he too is not very comfortable or satisfied with this imposed reality. To the Giver, Jonas' mission of escape provides him with the means to change the community by making it whole.

### **8. Conclusion:**

After the exposition of *The Giver*, the depicted utopian version of the society starts to fade away, paving the image for a dystopian one to prevail instead. The illustrated society in the story is not a realistic one as citizens of that society are left without essential human needs as that of emotion, recollection of memory, knowledge, and the freedom of choice. Jonas affirms this by saying: "'Well...' Jonas had to stop and think it through. 'If everything's the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and *decide* things!'" (123).

It is consequently a society which has no past or history and no future. The citizens, who are to be the main key players in the society, seem to be purposely absent minded. In the view of the Committee of the Elders, providing knowledge to the citizens is a threat to their autocracy. It is concluded that they view that citizens are too naïve to be given the freedom of choice. That is why citizens have no preferences. In this society, the citizens are not granted the right to choose anything such as their assignments, dwelling places, and even their spouses. This is extremely depressing as everything happens to be gloomily preplanned. In actuality, Jonas does not recognize how depressing his life was before being selected to be the Receiver. It is only when he is given insight into higher horizons of knowledge by the Giver that he comprehends how much he as well as these other poor citizens have been missing upon.

A major limitation of understanding the profound meaning of the portrayed story of *The Giver* is that insight into the mentality of the sole decision maker in society, the Committee of the Elders, is not given or even implied. Had this been revealed, probably a better understanding of the story would have been reached. However, an examination of the future life, which Jonas is expected to lead, may pave the way for ongoing research trying to justify the tenaciously executed deprivations of the society of *The Giver*.

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