

Extended Essay

An In-Depth Analysis of The Dystopic Elements in The Giver

Research Question: How was lack of choice, memories of the past, and precision of language used to make a dystopian community in The Giver?

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1.Introduction

Dystopias are fictional worlds where the living conditions of people are either not desirable or horrific. Most of the time they take place in the future but some take place in the past. Writers of this genre tend to write dystopias in order to criticise the conditions of real-life and show how things can be if things continue that way. It is an interesting part of literature as it is created as the opposite of utopia, where everything is perfect and without any conflict or pain. First originating in 1868, there have been many popular dystopian books throughout the years. Some of them take place in worlds where humanity is controlled by a political party, 1984 by George Orwell (Ostergaard). Another example would be The Road by Cormac McCarthy where the world undergoes a catastrophe and shows the suffering of humans and the cruel things, they must do in order to survive (Cooper). However, The Giver is quite different due to the circumstances its world was built upon.

The Giver is a dystopian work by Lois Lowry that takes place in the non-descript future in a utopian society: a world without crime, sickness, or poverty (Brugar 85). The main character of the book, Jonas is a normal citizen in the community until he turns twelve and gets the assignment of The Receiver of the Memory, a highly important and honoured job. As the book is written from the perspective of Jonas, we see the community as he sees it. Until Jonas first meets the Giver, the community is seen as a utopia with everything a person would ever need. Only after Jonas starts receiving the memories of the past does he realize how much humanity sacrificed in order to obtain such a dull and stale life. With this, we get to see the dystopian elements hidden behind the secrets of the utopian community.

From the start of it, The Giver seems like a utopian society with rules that ensure everyone is safe and happy. Later on, we learn that it indeed was the *initial* plan with the world. Yet as the story continues and the narrator and main character of the book, Jonas, gains more knowledge about the world around him, the world shows its true colours as a dystopia. For the most part, no one in the community seems to suffer from any physical inconveniences such as hunger or pain but instead, they seem to lack certain human qualities that make them human in the first place. In this research, I will be analysing the aspects of the dystopian community in The Giver and explain how they turn this seemingly utopian community into a dystopic one. To do this, I will be using three different elements of dystopia: Precision of Language, Lack of Choice, and Memories of the Past. The Precision of Language is a dystopian element due to how it is imposed on the people of the community along with being the cause of erasure of words from the vocabulary of people. Lack of Choice is an infringement of basic human rights thus it is deemed as a dystopian element. Lastly, Memories of the Past is the system where a selected individual is given the responsibility of safekeeping and recalling human history directly from their brain. By using just one person to store the memories, the rest of the community can be kept in dark about the past of the community. As they do not know about the humanity before the community, they do not know what some emotions are. This results in an emotionless and dystopic community. In this analysis, I will be providing examples from the book to support my points about the dystopian elements.

2.Precision of Language

Language is one of the, if not, the most important aspects of dystopias. The Precision of language is quite important for both the community in The Giver and in the real world. In real life, even though we often try to be as accurate to our feelings as possible, there are still times when we may express our feelings a bit differently. Some people can even make a job by writing and expressing feelings in the most extravagant way. For the community in The Giver though, it is something that is enforced onto the people. By teaching kids to always speak precisely as early as possible, from three years old and onwards, the community is able to be a place where everybody uses a precise language.

The precision of language is the first dystopian element of the Giver that the readers are introduced to. The first instance of it seen in the book is when Jonas tries to name the feeling he was experiencing when December was approaching. At first Jonas names it as “frightened” but thinking back to when he actually felt “frightened” he realises that the word is “too strong of an adjective” (Lowry 4). Throughout the story, Jonas is always shown to be careful about naming his emotions and feelings. This shows how intricately controlled the citizens of the community can be. Jonas’ best friend, Asher, on the other hand, is the opposite of Jonas and works as a contrast to show what happens when a person is not precise in their language. When the Chief Elder is telling the story of how Asher used to not be able to differentiate between “Snack” and “Smack” when he was only three, he was spanked until he stopped talking altogether showing how the children are disciplined by using violent methods for something as simple as unintentionally using a wrong word (Lowry 55). What this shows is that even though the community promotes itself as a safe place where no one can get hurt, the prospect of teaching kids discipline by using a discipline wand contradicts that statement.

Later on, it is revealed that the reason why precision of language is so enforced onto the community is to “ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered”. (Lowry 70). Yet the “unintentional” part seems to cause a loophole as it is shown that when Jonas gets his assignment rules he is permitted to lie (Lowry 69). Meaning that even though it is not allowed to utter unintentional lies, intentional ones are allowed. This creates the realisation in Jonas and the reader that every single adult in the community may be allowed to lie and have lied at some point. Jonas believes that if he were to ever ask if his father ever lied to him, no matter what answer he gets he would never be able to confirm it (Lowry 71). His belief about everyone being allowed to lie when they become an adult is also supported when Jonas’ father doesn’t tell what exactly he does when releasing the baby twin. He leads Jonas to believe he is giving the baby a comfortable ceremony and then handing it to the people in Elsewhere but when Jonas is watching the ceremony it is revealed that he euthanizes the baby and then puts it in a chute that leads to the trash (Lowry 151).

The Precision of language is also used to limit the depths of feelings people can feel by limiting the language that is able to express them.

“Do you love me?”

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Father gave a little chuckle. Jonas. You, of all people. Precision of language, please!"

"What do you mean?" Jonas asked. Amusement was not at all what he had anticipated.

"Your father means that you used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it's become almost obsolete," his mother explained carefully.

Jonas stared at them. Meaningless? He had never before felt anything as meaningful as the memory. (Lowry 127)

In this snippet, a conversation between Jonas and his parents is taking place. This conversation happens right after Jonas receives a memory of family and love from the Giver. Due to not having seen or heard about the concept of love Jonas is not familiar with it and thus tries to see if the others also feel it by asking his parents if they love him. It is also seen that he didn’t know about the word and the concept of “love” before receiving a memory of it (Lowry 125). Yet when he asks his parents if they love him, even though they don’t feel it, they are familiar with the concept of it. I think that as the generations go on some words are lost to time as they stop being used. If Jonas had never asked about love to his parents, they certainly would not have ever taught it to him as they would deem it unnecessary. This shows how the community, in fear of not using precise language, lets some words be forgotten.

It also seems like even though “precision of language” is so preached in the community its precision stems from deleting some words from existence that could be related to any of the things that got deleted with sameness. For example, Jonas finds it difficult to find words to describe what the colour looked like. At first, Jonas does not even know what colours are and learns what it means from The Giver. After learning it and wanting to describe how it makes him feel, he is unable to do so as the language was constructed to not include things that the Sameness destroyed. “It was so- oh, I wish language were more precise! The red was so beautiful!” (Lowry 95) is what he states when trying to describe how the colour made him feel. Since colours were destroyed along with Sameness the words used to describe them such as “vibrant”, “light” or “deep” also got destroyed in the process due to people not needing to use them anymore.

3.Lack of Choice (Sameness)

The community of Giver, rather than being a dystopian community from the get-go, seems to have developed into a dystopian one due to humanity’s desire for a utopia. The reason why it evolved into a dystopia rather than a utopia is because utopias need to be perfect for *everyone*. But as long as people desire things, it would not be possible to satisfy everyone at the same time. Most of these desires, such as hunger and sleep, are instinctual things. And some of them are formed with time. For instance, it is not possible to crave food that you have never eaten. Or it is not possible to feel an emotion that is never taught, such as love. It is not possible to desire things that you have no idea about. So, in order to achieve a utopia, where everyone is safe and satisfied, it is crucial for no one to experience any positive or negative emotions that could pose a threat to others’ safety. Which is a dystopian element due to how it takes humanity away from humans. To achieve that element, most dystopias take the route of limiting people’s ability to make choices. The Giver does this too but takes it to the extremes by deleting the mere possibility of the existence of other choices.

Humans are not perfect; thus, we all make mistakes. Some lead to small accidents and some world-ending catastrophes. To create the perfect utopia, the community of the Giver decided to adopt Sameness, an ideology that strived to make everything the *same* from the colour to the shape of it. With this ideology not only did the community destroy people’s choices they also destroyed people’s ability to perceive other choices. With this, they took away one of the most important rights of humans, the freedom of choice (Markus & Schwartz). Thus, people were saved from making wrong choices that could have resulted in the harm of others.

One of the things done in order to achieve Sameness was climate control. Since bad climate resulted in unproductivity when the technology was achieved, the community destroyed the climate and made every single day dull without a sun or clouds. Since there were no fluctuations in the weather, the people of the community always woke up to the same dull-looking day. This stale lifestyle is another example of how people in the community live without emotions which are usually caused by normal life activities. The lack of weather diversity also makes it possible to wear the same clothes all year long, thus destroying the possibility of other clothing choices. Yet the community didn’t stop with just controlling the weather. They also terraformed the landscape in order to cut down on the time delivery trucks spend while travelling mountains and hills. By destroying hills and mountains they were able to speed up the time it took for the conveyance of goods (Lowry 84). Because Sameness destroyed these things, it resulted in the words used to describe them to be forgotten. This is why whenever Jonas receives a new memory, he has to either learn the word from the Giver or perceive it himself (Lowry 85).

Another thing destroyed with the Sameness is, as the name suggests, the uniqueness of people. Even though people often celebrate achievements, in the community of The Giver it is the opposite. In order to

create an environment where everyone is seen and treated the same, talking about any kind of difference amongst individuals is deemed as rude. This is first seen when Jonas is thinking about different eyes he and another girl had, "...it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals." (Lowry 20). Another rule that is combined with rudeness is the rule against bragging, "There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to." This shows that an accomplishment a person has made is not rewarded in any form. However, one of the best ways to increase morale and productivity in people in a workspace is giving them verbal or material rewards. The reason why is because a reward makes people feel like they are contributing and making an impact on the system (Fontes). With this being absent in the community of The Giver, it is shown that what keeps the community working is the sense of duty its citizens feel.

4. Memories of the Past

In most dystopias, the history of humanity is either erased or rewritten. This is a way for the governments in dystopias to control the way people think. Some of the examples would be the continuous change of the past in order to make people agree with the new statements of Big Brother in 1984 by George Orwell and the burning of the books that were English-influenced in Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury (Opreanu 78). The human mind is quite tricky as we have not been able to solve it. This trickiness causes us to rely on our memories less and evidence more. This means that if the evidence itself changes it would be easy to gaslight our brains into believing that it is not remembering things right. The totalitarian governments use this to their advantage in order to control their citizens. Yet in The Giver, it is quite different.

In The Giver the past of humanity is non-existent for ordinary citizens. We learn this by seeing Jonas' reaction in the snippet below, in his first meeting with the Giver.

"He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. "It's the memories of the whole world," he said with a sigh. "Before you, before me, before the previous Receiver, and generations before him."

Jonas frowned. "The whole world?" he asked. "I don't understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean Elsewhere, too?" He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand exactly. Maybe I'm not smart enough. I don't know what you mean when you say 'the whole world' or 'generations before him.' I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now." (Lowry 77, 78)

This shows how alienated the citizens of the community are from the concept of the past. As they are never taught about the past, they only know that the community has existed before them and will continue to exist after them. By not knowing anything of the past they do not know what they are being stripped away from. Which, in the case of The Giver, is their feelings and humanity. The idea of normal citizens being forbidden to know anything about the past, by the community leaders, is reinforced when we see that it is forbidden for the Receiver to discuss their job with other members of the community, including the Elders, in rule 4 of Jonas' job folder (Lowry 68). This shows that even though Elders are the ones that control the community they do not know about the world before the community.

Since the community was constructed with the goal of erasing pain from the world, it seems quite successful for the most part, except it is not. In order to alleviate the citizens of the community from the pain, the first community leaders put all of the weight of thousands of years of history onto the shoulders of just one person, the Receiver. From the start of Jonas' training, we get to see how heavy the burden of all the memories is by observing the Giver, "'Go,' The Giver would tell him tensely. 'I'm in pain today.

Come back tomorrow. ” (Lowry 106) showing that the Giver has no choice but to be burdened with the pain for the good of humanity. This raises the question of, could the community have been a utopia if one person must suffer for others? I believe that the answer would be “no” as utopias are places where no one suffers, yet generations of Receivers seem to have suffered while doing their assigned job. This shows that memories of the past worked more like a dystopian element in the community rather than a utopian one.

5. Conclusion

In this study, I have analysed the three different dystopian elements present in *The Giver*, Precision of Language, Lack of Choice, and Memories of the Past, and proved how they turn the seemingly utopian community into a dystopian one. The reason why precision of language is so predominant in the community is to create an environment where everyone is honest, yet since too much honesty would ruin the intricate lies around the community, once people reach age twelve, they get permission to lie in order to cover for their jobs. The precision of language also leads to other dystopian elements such as kids being abused with smacks simply because they mistakenly used the wrong word. The use of precision of language also seems to have resulted in the erasure of certain words such as “love” or “hills” as they are either deemed too general or non-existent. These show how, even though the precision of language was created in order to create a utopia with no unintentional lies, it became a dystopia instead.

Lack of choice or Sameness in *The Giver* is derived from the need for utopias to be perfect for everyone. Since it is not possible to cater to every specific person’s desires, the ability to desire things was taken away by the community with Sameness. By reducing the options to one the community is able to satisfy everyone as they don’t know other choices ever existed. Yet this took away people’s freedom of choice, one of the most important human rights.

Memories of the past are the reason why nobody in the community has ever thought of escaping. Since all the memories of the humans for generations are only stored in one person, for others the community looks like a place that was and will forever be there. But it is important to note that for a place to be truly utopic there must be no one suffering. Since the person that has received the memories has to relive them every day, they are under continuous stress that burdens their minds and bodies, leaving them to suffer by themselves.

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