

## Totalitarian Discipline in Lois Lowry's The Giver

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### Abstract

This paper studies Lois Lowry's The Giver as an example of totalitarian rule in its use of discipline and control. The Giver is a dystopian novel that focuses on a regime which eliminates people's freedom in fear of wars or rebellions. Totalitarianism is a form of political control where the state makes all the decisions on the behalf of the individual and no objection or refusal is allowed. Dystopian fiction utilizes the image of totalitarian rule to show how country designed as utopia might end up being dystopian through restrictions and excessive control. The study utilizes Foucault's theories on regulations and discipline in order to understand the methods and reasons behind subjecting citizens to an absolute political control.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Foucault, discipline, The Giver, memory.

الانضباط الشمولي في رواية لويس لوري "المُعطي"

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مُلخص

يدرس هذه البحث رواية لويس لوري "المُعطي" كمثال على الحكم الشمولي في استخدامه للانضباط والسيطرة. "المُعطي" هي رواية ديستوبية (نوع من الأدب المعاصر) تركز على نظام يقضي على حرية الناس خوفاً من الحروب أو الثورات. الشمولية هي شكل من أشكال السيطرة السياسية حيث تتخذ الدولة جميع القرارات نيابة عن الفرد ولا يُسمح بأي اعتراض أو رفض. يستخدم أدب الديستوبيا صورة الحكم الشمولي لإظهار كيف يمكن لبلد مصمم على أنه يوتوبيا (نقيض الديستوبيا) أن ينتهي به المطاف إلى أن يكون ديستوبيا من خلال القيود والسيطرة المفرطة. تستخدم الدراسة نظريات فوكو حول الأنظمة والانضباط من أجل فهم الأساليب والأسباب الكامنة وراء إخضاع المواطنين لسيطرة سياسية مطلقة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المدينة الفاسدة، الفيلسوف الفرنسي فوكو، انضباط، المُعطي، ذاكرة.

### 1.1. Introduction

Dystopian fiction is often described as a negative form of utopia, since every dystopia carries within it the trace of a utopian dream. However, the boundary between the two concepts is not always distinct as some works present both utopian and dystopian features. In fact, dystopia functions as a genre in its own right, marked by recurring strategies such as hostility toward the body, the erasure of personal identity, the breakdown of family structures, euthanasia, the suppression

of art and literature, and the presence of rebels who rise against oppressive systems. At the same time, dystopian fiction has been situated as a sub-genre of science fiction, sharing many of its elements (Toma, 2017, p. 227).

Yet dystopia distinguishes itself from science fiction through its focus on social and political critique. In this sense, it operates as a cautionary tale, warning readers of the dangerous consequences that may result from current cultural or political tendencies. Even when dystopian societies claim to provide solutions to crises, these solutions solidify into permanent systems that prioritize collectivism over individual freedom (Toma, 2017, p. 227). One of the key frameworks through which dystopian literature is read is totalitarianism, a political idea that emerged in the 1920s and later became central to Cold War ideology. Dystopian works, in particular, are often interpreted through their political dimensions. For instance, famous dystopian novels like George Orwell's 1984, Aldus Huxley's Brave New World, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, or Lois Lowry's The Giver draw heavily on the realities of twentieth-century dictatorships and fanatic regimes, including German Nazism, Stalinist Communism, and even Attlee's postwar Labour government. The wars and international conflicts that influenced dystopia writers have led readers to link Dystopia to political imagination and totalitarian regimes (Sampaio, 2013, p. 130).

The term totalitarianism was first introduced in the early 1920s by Italian politician Giovanni Amendola. He used it to describe and criticize Mussolini's regime, which he considered unlike any dictatorship that had existed before. Totalitarianism refers to absolute political control, meaning that governmental authority is without limits. As Abdulridha (2019) explains, such a government maintains complete dominance over every aspect of society, including education, culture, laws, and ultimately the fate of individuals (p. 17). In totalitarian governments, the authority relies heavily on disciplining individuals to lead them into acting in specific ways.

Michel Foucault connects the disciplining of individuals to regimes that aim to exercise such domination. Totalitarian systems demand that citizens form a unified, homogeneous body that follows the vision of their leaders. To secure this obedience, mechanisms of guidance and punishment are established. Those who comply are granted limited rights, while dissenters face imprisonment, heavy penalties, or even death:

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body (Foucault, 2012, pp. 137-8)

Foucault draws attention to how systems of reward and punishment shape power in the hands of leaders. They become the only source of truth and knowledge. People obey and follow their commands, which turn into basic rules passed from one generation to another. This control grows stronger when these governments also dominate the economic lives of their people. “The growth of a capitalist economy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power, whose general formulas, techniques of submitting forces and bodies, in short, 'political anatomy', could be operated in the most diverse political regimes,” (Foucault, 2012, p. 221).

The fear that controls people in dystopian novels reflects the fear built into all totalitarian systems. This fear was visible in the past century with Hitler in Germany, Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, and Pol Pot in Cambodia. Writers like Orwell and Lowry saw the violent nature of these regimes and turned that into an apocalyptic vision in his novel. History records that Stalin’s rule caused about 66 million deaths, Hitler at least 12 million, Mao about 30 million, and Pol Pot more than 2 million (Frodsham, 1984, p. 141). Literature cannot fully capture such horror, but in dystopian fiction the horror is narrowed to the pain of few individuals. Through the suffering of few characters, the novel shows the destruction of millions of anonymous victims under similar systems.

## 1.2. Literature review

Different articles and theses tackled Lois Lowry’s novel. Among these, there are some that stand out. For instance, there is “The Philosophical and Ethical Significance of Color in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*” by Kyoung-Min Han and Yonghwa Lee (2018). In the futuristic community of *The Giver*, much is missing. The absences range from natural elements such as snow, sunshine, and hills to abstract qualities such as love, free will, and individuality. Although the community has achieved safety from crime, gender equality, and an abundance of food, critics still classify it as dystopian, emphasizing the implications of what has been erased. Among these absences, color is particularly significant, as it plays a central role in the development and transformation of Jonas, the protagonist. The Chief Elder remarks that Jonas has been chosen as the new Receiver of Memory because of his rare capacity to “See Beyond” (79), which allows him to perceive fleeting flashes of color in an otherwise colorless world. While critics have acknowledged the role of color in the novel, most have concentrated on its sociopolitical meaning. The community’s enforced Sameness and resulting colorblindness as a classroom tool for examining the flaws of a race-neutral perspective, which fails to recognize the institutional and systemic nature of racism.

Also, there is “A Return to Normal: Lois Lowry's *The Giver*” by Susan Louise Stewart (2007). Stewart argues that, for all its innovation, *The Giver* ultimately represents a “return to normal.” Instead of breaking from convention, the novel

undermines its own radical potential by placing readers back into a familiar ideological position. Lowry points out that Jonas and the Giver—both light-skinned and pale-eyed—embody cultural assumptions that privilege certain figures as decision-makers and saviors. In addition, she notes that the theme of choice, seemingly one of the novel's central concerns, is weakened outside the text itself. With the publication of Lowry's interviews and *Messenger*, the final novel linked to *The Giver*, the radical possibility of choice largely disappears.

Also, there is "The Utopian Function of Memory in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*" by Carter Hanson (2009). This study focuses on the novel as a work that gathers both utopian and dystopian aspects. It tackles the fact that dystopia is a utopia that misread the human nature and needs. On the other hand, "Individual and Societal Control in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*" by Tiina Virtanen (2012) takes the discussion to another point. In *The Giver*, systems of control permeate every aspect of human life, from the institutional to the biological. In this way, the novel continues a well-established dystopian tradition that critiques totalitarianism and highlights the importance of individual freedom and privacy. *The Giver* is the first part of a loosely connected trilogy. While the later novels share some thematic similarities, their connections are minimal: characters from earlier books appear only briefly or are mentioned in passing. It in *The Giver* that Lois Lowry discusses the significance of individual freedom in designing a utopian or dystopian society.

### **1.3. Totalitarian control and individual freedom in *The Giver***

At the beginning of the novel, readers realize that the protagonist, Jonas, lives in a community where people cannot see colors. Everyone sees in black and white, except him. He is 11-years-old and his community is strictly directed in everything they say and do. As soon as the novel begins, Jonas is shown confused over two incidents. First, he is surprised to notice the pale eyes of an infant lying in a basket, because everyone else in the community has dark eyes. Second, he steals an apple from a park and get severely scolded by the officer. Jonas becomes unsettled not by the act of scolding, but by what he saw. He glimpsed the apple's red color which cannot be seen by anyone else except The Receiver of Memories. Gradually it becomes clear that in his community, people's perceptions and senses, as well as memories are controlled thoroughly by the governing authority of the Elders. Even though Jonas becomes aware of his capacity to see colors he cannot describe that because he lacks the language to describe it: "he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of his confusion, so he had let it pass" (Lowry, 1993, p. 38). This lack of language suppresses Jonas's feelings and leaves him no choice but to overlook his confusion (Lone & Zafar, 2018, p. 46).

The suppression of language and colors in Jonas's community reflects the annihilation of choice under totalitarian rule. By erasing difference and enforcing sameness, the state makes sure that the community will be cohesive. This policy transforms society into a collective organism where each member thinks and acts alike. Individual expression is sacrificed for uniformity, and the authority constantly asserts its presence through strict surveillance. Cameras are panted everywhere and every move and word that Jonas and his friends utter is watched. This regulatory guarantees citizens' submission to the point where they internalize discipline and become their own observers (Toma, 2017, p. 228).

Childhood in Jonas's society is divided according to age groups, with each stage linked to a specific milestone. At seven, children receive jackets that button in the front. At nine, they are given bicycles. At twelve, they are assigned the jobs they will keep for life. These rigid stages suggest that there is no separation between childhood and adulthood. Everyone is expected to act like an adult, while at the same time they are treated as children. (Latham, 2002, p. 8).

Life in *The Community* is not defined by ideas and individual opinions, when they turn 12-years-old, children are gathered in a large ceremony and the chief elder gives them the jobs that they will practice for the rest of their lives. The children have to follow their assigned jobs as they have to or obey the rules inside any job. In order to prevent people from objecting, a process of brainwashing is carried out in *The Giver*. It includes several methods such as reward and punishment, the use of drugs, and persuasion through speech and visual suggestion.

When the ceremony is held, Jonas' friends receive their job assignments. Olivia is chosen as a nurturer, so she will care for newborns. Asher becomes a pilot. Jonas, however, is left uncertain because no job is given to him. Then the Chief Elder steps forward and announces that Jonas has been selected as the new Receiver of Memory.

In a firm, commanding voice she announced, "Jonas has been selected to be our next Receiver of Memory."

Then he heard the gasp—the sudden intake of breath, drawn sharply in astonishment, by each of the seated citizens. He saw their faces; the eyes widened in awe.

And still he did not understand (Lowry, 1993, p. 61).

In this community, people have no memory of the past. They know nothing about earlier generations or about the lives of people outside the borders of the community, which are called the edge of memories. Only one person is allowed to carry and hold these memories. This individual is the Receiver. The memories are kept and passed down in order to maintain unity. By erasing differences such as religion, culture, or personal beliefs, the society avoids conflict. The more similar and uniform the people are, the safer and more controlled the community becomes.

One reason that creates differences among people is their families and their family backgrounds. For this reason, the natural way of producing children between husband and wife is not allowed in the community. There is only one method, and that is through genetic engineering and artificial tubes. Babies are born in hospitals under the care of doctors, nurses, and nurturers. After they get measured and pass the health test, they are given to selected families. These families adopt them and raise them as their own. However, if a baby is found to have an anomaly, a disability, or even a weight lower than normal, that baby is released. This word “released” is used as a soft way to say that the baby is quietly killed. Release is given to both sick babies and individuals that disobey the system.

He system of discipline in the community relies heavily on rules and punishments. Punishment is enforced through strict rules such as forbidding discussion of the past, death, or unnecessary medication. Every member of society must take daily pills to suppress emotions and desires. Throughout their day, individuals receive different orders in public spaces that are delivered through large speakers. This way ensures that individuals remain under continuous influence and control.

Once Jonas is selected as the receiver, he has to meet the previous receiver of memories who will pass him knowledge of the world beyond their life and borders. He calls himself the giver and he shares his knowledge with Jonas through telepathy. Jonas sees through the giver a sight of snow and in his mind, he slides on the hill and experiences the feeling of sliding for the first time in his life. However, he finds himself lacking in the vocabulary to describe that:

There is no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annexe room. How could you describe a sledge without describing a hill and snow; and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery magical cold? Even trained for years as they all had been in precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?” (Lowry, 1993, pp. 116-117).

Jonas’s society in *The Giver* is designed to be without ambiguity. It enforces a totalitarian system of “Sameness,” a state of order in which all citizens accept the purposes that are assigned to them through their government (84). In doing so, individuals surrender all their desires and responsibilities. Birth defects and the pains of aging are erased through secret yet routine acts of murder, release. These “Releases” protect people not only from suffering but also from the discomfort of seeing other people suffer (Wend-Walker, 2013, p. 147). A vague mythology is created to explain the disappearance of those who are “Released.” People are told that when someone is released, they go to a place called ‘elsewhere.’ This is a subtle reference to religion. The so-called “Elsewhere” is imagined as a “quiet and serene” place (Lowry, 1993, p. 117). It is a euphemism that echoes the idea of Heaven and shields citizens from confronting the reality of death.

Jonas and his sister Lily rarely behave like children in the usual sense. Like all young people in the community, they are unusually polite and quick to apologize for even the smallest mistakes. They also show a sense of irony, a trait more often linked with adults. For example, when their father speaks of bringing home a newchild for extra care, Lily pretends she wants to keep him, even though the rule allows only two children in the family. Jonas notices her sarcasm, observing that she spoke “sweetly” but with a “fake” look of innocence that everyone recognized (p. 8). This shows that within a society of carefully defined stages and fixed roles, children learn an adult life very early (Latham, 2002, p. 8-9).

The totalitarian society envisioned by Lowry is fundamentally hierarchical, with the Elders functioning as the central force that holds everything together. This hierarchy is reinforced through rigid divisions that separate people into specific ages that culminate in the Elders. The social structure is designed to restrict individual freedom and maintain order. By elevating a select group of leaders, the system limits the rest of the population, drain their resources and reduce their choices to ensure control.

The more Jonas learns about love, care, dancing, music, culture, sea, sailing, etc, the more he is convinced that this dystopian society need to be liberated. The chief means by which the elders control the community is through the suppression of historical memory. In his first meeting with the Giver, Jonas says, “I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now” (p. 78). Jonas sees mother’s love and spousal romance and he goes home to ask his parents if they love him. His parents tell him to be precise in his question because love is used in their community. His parents answer him in “a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete” (p. 127).

Jonas designs a plan to take the new born baby that his father brought home and escape to the edge of memory. He learns that authorities want him dead because the baby weighs less than normal babies. Jonas takes him and Escape with the help of the giver. Throughout his learning, Jonas realizes that knowledge of the past and the outside world can lead to differences, divides, wars, and death. However, it also creates in him a sense of life that he never experienced before. This knowledge could be passed to everyone in the community if he passed the edge of memories. Thus, he prevents the authorities from killing the baby, Gabe, and escape outside the borders. Jonas’s decision to pass his freedom and memory to everyone else starts a rebellion against the totalitarian rule of the elders.

For generations, the founders of the society knew that Sameness could not survive without keeping some knowledge of the past. They understood that forgetting everything would risk repeating the mistakes that once caused disaster, such as famine and war. For this reason, they kept one person as the Receiver of Memory to provide advice when needed. However, inheriting memories of freedom and love

can only lead to refusal of totalitarianism. Jonas willingly chooses a life of chaos, liberty, and danger over a life of structured safety and disciplined thoughts (Wend-Walker, 2013, p. 148).

Even though the community is built to shield humans from the dangers of wars and pains, it did so in a way that led to eliminate all that makes an individual enthusiastic or happy to live. The removal of differences, colors, music, art, literature, history, love, and even natural reproduction ensured a homogenous society, yet it is a pale and miserable one. In this totalitarian community, the enforcement of 'sameness' and discipline was not enough to curb people's spiritual yearnings because medications had to be used for that purpose too. Thus, The Giver warns that when human qualities are sacrificed to mechanical order, society may gain safety but lose what makes life meaningful. Despite their efforts to prevent anyone from rebelling and control people's choices and brains, these efforts did not create a utopian society, but rather a dystopian one. The novel concludes with everyone getting the access to memories because of Jonas and choosing to shake the discipline of the Elders because the life they gave them denied people joy as much as it denied them pain.

### Conclusion

In Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, humanity is deeply dehumanized. The society she imagines shows a future where mechanical order and rigid systems have replaced human freedom and individuality. Lowry is concerned not with machines in a literal sense, but with how mechanical ideals of control and sameness can dominate human life. In her vision, the drive for perfection and order strips people of memory, emotion, and choice, leaving them as controlled parts of a larger system. Lowry recognizes that systems of order can protect people from chaos, pain, and suffering. Yet she also shows the cost of such protection. In the world of *The Giver*, the suppression of difference, the regulation of family and birth, and the erasure of memory all serve to make society stable, but at the price of freedom and human dignity.

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