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## Language in Utopian Societies: A Study of Works by Le Guin, Atwood, and Lowry

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LANGUAGE IN UTOPIAN SOCIETIES: A STUDY OF WORKS BY  
LE GUIN, ATWOOD, AND LOWRY

by

Laura Katherine Latinski

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

April 27, 2007

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### Author's Note

First I should discuss the structure of this thesis. I begin with an introduction to present some of the history of utopias, to set the context for the rest of the chapters, and to explain why I have grouped these various books in this one thesis. In each subsequent chapter I discuss a single book by one of the three writers here studied. I focus on one book each by Le Guin and Atwood and three books by Lowry. Each chapter begins with a brief summary of the particular novel followed by a discussion of the constraining and/or liberating role of language in that novel.

For my in-text citations, I use the author's name along with the page number. However, for the five books that are the topic of this thesis, I use abbreviated in-text citations. My abbreviations are as follows: "*Dispossessed*" stands for *The Dispossessed*, "*HT*" stands for *The Handmaid's Tale*, "*Giver*" stands for *The Giver*, "*GB*" stands for *Gathering Blue*; as is already one word, I cite *Messenger* as it is.

Some of my terminology might need an explanation. When I use the words "the people," "the citizens," "the population," or "the populace" I mean simply the inhabitants of the community that I am currently describing. Similarly, when I say "society," "culture," or "community," I am referring to the setting of the particular novel that is the topic of the current chapter, and nothing more complicated than that.

As this thesis deals with the perils of misleading and ambiguous language, I hope that you find the following words as clear and plain as I mean them to be.

Laura Katherine Latinski

August 16, 2007

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“With love to those who read—  
remember—  
and GIVE.”  
—Lois Lowry, 1994

Introduction

## I.

The term “utopia,” which means “no place,” originates in Sir Thomas More’s 1516 book of the same name. In his *Utopia*, More describes a perfect island society, where everyone lives in happiness and considerate reciprocity. This system assumes that people are essentially good, so long as they are raised in the right conditions, in an environment free of greed, commercialism, and poverty. The people live and worship their God in a logical way: their religion dictates that the only way to live morally is to be happy, and the only way to be happy is to work cooperatively with one’s neighbors.

In naming his ideal society “no place,” More suggests there is no place on earth as peaceful and wonderful as the one he describes.<sup>1</sup> But More is deeply critical of English society as it existed in his time, and he feels that if people would shake off their complacency, it would bring his ideal world into existence. In this respect, More exemplifies Tom Moylan’s description of utopia as characterized by a “radical hope” (Moylan 195). This definition and others are found in Moylan’s 2000 book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, described on its back cover as “a critical investigation of the history, aesthetics, and politics of dystopia.”

Moylan provides a helpful framework for charting the varieties of utopian works. He defines a utopia as an idealistic, hopeful society. Its exact opposite, the anti-utopia, is characterized by cynicism and despair with no hope for change. Another form is the dystopia, which differs from the anti-utopia in that while the people feel a “militant pessimism,” the community is still an open system where there is some hope for improvement. Its opposite is the pseudo-dystopia, which is a closed system, where the

people have resigned themselves to their grim fate (Moylan 195). On a parallel tier are the critical utopias and dystopias, which present themselves as “strategically foregrounding their own conditions of textual productions in light of the historical opportunities and pitfalls of utopian writing” (Moylan 9). Basically, these are self-conscious works, where readers are invited to think about the upsides and downsides of utopias. The critical dystopia is an open form that portrays what can happen when people attempt to create a utopian world: some problems are fixed, but new ones are created.<sup>2</sup>

Utopian societies are usually founded in the way that More’s is founded, as discussed above. That is, a group of wise leaders plans a society ideally suited to human capacities and limits. A dystopian society, however, can be founded and maintained in several ways. Sometimes an authoritarian body takes control of the state and rules over its populace, such as in George Orwell’s *1984*. The government of this kind of society might threaten imprisonment or physical violence to those who disobey its precepts. In other dystopian societies, a more democratic body of people comes together to plan a society where the greatest number of people can be happy; ideally, no one will ever suffer there, and everything will run smoothly. But these intended utopias may evolve into dystopias when the people in charge desire to have too much power or attempt to evade their responsibilities to the people in favor of pursuing their own personal interests.

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<sup>1</sup> More also unknowingly contributed to the difficulty of defining “utopia.” Ruth Levitas points out that the word “utopia” is a pun: it may derive from the Greek “eutopia,” a “good place,” or from “outotopia,” a “noplacel” (Levitas 2).

<sup>2</sup> For a less complicated definition, we can look at Ruth Levitas’s summary of Krishan Kumar’s: “Dystopia (or anti-utopia) represents the fear of what the future may hold if we do not act to avert catastrophe, whereas utopia encapsulates the hope of what might be” (Levitas 165). Or, we can look at an even simpler definition that she also offers: to define utopia, “one must of course be able to locate something which remains constant while content, form and function vary. This element, I would argue, is that of desire— desire for a better way of being and living” (Levitas 7).

## II.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the way that language creation, manipulation, and usage can affect utopian and dystopian societies. In some cases, language can produce the utopian or dystopian elements of a society, and in other cases, the language serves as an indicator of these societies' health or pathology, respectively.

George Orwell discusses the cause-and-effect relationship of language to society as a whole in his 1946 essay, "Politics and the English Language." In reference to the English-speaking nations of the world, he states that, "our civilization is decadent and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse" (Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" 156). However, the relationship is not as simple as that, and the cause and effect can progress in the opposite direction as well: "the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes. . . . But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely" (Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" 156). Language can be a symptom of a society's increased degeneration, but it can also cause and perpetuate this corruption.

To state it simply, when a society's ideologies change, so does its language, and vice versa. Observing its language is a good way to monitor a society's overall health.

Sometimes the evolution of a language is a somewhat passive or unintentional process, caused by the fact that as concepts change, so too must the language that refers to these concepts. This relationship between a word and its referent is metaphorical, and unfortunately even the best metaphor can only be an approximation. When a person wants to communicate, he or she follows this process put forth by Nietzsche: first "he



translates a nerve stimulus into an image! That is the first metaphor. Then, the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overlapping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a totally different, new one” (Nietzsche 249). Through this process, qualities of a concept can be lost or blurred according to the speaker’s skill or the limits of the vocabulary available to him or her. And when concepts change in a changing society, it becomes more and more difficult to express something accurately, and so in the modification of language to fit the needs of the society, sometimes errors or ambiguities are perpetuated. Sometimes we simply do not have an accurate word for something, or a concept changes but the word does not, which creates a discrepancy. Most of the time, this process is no one’s fault in particular, but because an apathetic populace might fail to attend to these changes, language may imperceptibly become a source of error and confusion.

However, in some cases, a person or governmental body may willfully manipulate language in order to control the people and how they think and communicate. This practice gives the governing person or persons power over others, and directs the populace to act in such a way as to carry out the manipulator’s wishes. For example, in a society where the people are not allowed to learn to read, the literate will be able to keep secrets from and thus have power over the illiterate. Or if people are literate, the state can design a school system to maintain control over the thinking of the students. Regarding an experimental school, Harvey Graff states that “the development of hegemony . . . depend[s] on a ‘level of homogeneity, self-consciousness, and organization’” where literacy was “the medium and the carrier of the elements of the hegemonic culture”

(Graff 35). Teaching students selectively like that can perhaps be just as detrimental to them as denying them all literacy altogether.

Perhaps the most famous example of language control is in George Orwell's *1984*, a novel that is decidedly anti-utopian; this is made especially obvious in the mood of the last sentence<sup>3</sup>: "He loved Big Brother" (Orwell, *1984* 245). Contributing to this hopelessness is the enforced usage of Newspeak, a strict and excessively practical English-based language, created to influence the citizens' cognition in a way that keeps them from being able to express any thoughts involving freedom or rebellion, concepts that might threaten the government's absolute control.

In an appendix to his novel called "The Principles of Newspeak," Orwell discusses the aims and strategies of this language: "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism. . . . The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible" (Orwell, *1984* 246)<sup>4</sup>. The people are controlled so completely that they cannot even conceive of any way to challenge their government, or if they should feel a rebellious impulse, they would have no words to communicate the idea to others or organize a rebellion. As this book and Newspeak itself have been studied quite exhaustively, they can serve simply as a historical starting point for the ideas that inspired the novels that this paper will examine.

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<sup>3</sup> William Steinhoff calls it a "hopeless capitulation" (Steinhoff 149).

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf talks about this relationship in "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language": "Which was first: the language patterns, or the cultural norms? In main they have grown up together, constantly influencing each other. But in this partnership the nature of the language is the factor that limits free plasticity and rigidifies channels of development in the more autocratic way. This is so because a language is a system, not just an assemblage of norms" (Whorf 156).

### III.

One book that discusses the role of language in the operations of a utopian society is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.<sup>5</sup> Moylan labels the story a critical utopia (Moylan 166); the criticism of the utopian society, Anarres, comes from a "normal" capitalist society much like our own, on a nearby planet called Urras. The descriptions of the two societies are laid side by side to allow a reader to compare and contrast them, and to see whether or not the utopian society works as well as it aims to. On Anarres, one of the goals the people have is to be completely selfless and to be considerate toward the community, an appropriate ideal for anarchists, and they encourage this selflessness through their language. For example, the people avoid using possessive pronouns, in order to emphasize that any items they use—and the people themselves—belong to the community. However, in many ways Le Guin's book moves toward a critical dystopia: many problems are solved by the selfless language of Anarres, but new ones are created when people begin to claim ownership over things and ideas, and the people don't have a terminology that allows them to recognize what is happening and stop these changes.

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood portrays a society that could be classified as dystopian, because under all the superficial quaintness that these people show to the tourists, and despite all their attempts to create a picture-perfect biblical society, everyone here is miserable. Some are more militant than others, but no group of people here is happy. What began as strict control measures to expand the population's birthrate becomes the oppression of women by men and oppression of men by

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams says that this book exhibits the "marks of its period: the wary questioning of the utopian impulse itself, even within its basic acceptance; the uneasy consciousness that the superficialities of utopia—affluence and abundance—can be achieved, at least for many, by non-utopian and even anti-utopian means."

themselves. One manifestation of the women's oppression is in the fact that they are no longer allowed to read or write, and the void left within them becomes the source of their dissatisfaction and thus rebellion. But Atwood is describing what Moylan calls an open system, in that it is just waiting to fall apart: the lower social classes are tired of being objectified, and the upper classes are perpetually dissatisfied and unfulfilled (Moylan 164). Moreover, we can tell that the resistance movements described in the book will win out, because many years later, the new society finds the remains of the old, and so we know that the oppressive system was shut down, a "potential 'utopian' gesture" (Moylan 165).

After the chapters on the novels of Le Guin and Atwood, I will discuss in some detail a trilogy by Lois Lowry, including *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, and *Messenger*. These books have usually been discussed for their usefulness as exemplary young-adult fiction, mostly in a classroom setting; but as one such reviewer states, *The Giver* in particular is "a book so unlike what has come before, so rich in levels of meaning, so daring in complexity of symbol and metaphor . . . that we are left with all our neat little everyday categories and judgments hanging useless" (Chaston 123). I will discuss the books of this trilogy as examples of utopian/dystopian fiction without a necessarily pedagogic approach. The first book, *The Giver*, winner of the Newbery Medal of 1994, can be called a critical dystopia. The novel describes a community where people appear to be happy because they have eliminated some of the social problems that are common for our culture, such as arguing with friends or dealing with moments of family dysfunction.<sup>6</sup> But the more we learn about this society, the more ambiguous that

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<sup>6</sup> "I wanted [Jonas's community] to be seductive. Yes, I wanted the reader to say; *this is a place that got it right. This is the place one would never want to leave*" (Lowry, *Village of Childhood* 7).

happiness seems. The people here seek to make language as specific as possible, which can be helpful, but overall the language that they use only restricts people's thoughts and freedom to experience the full spectrum of human emotion. The staleness of their language shows that this society cannot handle any changes or scrutiny, however cursory it may be. Ultimately, we recognize that the new problems created by their choice of language regulation are not worth whatever benefits that may result.

*Gathering Blue* is not strictly a sequel to *The Giver*, in that the main characters are not carried over, but Lowry calls it rather a "companion" that should be read in the context of having read *The Giver*. This book can be classified as a pseudo-dystopia. In this nearly medieval society, the people have nothing and live a savage life, barely surviving from day to day; but although they are miserable, they do nothing to change their lives and they accept anything that happens as an unavoidable part of everyday life. The governing bodies here manipulate language through the misuse of Christian terminology with all its deeply ingrained significance, and they assign other values to words as they please to keep the people anxious but unable to fully understand enough to act. At the end, this book takes a turn toward a utopian society, when the main character reclaims the power of metaphor from her government and returns this power to her people.

The final book, *Messenger*, draws the characters from the previous novels together in a new society, one alluded to in the end of *Gathering Blue*, to create what I would label as a critical utopia. The residents of Village are truly happy. Their world is utopian insofar as it is unlike anything that exists in the real world. People value language; having knowledge about literature and the ethical values contained within it

earns people respect among their peers. Everything is fine and everyone is happy until an element from outside their culture appears, a practice called Trade Mart where people speak unkindly to each other and sell their personal qualities for trifles and trinkets. But, the power of metaphor again restores this society to what it originally aimed to be, creating for the first time in this selection of books a true utopia.

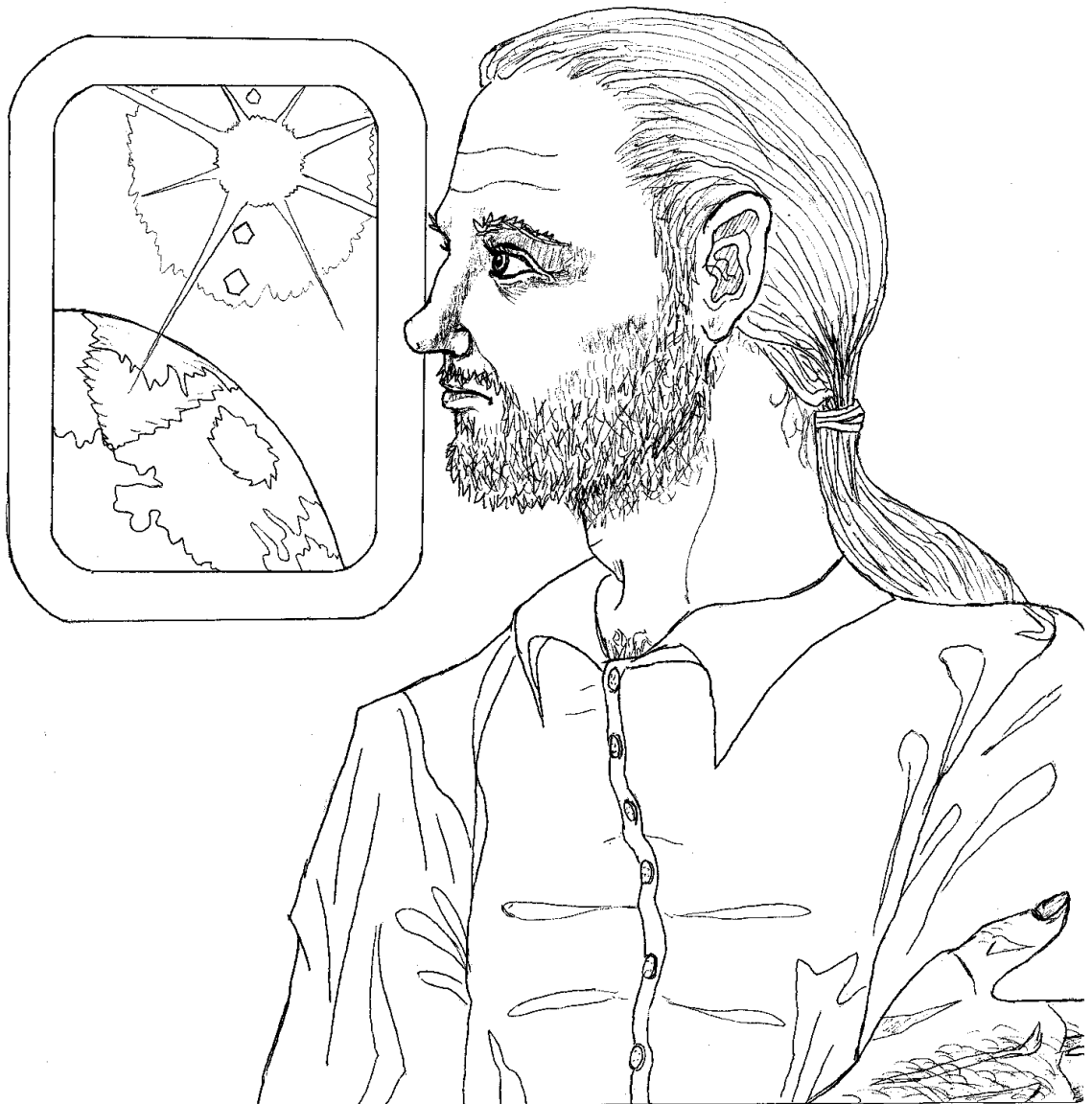
While natural or artificial changes of language can have many different effects in utopian and dystopian societies, that language can also be used to assess these societies' strong and weak points. These books all discuss what happens when language adapts and changes to fit its environment, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> The link between language and reality, however metaphorical it must be, is nevertheless a strong one, and one worth our present consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> Krishan Kumar says in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*: "On the whole, utopias are not very distinguished for their aesthetic qualities as works of literature. . . .One would not go to *Looking Backward* or *Walden Two* for the pleasure of their prose" (Kumar ix). The books I here discuss, however, *are* legitimately powerful works of literature in my opinion, which makes their perspective on language and its effects all the more valid.

*The Dispossessed*

Ursula K. Le Guin





Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, first published in 1974, tells the story of two societies on two neighboring planets and compares their merits and faults.<sup>8</sup> On one of the planets resides a society much like ours in America, and on the other is one that Le Guin calls on the book cover an "ambiguous utopia." The book begins with the story of Shevek, an early-middle-aged physicist from the anarchistic planet Anarres, and his journey to Urras, the neighboring capitalistic and authoritarian planet from which the Anarresti people originally came. The successive chapters alternate, taking place on either Anarres or Urras, with the Urras chapters progressing linearly in what might be considered the "present" moment, and the Anarres chapters starting at Shevek's childhood and progressing up to the point that he leaves for Urras.

In the Anarres chapters, we learn about the events that led up to Shevek's departure, and about the world itself. The planet is mostly covered in desert, and while there are periodic famines, the people are mostly content.<sup>9</sup> The language that the Anarresti use is completely different from that of the Urrasti; the first settlers created it anew, and it became the only artificially created language in active use by a culture.<sup>10</sup> There is no centralized government, and everyone shares everyday duties while spending most of their days doing their specialized jobs. The people adhere to a philosophy called

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<sup>8</sup> To give this some context, Carl Freedman mentions that this book was influenced by the science fiction of H. G. Wells (Freedman 93).

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams notes that "mutuality is shown to be viable, in a way all the more so because there is no abundance to make it easy." The only way to survive in a desert is to cooperate efficiently.

<sup>10</sup> Although we should mention that, ironically enough, the one word that *odos* derive from an existing language is the name of their philosopher, Odo. "The Greek word *odos* is a rough cognate of the Chinese *Tao* and the English *way*. Applied to places, *odos* denotes a 'way, road; course, channel of a river; the way to truth'. . . . With prepositions, *odos* means 'further on the way, towards, profitable, useful' (or, on Anarres, 'functional')" (Bittner 251). In this way, the Anarresti do take some linguistic history with them, as Odo's name gets associated with the people's whole way of life, and the definition is inexorably intertwined with their ideology.

Odonianism, started by a woman named Odo who was dissatisfied with her life on Urras several hundred years before this story takes place, and who inspired the Anarresti settlement. Her principles include a devotion to the social organism so absolute that the people share all the items that they use and do not consider themselves in possession of anything or anyone. This system breeds considerate people, who are satisfied with a meager life; however, this simple happiness comes at the cost of a ban on communication with Urras, whose society each Anarresti is raised to fear and hate.

Problems arise on Anarres when the people who are assigned the administrative and organizational tasks begin to assert authority over others, which violates this culture's agreement to maintain an anarchy—and since no living Anarresti has ever lived in an authoritarian system before, they do not recognize what is happening at first. Shevek notices this greed for power at his university posting, when an older physicist tries to take credit for Shevek's work, the General Temporal Theory of Simultaneity. The years pass and he struggles to do his physics work, while making a family with his partner Takver and raising their children. The two are often separated by their emergency job postings, and Shevek begins to see that their separation and his difficulty getting published are not a coincidence, but a convenience for those who would exploit him and his research.

In response, Shevek finishes up his posting, reclaims his family, and starts an independent press to assist artists whose work has been ignored for its not being immediately practical for this society (just as Shevek's theories have broad significance but no short-term application). He proposes to the interplanetary travel council that he travel to Urras; perhaps the Urrasti physicists will care for his work, and perhaps he can

learn what he needs to about a group of Urrasti that claims to be Odonians and wants to reopen Anarresti colonization. The council and the people in general disapprove strongly, but they allow him to go.

However, Shevek ultimately finds out that the Urrasti government, one of misogynistic capitalists, only wants to use his theories to develop faster-than-light travel, and thus faster-than-light interplanetary conquest. He escapes from the Urrasti university to the neighborhoods of the oppressed, malcontented lower classes, and leads a demonstration made by the people who wish to live an Odonian lifestyle on Urras. The police shoot everyone they can in this demonstration, and Shevek retreats to the Terran embassy. In the end, he offers to all planets the principles necessary to build an instantaneous communicator, the ansible, whose processes are not subject to the time delays associated with normal relativity: it is essentially an interplanetary telephone. He wishes for all nations to be on common ground, and returns to Anarres after helping to create a framework that will allow information to be shared among the Anarresti, Urrasti, Terran, and Hainish peoples.

## I.

On Anarres, the people aim to live wholeheartedly by the principles set forth by Odo. Their spirit of community is perhaps stated best on Odo's tombstone: "To be whole is to be part" (*Dispossessed* 68). The way the people use their language in particular shows how they value sharing and selflessness. However, we can see that problems develop within this system when people abuse this language, and use it as an excuse for the pursuit of their own personal desires.

The Anarresti language, called Pravic, was created with Odonian ideals in mind: the language should promote people's contributing to the social organism, by encouraging sharing as opposed to ownership;<sup>11</sup> on Anarres, the derogatory term for ownership is "propertarianism." One way that Pravic idioms compel people to share is by accusing those who do not of "egoizing."

Egoizing is when someone speaks in a way that is inconsiderate toward his or her listeners, such as discussing a topic that they are not interested in. When a child is accused of egoizing, he or she will be sent to sleep in a single room for behaving intolerably (*Dispossessed* 89). To avoid being ostracized, people learn to talk about things that other people can relate to. This emphasis on including others in a conversation serves the goal of sharing, because talking about things that no one else understands leaves nothing for the listeners to partake in.

The Anarresti language also discourages propertarianism by discouraging use of possessive pronouns. People do not use a possessive pronoun to describe an object, even if that item never gets used by anyone else, and the same goes for using the possessive to describe people. For example, a child does not call the plaything that he uses "his toy," but "the toy," and does not call the people that bore him "my parents," but "the parents." This language pattern is designed to help people embrace the Odonian principle of owning nothing, but of sharing everything with the community. In a society like this, where everyone has to cooperate with each other for everything to work, this language usage is helpful.

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Meyers says that "the language policy of the Odonians officially embraced the Whorf hypothesis. Pravic was designed to foster and protect their ideology. For example. . .Pravic exerts both positive and negative social pressure on nonconformists: the same word means both 'work' and 'play'. . .and a special

We see how the Odonian style of language especially helps in teaching children how to share. When Shevek comes home and sees his infant daughter for the first time in years, he is a stranger to her. However, in the spirit of sharing, she offers the crying man comfort, despite her being shy, saying, “You can share the handkerchief I use” (*Dispossessed* 253). Calling it “hers” would imply her exclusive use of it, while offering it to someone as the “one she uses” implies that she would like to allow someone else to use it too. Sadik, despite her young age, already understands that she should share her things with anyone, even a frightening stranger. Shevek finds the gesture touching, and it gives him hope about the future of Odonian philosophy.

## II.

This style of speaking does have its flaws, however. The problems come when situations occur which are outside of the experience that this language was wrought to describe. For example, should a person be said to own something if no one else would ever want to or have a chance to use it, and if the person specifically needs the item in question? This situation is ambiguous, and as a result the language describing it also becomes ambiguous.

For example, Shevek has for a long time used the same orange blanket, and even carries it with him when he moves from place to place with his job postings. Takver mockingly calls him a propertarian, and by the word’s definition in her society, she could be right. Shevek denies it, saying, “I’m not a propertarian. I’m just sentimental. It was the first blanket we slept under” (*Dispossessed* 261). Because Shevek is a strict and faithful

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term of opprobrium exists for those few people who drift from place to place, refusing to accept “voluntary” work postings” (Meyers 204–205).

Odonian, we would expect him not to act in a proprietarian way, but is sentimentality a proprietarian impulse? By strict Odonian principles, one might think so. But Shevek and Takver *do* need to have a blanket, and things that all people need fall into that grey area.

People cannot even be said to “possess” their own family members, though both contain the same blood and genetic data. Walter Meyers suggests that “Pravic . . . helps to disrupt any incipient family bonds,” likely in order to split apart families for practical reasons such as work postings (Meyers 206–207). Children are allowed to say “the mother,” and not “my mother”<sup>12</sup> and the words for mama and papa, “mamme” and “tadde” can be used by any child to any adult he or she feels is a role model. These language traditions subtly reinforce the idea that the attachment of children to their parents is not permitted to get in the way of work that needs to be done for the community,<sup>13</sup> even if such work means splitting families.

The same goes for partners; marriage is not allowed in Odonian society, but monogamy is not uncommon. It is still considered wrong, however, to think of someone as “his wife” or “her husband,” for example, because that would imply that a person owned another, and would not be sharing that person with the community as needed. However, one woman justifies marriage by saying “Having’s wrong; sharing’s right. What more can you share than your whole self, your whole life, all the nights and all the days” (*Dispossessed* 40)? These people who have chosen monogamy will certainly not be

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<sup>12</sup> According to Mühlhäusler, certain pronoun uses “can be seen to influence the degree that a speaker’s attention is lavished on this or that aspect of the material and social environment” (Mühlhäusler 5–6). In this case, the person in question, a parent, is not called by a pronoun at all, but by an article like any object, animate or inanimate. In the addresser’s perspective, the parent is to be placed on an equivalent level with, say, a chair or a rock.

<sup>13</sup> Baby Shevek has trouble with this concept. Selinger proposes that, “his screaming repetition of ‘Mine sun!’ cannot simply be dismissed as an inability to share; it is something he has focused on, made part of himself, to make up for what he is lacking,” with that lack being his mother, who has just left his life at age two (Selinger 110).

sharing themselves romantically with anyone else in the community but their one partner. The woman's statement may be a misuse of the word "sharing" according to original Pravic, but again, in all practicality, if a person will have no other partner and that partner will have no other partner, can these two people not be said to belong to one another?

### III.

Ambiguities and misrepresentations of language can happen naturally with the passage of time. All languages evolve, and "[i]f it is difficult to prevent an authoritarian language like Newspeak from evolving in unpredictable ways, it should be even more difficult to predict the evolution of language in a less oppressive environment" (Booker 186). While the ambiguities are perhaps innocent in nature, the more severe problems happen when people abuse Odonian language to further their own personal ambitions. In this way they abuse the whole Anarresti system, of being a part of the community that wants to share with others.

People in the arts can be treated unfairly because others who dislike or are envious of their work label them as egoists. Nothing in this society restricts artistic expression—quite the contrary. Most children learn to sing or play an instrument at school, and some people buy jewelry just to wear something beautiful, and thus the people create markets for arts that have no practical application in the society's everyday life. However, if an artist creates work that does not have a wide appeal, he or she can be accused of egoizing, and might not be allowed a job posting in his or her field. While sharing is supposed to be a two-way process of giving and taking, some people will not allow others to give something that they don't want to take.

When Shevek is a little boy and tries to make a joke, his teacher accuses him of egoizing (*Dispossessed* 23). The joke is that a thrown rock cannot ever hit a tree, because when you divide the space between the objects in half over and over as the rock travels, you can never reach zero (and thus Shevek discovers on his own what is generally known as “Zeno’s paradox.”). The teacher accuses Shevek on the basis that “speech is sharing—a cooperative art” and that telling a joke that no one understands is egoizing (*Dispossessed* 24).<sup>14</sup> However, what Shevek says is not uninteresting, because one of the other students asks him to explain further. The teacher simply does not like Shevek or understand the things Shevek says, and so is able to use the word “egoizing” as a mask for his own unbrotherly impatience and unscholarly ignorance.

Shevek’s professor and advisor, Sabul, represents the worst abuse of the Odonian spirit of community in this story. He makes Shevek rethink his position on sharing, simply because he misuses the word, using it in a more general way than the Anarresti have designed it for. And as the Anarresti are not used to being manipulated, they have no legal system in place to handle such a situation (Plaw 294).

When Shevek wonders why he should keep his grammar books of Iotic, the language of Urras, hidden, Sabul brings to him a disparate, false analogy. “If you found a pack of explosive caps in the street would you ‘share’ them with every kid that went by? Those books are explosives” (*Dispossessed* 85). He gives Shevek the sense that to “share” is to give people something that they cannot handle; it is assumedly a given that people here do not give dangerous objects to their children simply based on a policy of

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<sup>14</sup> If the teacher is correct in calling Shevek an egoizer, this is what Whorf calls in his essay “On the Conception of Ideas” an association (which is personal) as opposed to a connection (which is social/communicative) (Whorf 36). A person outside of Shevek’s own mind would not understand the joke; the teacher however, does not allow him to provide that context.



sharing. The main principle is to do what is best for the community, which would include keeping children safe. Knowledge here is something that should be shared, simply because if someone were to decide that a message was not safe for common knowledge, then that would put that person in an authoritarian position. The fact that Sabul claims such authority here makes him a hypocrite, because his decision is for his own gain, not that of society.

Sabul proves his own egoism when he refuses Shevek permission to publish his most controversial book yet, *Principles of Simultaneity*. Before, Sabul had taken some of Shevek's glory by listing himself as co-author of Shevek's first book. But now he seems to fear possible public denunciation that may come as a result of ideas as radical as the ones in this new book (*Dispossessed* 193). That fear might be why he refuses to publish the book, but Takver proposes that Sabul might only want to create doubts in Shevek's mind about the validity of his work so that he will beg for Sabul's help. Perhaps Sabul only wants to share in the credit, and he secretly recognizes how good the book really is. By contrast, in the spirit of sharing and brotherhood, Shevek speaks in a non-possessive way, "I am that book," when he might have greedily said "it is my book" (*Dispossessed* 194), Sabul wants it to be *his* book, Takver realizes, and not a collection of ideas open to use by any or all of the people (*Dispossessed* 193). This is the inherent problem with Shevek's culture: his self-worth depends on his contributions to others, and in a system that does not acknowledge him or return the favor, he gets no reward or satisfaction. In his book on *The Dispossessed*, Selinger quotes Lichtenstein: "this problem [alienation] derives from man's lack of an innate 'identity,' thus compelling him to define himself in

terms of his instrumentality for someone or something else” (107), which for Shevek is uncertain.

#### IV.

The terms “egoizing” and “sharing” might take on meanings other than their intended ones when a few selfish people abuse the words. The general populace, in their devotion to Odo’s principles, cannot conceive of this kind of deception. Until Shevek relearns how to think like a revolutionary and returns home with an outside perspective gained from his life among the Urrasti, the Terrans, and the Hainish, the Anarresti really cannot understand what is going on. His mentor, Mitis, had warned, “don’t let false egalitarianism ever trick you. . . . [Y]ou should be free to find the line you want to follow” (*Dispossessed* 46). Shevek reaffirms this principle and helps his people see that they must always be thinking, and cannot let their society run itself with no effort. He leads by example through practicing true egalitarianism; by wielding the ansible, “Shevek insists upon giving his theory to all of the planets at once, so that it cannot be transformed into property and a basis for power and domination” (Plaw 298). He gives everyone the free communication that can help them all. Anarres is a home for revolutionaries, and the constant of “endless variety within the unchanging framework” (*Dispossessed* 90) has the potential to keep their society the healthy anarchy that Odo and her companions traveled there to build.

*The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood



Set in a near-future America, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is written in the form of an oral recounting transcribed from audio tapes, and resembles a diary in its intimacy. The story is told after the fact by Offred, a Handmaid, who describes the society she lived in and her personal experiences in it, although it is not certain whether she made a clean escape or was captured in the attempt.

This society is called Gilead, and its leaders are Christian fundamentalists who, in order to cope with extremely low birth rates due to pollution and disease, have enacted strict controls upon its citizens, with the more radical of the changes affecting women. All sexual content has been removed from the people's lives: revealing clothing, suggestive books and magazines, and even the practices of courtship. We come into the story three years after the inception of the new regime, after the president and members of congress have all been gunned down and the Constitution has been suspended.

The situation is relatively unchanged for women of the lower economic classes, but in the higher classes, women can either be Wives, who are non-sexual partners to the male Commanders, or Handmaids, who are women who live as slaves, and whose only purpose is to bear children. Women who have gone through a divorce or who have married formerly divorced men are made into Handmaids, as a punishment for violating this society's religious edict against divorce.

Handmaid training happens at the Rachael and Leah Center, named in reference to Genesis 29:28–29:32, in which Jacob marries Leah but bears children by Rachael. At the Center, the women are imprisoned for conditioning until they are assigned a Commander. They learn to be subservient and are no longer allowed to read or write,

although many of them are tortured by the fact that they are already literate, and can fully understand what they are missing.

Once they are out in the world, Handmaids must be careful not to do anything rebellious, or they will be sent to the Colonies to clean up toxic waste. The citizens are always being watched by the government's spies, called Eyes, and almost anyone might be one. In response, there exist secret resistance groups: Mayday, which is a group of women looking for ways to break out of this oppressive system, and the Underground Femaleroad, a group of people helping women secretly escape to other countries.

In the context of the whole world, Gilead is a small but powerful force; other countries do not have governments of this type, but these other nations do not interfere with Gilead or offer any help to its oppressed citizens other than a safe place for the few escapees to live. The government of Gilead (whose church is not separated from the state) is also constantly at war with other religious groups, like the Quakers and Baptists.

Our narrator, Offred (the Handmaid "of Fred"), spends her time elaborately preparing her body for childbirth, remembering and worrying about her loved ones, and trying to find a way out of her situation. She thinks often of her little daughter and Luke the man who had been her husband before the new government made divorces void (thus invalidating their marriage and leaving Luke still legally bound to his previous wife); Offred hopes that her family is still alive somewhere. She contemplates suicide, but takes some comfort from a sentence she finds scratched into the woodwork in her room: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum."

Against all propriety, the Commander begins inviting her to his private room and tries to win her affections with illegal items, like books, magazines, and games of

Scrabble. She certainly cannot refuse him, and she does enjoy being allowed to read and write again, but she must keep this privilege a secret from Serena, Fred's Wife, who greatly resents the Handmaid's presence. Fred, ironically, also tells her what the phrase the previous Handmaid carved into the closet means: "Don't let the bastards grind you down." She must do her best to stay in the Commander's favor, although she finds him repulsive.

Offred learns more and more about the resistance movement from Ofglen, another Handmaid she goes shopping with, and from her old friend Moira, with whom she is reunited at a brothel called Jezebel's on a covert night out with the Commander. However, at this point, Offred begins to get too careless. She begins regularly making love to one of the Commander's men, and she speaks about Mayday too openly on the street. We may assume that she gets caught when a black van comes to pick her up in the middle of the day, and while the people in it claim to be Mayday, Atwood never makes it clear who they are or what happens to Offred.

In a sort of epilogue, we see that many years in the future, a historical society has found the audio tapes and has been studying them. Putting Offred's life in the context of a study by academicians may seem to trivialize her situation: "this ordinary suffering woman, who became a courageous political agent in her own right, is patronizingly reduced to the reified status of an object of study" (Moylan 165), as if she were an ancient fossil or a rare microorganism.

## I.

In the nation of Gilead, women are not allowed to read or write,<sup>15</sup> among many other restrictions. For a literate and thoughtful person like Offred, writing in particular is a large part of who she is, and accordingly her life must change when she is denied this privilege. In some ways, she exists in the present through writing and in the future through being written about. Writing also acts as an indicator for her level of optimism. The way that Offred feels about writing reflects how hopeful she is for her future and for her plan to escape this system, or how far she has descended into pessimism, respectively.

In the beginning of her narrative, Offred misses being able to write, and talks about its many benefits. For an example, writing helps a person organize his or her thoughts in a different way. She says, “What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. . . . Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be” (*HT* 143). Writing about thoughts or experiences after the fact is a way to clarify how you feel about them, so that you can assimilate knowledge rather than letting it pass by in a blur. She misses this kind of cognition.

We can see how tantalizing reading and writing have become for women who are denied them. When the Commander reads the Bible out loud to the women and servants, Offred compares their desire to be a part of the reading process to the feelings of starving children watching a man eating a steak. “We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his

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<sup>15</sup> The stores where the women do their shopping have pictures on the signs; as Graff points out, in the nineteenth century “taverns, stores, and other buildings were often demarcated by symbols as well as lettered names” (Graff 310). But in Gilead not only have pictures been added but the words have been removed, to try to enforce a fake, compulsory illiteracy.



magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (*HT* 88). While she may envy him simply for having something women don't have, we can tell that the feeling is more complicated than that because she is not interested in the Bible stories at all, and in fact finds them repetitive and boring. She just wishes that she might possess the use of words like she did once—throughout her whole life until only three years before—and the desire for reading does not fade easily.

## II.

When Offred does get whatever small doses of writing that are available to her, we see how much strength and hope it gives her. We see that she equates writing and the thought pattern associated with it to the happiness and fulfillment she strives for.

Even a simple game like Scrabble, one that previously she would have scoffed at, becomes a rare joy for her; Fred, who wants to feel generous and thus have power over her, invites her to play with him. For her it is exquisite. "This is freedom, an eyeblink of it *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury" (*HT* 139). This fascination comes even though the Commander controls the words. Offred does not need to own the words; she merely wants to use them. The Commander, on the other hand, likes to own them, dole them out at his leisure, and even define them, as is the case when he gets drunk and they use made-up words in play (*HT* 209). This is the best pleasure she gets, when she can exercise her vocabulary, and can physically grasp the words themselves as she makes them with the little wooden tiles. For the moment, the words are hers to use, for her enjoyment.

Offred is also able to form a connection between writing and its mindsets and her own contentedness. When she needs to focus or calm herself, she makes a chain of free associations in her mind, thinking about how words and origins relate. For example, she

thinks of the word “chair,” and how it can mean different things and how its one syllable sounds like components of other words: “None of these facts has any connections with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (*HT* 110). It is significant that she uses a writing word, “compose,” in this expression. In the same way that definitions and origins compose the totality of a word, Offred’s thoughts and introspections compose her as a whole person. Nor does she exist before she writes; rather she constructs herself through conscious writing, in the same way that an idea becomes a physical object when written on an actual page. “What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (*HT* 66).

Offred’s writing also comprises and equates to her self as a sexual being. When she thinks of her visits with the Commander and the intimate yet non-sexual activities they engage in and wonders what one of the Commander’s men thinks they are doing, she realizes that the two types of activities, forbidden writing and forbidden love-making, are nearly the same. “Acts of perversion, for all he knows. The Commander and me, covering each other with ink, licking it off, or making love on stacks of forbidden newsprint. Well, he wouldn’t be far off at that” (*HT* 181). Here she feels freedom in the word-play that she and the Commander engage in, and connects that thought to the freedom of unconventional sexual activities that are considered taboo. For her, writing and sex engender the same passionate, emotional response.

Perhaps the most startling emotion that she feels as a result of forbidden writing is hope, which she finds in the “dog Latin” or mock-Latin phrase carved into her closet by the previous Handmaid: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (*HT* 52). She does not know what it means, but the fact that it was written by a woman just like her, forbidden

from writing just like her, represents a secret resistance, and an embracing of the craft they both hold dear. “It pleases me to think I’m communing with her, this unknown woman” (*HT* 52). The woman’s message gives Offred a feeling of camaraderie and hope.

Another hopeful aspect of writing for her is a more personal one, the idea that one can think of one’s life as a narrative, one that any person could read or write. In circumstances as harsh as hers, Offred realizes, “I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. . . . Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off” (*HT* 39). She will tell her story so that she can take comfort in a possible future and then an ending. And we know that if she could, she would write her story down herself; she must “[t]ell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden” (*HT* 39).

As a result of how we all grow up reading and writing stories, we tend to think of ourselves as the protagonists in an important story. We feel we are engaged in some important or epic quest sometimes, because “people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot” (*HT* 215). There is no reason to live if there is no goal or no action in a person’s life, and the act of writing creates a comforting self-image. Offred wants to write her own story and cast herself as an important and worthy character, and the perspective of her life’s being an important story gives her the confidence to do so.

### III.

However, we begin to worry about Offred's welfare at certain points in the book, when she starts to lose hope, and this loss of faith occurs when words stop having meaning for her. When she does not feel so secure in her art of writing, this insecurity sounds like an indication that her resolve to survive this culture is beginning to flag.

Despite her attempt to place an importance on herself and her story, she admits even early on that some events she describes are a "reconstruction" (*HT* 140). In particular, she talks about how at the end of their game of Scrabble, the Commander tells her to kiss him, and she tells us how at the time she imagines knifing him savagely the next time he asks. Then, she tells us how he becomes sad and asks her to kiss him like she means it. She tells us straightforwardly that these are untruths, or thoughts that she had had after these events took place. She feels insecure with the truth here, and inflates and romanticizes her story to make it sound more like how she wishes it happened. Rather than "composing," i.e. creating a piece of writing anew, she frames events that she is dissatisfied with by "reconstructing," the act of obscuring an unpleasant historical truth, and through this change in terminology we see that she is not so confident as we had hoped.

The context of particular statements also takes away some of their power as well. She asks the Commander to translate the Latin that she found, and he can, but she can tell that she is making a bad decision in showing him the words: "Here, in this context, it's neither prayer nor command, but a sad graffiti, scrawled once, abandoned" (*HT* 186). Showing it to the Commander betrays her impatience to know what it means, and she recognizes her error by how the words appear on the page. The phrase translates to

“Don’t let the bastards grind you down,” and as no woman at this point would know this joke that boys tell to each other, she figures out that the previous Handmaid must have learned the phrase in this room (*HT* 187). The magic and power of the words is taken away because of how Offred betrays the unknown woman’s secret to the Commander; they are now translated and robbed of the mystery of their original form. Furthermore, Offred might feel betrayed by the woman, in that she seems to have been in league with the Commander, and not the self-confident rogue that Offred envisioned. The words no longer lend her hope, because of the fundamental doubt that caused her to ask, when simple faith in those words would have preserved their strength for her and others.

#### IV.

Offred is captured or at least taken somewhere else at the end, and her very person and her story become objectified in the journal that the historians find. She did not even write the journal, but dictated it, and someone transcribed it with all the inherent opportunities for mistranslations, typographical errors, and even possible tampering by a deceitful revisionist. Technically, Offred did not hold control over her language, and as a result we cannot in good faith trust her account. Her words could have been corrupted and we would never know, or her story could be a complete fabrication (*HT* 302–303). When she loses the strength and attention to detail that kept her from getting caught, she becomes a character we cannot depend on, and her unverified tale follows suit. Offred only exists for us and for the historical society through her words, and as we see how she comes to lose her confidence, her words reflect that uncertainty. And whether she ends up

safe across the Canadian border or mired in chemicals in the Colonies, we see that Offred has been ground down and defeated.

*The Giver*

Lois Lowry





The society Lowry creates in *The Giver* is a classic dystopia: the people tried to create a perfect society without suffering, and as soon as people start to realize what has been done to them, they start to question and eventually deny the wisdom of their predecessors' choices.<sup>16</sup>

This is the highly structured society of Jonas, a young man who at the start of the novel awaits his Ceremony of Twelve, the day he will receive his job assignment. Almost everything in this community is assigned: a person gets assigned a name, a job, a mate, and two children from designated Birthmothers. The aging process is also very structured: at each "Ceremony" for each year, children get a new feature in their lives, whether it be a coat with buttons, a bicycle, or finally a job. And after that, each person lives a full life raising children (if he or she is deemed appropriate for parenting), and then finally moves into a group home for childless adults.

Jonas finds out that his family will be taking in an unexpected house guest, a little baby from the Nurturing Center where Jonas's father works. This little baby has been put on the list for possible "release," the process by which sickly babies, old people, and those who have committed three consecutive crimes or transgressions toward the community are sent to live in that mysterious place called "Elsewhere." We find out that the baby's name will be Gabriel, once he attends his Ceremony of One; Jonas's father doesn't mind bending the rules just a little by calling him by that name early, as he has a

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<sup>16</sup> Lowry's own experience with the need to share personal suffering partly inspired this book. Her mother's health was failing and she was near the end of her life. She wanted to tell all her stories to Lois, and when she spoke of Lois's sister Helen's death, a painful topic, Lois "tried, sitting there by her bed, to move her away from it, to direct her to other topics, other memories. But she lingered there, telling the details of it, needing to remember the anguish of it, for a long time" (Lowry, *How Everything Turns Away* 11).

fondness for this one. We see that a person can break the rules secretly, if he or she is careful.

When the day of the Ceremony arrives, Jonas waits for his number to be called, but the Chief Elder skips his number and goes on to the next without explanation. At the end, he finally learns he is to be trained as the new Receiver, a role described only as the most honorable job in the community. With his appointment he receives the rules of his position, one of which startles him: he is allowed to lie, which is otherwise strictly forbidden here. He wonders: what if everyone in the community has been given this permission, and how could he ask anyone if they have received this instruction and expect to be given a truthful answer?

In the private apartment of the current Receiver, a grandfatherly old man whom he will now call the Giver, Jonas finds out that that as his job he is to receive the memories of history, to hold within him the experiences that people used to have before the community converted to Sameness many generations ago. The Giver tries to explain to Jonas what that means, only to find that he cannot adequately convey experience through words alone. He places his hands on Jonas and transmits directly to him the experience of snow, and cold, and hills, and sledding.

Every day Jonas receives memories. He learns of sunshine, and wind, and eventually begins to see colors. He eventually comes to know pain and the accompanying wisdom. Later he sees a holiday scene with a family exchanging presents by the fireside. The Giver explains to him that the feeling he gets from this memory is called love, a feeling that Jonas is appalled to find that his parents are not equipped to feel, not even for him.

With his increased knowledge comes more questions. Jonas asks what release is really like, and to his horror, he sees the security footage of a release of an infant, performed by his father that very morning. Instead of dressing the baby up and sending him to faraway lands, his father sticks a long needle in the baby's brain to kill it. We find out that Rosemary, the previous apprentice Receiver, had elected to perform this procedure on herself, and with this discovery, Jonas plans his escape from the community.

The plan falls apart one day when Jonas finds that little Gabe is to be released the next morning. Determined to save the baby, Jonas has to leave that night, stealing food and his father's bicycle.

They travel for weeks and weeks through the wilderness, passing communities similar to their own until they're in an uninhabited wilderness. Their food supply and morale dwindle, and they're threatened with failure when it starts to snow and they can no longer ride the bike. Just as Jonas is about to fall down and die, he sees the sled from his memory, poised at the top of a hill, waiting for him. He rides down the hill on it, towards the lights and quiet sounds of caroling from the village below. The memories have finally come to life for him, and we see that he has the chance for a new beginning in this normal place.

I.

In *The Giver*, the society has created a language that is designed to be very specific. The children work hard at school to learn to express themselves succinctly and accurately; lying is of course forbidden, but even an accidental misuse of a word warrants

punishment. However, the unwritten rules regarding language cause this society to be hypocritical. While the people claim to use only specific language, they rely on many vague euphemisms to conceal the inhumane nature of some of their policies. Furthermore, we find out that plenty of people here do lie, on a regular basis and with no apparent remorse. It is unclear whether the members of the governing council fully understand what is going on, but they perpetuate the concealment of the truth and the citizens never know any better, until Jonas discovers exactly what the founders of the society had planned.

There are no defined oppressors in this book, really, and no terminology to discuss them. The choice to live and speak this way was made by the people collectively, long ago. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the people who created the rules as “founders,” and will refer to the modern people that perpetuate their ideals as “governors.” The only person with the knowledge to change things is the Receiver of Memory, the only person aware of humanity’s complex history.

At the beginning of this novel, this community might appear to be a place very different from ours, but still a benign place. Its education system seems to be an impressive one, one that teaches children as young as Jonas to be careful and conscientious with their language use. For the sake of interpersonal relations and many other reasons, this society’s commitment to specificity of language is in many ways a good thing.

Well-defined precepts can certainly be helpful in societies. While we readers of course have laws in all our countries, these people keep their laws in the “Book of Rules,” a copy of which is in every house (*Giver* 74). Everyone knows this book, and its

contents are reinforced in the classrooms in such a way that even small children know most of the rules. People also receive detailed job descriptions in adulthood (*Giver* 68). The people can take some comfort in always knowing exactly what is expected of them.

For another benefit of precision of language, we see how Jonas uses specific language simply to be better understood by his family. He feels an unease about the upcoming Ceremony of Twelve, and at first he thinks that he feels “frightened” (*Giver* 1), but on second thought realizes that the right word is “apprehensive” (*Giver* 4). This young man’s grasp of the subtle differences between words speaks highly of his language teachers’ attention to detail, and the society that generated such sensitive people.

Jonas was trying to come up with that description for the nightly “telling of feelings,” which is when each family member talks about the good or bad feelings he or she had that day to reach a peaceful resolution (*Giver* 4–5). In this way, everyone has a clear communication with all members of his or her family, and if they have a conflict, they can bring it forth rather than let it fester. This practical convention helps each family with learning and bonding.

Another manifestation of this society’s precision of language is the rule against lying. Children are told to be honest, and as a result find the very notion of lying astounding.

Even exaggeration is considered a form of lying here. Jonas is chastised for saying he is “starving” when he is only hungry (*Giver* 70). It is a good lesson, to avoid reckless and insensitive words. This conversation is a bit unsettling, however; cannot exaggeration be a useful figure of speech sometimes?

## II.

Exclusive use of specific language may have been a well-intentioned experiment, but its failures manifest themselves slowly, emerging one by one as the story progresses.

As discussed earlier, the processes of telling of feelings and dreams can be helpful, but it can also be harmful and awkward. A person is not permitted the privacy of unspoken feelings, or the learning experience of trying sometimes to resolve his or her own emotional problems. The individual's desires are pushed to the background here by the rules of the community: if a person wishes to withhold a feeling, he or she has to relinquish it anyway because hiding it might disrupt the family's smooth operation, and there is no allowance for privacy here.

Furthermore, what if a person felt a feeling that he or she could not describe? It happens sometimes even in a place with free speech, perhaps because the words escape a person for whatever reason, or because he or she is new to the language and doesn't yet know all the words to speak of feelings. But, when they are required to express their feelings every evening, these people might feel frustrated if the words won't come, or worse, if there seems *not to be a word* for their emotion. They might assume that that emotion doesn't technically exist, and that they ought not to be feeling that way. In Jonas's society, where many words have been removed from the lexicon altogether, this is a problem. As Mühlhäusler argues, "It is not implausible to conclude that in the process of learning the emotion vocabulary of one's culture, one is learning to discriminate, elaborate, or suppress bodily feelings to accord with the local conventions of how one should feel." He illustrates this point by noting that in the Tahitian language, where there is no word for "sad," and no sort of behavior or ritual that we would

associate with the concept of sadness (Mühlhäusler 7). The word doesn't exist and neither does the concept.

Requiring a specific style of language can even undermine the message itself. When a person in Jonas's community offends someone, the two of them complete a pre-scripted sequence of apology and apology-acceptance statements, as a reflexive response (*Giver* 4; 59–60). Regarding standardized language, Orwell states that “Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. . . . A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine” (Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” 166). An apology ought to involve contemplation of one's transgression, but in Jonas's world apology has become has become a thoughtless, mechanical act.

Adhering so strictly to language rules even inspires brutality in this culture. Jonas's friend Asher gets no mercy for what appears to be a form of dyslexia. When Asher as a toddler kept asking for a “smack” when he wanted a “snack,” the teachers obliged and beat the child so much that he temporarily became an elective mute (*Giver* 55). The teachers achieved their goal; as a result, when Asher finally talked again, they said, “it was with greater precision. And now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies are very prompt” (*Giver*, 55). Since the people knew what he meant, that he wanted a snack, they beat him only because of imprecise speech, which seems an extreme measure for a three-year-old, especially one with a disability that he cannot control.

The treatment of a citizen's imprecise speech is harsh, but it is perhaps just as dehumanizing to be talked about like an object, which is the result of the naming and labeling systems of this community. For example, being a newborn baby is very difficult

in this culture. He or she is not permitted a name until that year's Ceremony of One, performed collectively for all children born since the time of the last Ceremony; until then, a baby is called only by a serial number. (*Giver* 12) This policy exists to discourage Nurturers from forming attachments to these newborns, in case a baby is labeled as fit to be released. And when babies do get their names, they receive whichever one is available from the list, as if they were tropical hurricanes. It's a process that makes a child into an object in the minds of the citizens.

Even after the children have names, this society uses a verbal ceremony that causes them to be viewed as replaceable. When a child named Caleb drowns in the river, his parents are given a "new Caleb," who is "a replacement child" (*Giver* 44). The society performs the "Ceremony of Loss" where they repeat Caleb's name all day long, getting softer and softer until finally "the little Four seemed to fade from consciousness" (*Giver* 44). Basically, the people repeat the name until it's nearly meaningless, as when someone says or writes a word too many times. Whatever loss they might normally feel is anesthetized by the ceremony, and by the addition of a new child that by its very name is equated to the former child. The original child's individuality is forgettable.

There are yet other ways that these citizens use a person's name to devalue him or her: they take the people's names away from them to indicate disapproval. When children misbehave, they are called by their serial numbers by their parents, "indicating that mischief made one unworthy of a name" (*Giver* 50). Furthermore, when a person does something that particularly offends the populace, his or her name is removed forever from the pool of reusable names. "A name designated Not-to-Be-Spoken indicated the



highest degree of disgrace” (*Giver* 67). The only way to be memorable in this community is through an outstanding crime, which makes the overachievers feel worthless.

Jonas is one of those who feels unimportant here. “I’m only, well, I was only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday,” he tells the Giver. “I’m not anything at all. Not yet” (*Giver* 75). That one of the brightest minds in this community, and one given supposedly the most honorable job responsibilities, feels this insecure simply because he hasn’t yet developed all his skills shows that the specific labeling of people does not add up to a feeling of personal worth. On the contrary—if one does not live up to one’s title, then one is worthless.

### III.

While the community’s insistence on using specific language is a problem, another problem, and a quite ironic one, is that plenty of their language is not specific at all, and in some cases appears to be deliberately vague, where the practice that the words conceals is immoral or barbaric.

In order to keep the society as practical and unfrivolous as possible, the founders have all but completely excised poetic language from the vocabulary, perhaps because it would be distracting to have such emotionally charged language in everyday usage. When each class of students does their morning activities, they chant the “morning anthem” and sing the “patriotic hymn” (*Giver* 3). Rather than the heart-stirring (and appropriately capitalized) “Pledge of Allegiance” and “Star-Spangled Banner,” we are left with these empty euphemisms, which may or may not even contain the same

elements as the originals. Likely these only serve to help get the students' minds focused on the coming school day, with a conditioned and familiar habit.

Another extraneous and possible distracting feeling is a factor of biology itself: the onset of puberty. The people call it "stirrings," and it is presented as if it were a disease, especially when adults discuss "treatment," which entails taking a pill that suppresses all romantic or sexual impulses (*Giver* 38). The term "stirrings" is just vague enough that no child will have any idea what it means, and thus will not really be able to question what these new feelings are or why they need to be treated. Because the founders of this society wished to strictly regulate reproduction but didn't have the means to stop puberty from ever happening, they obscured the concept by changing its name to something more vague.

The euphemism "Elsewhere" is also intentionally vague. Without any definite names of real places outside this community, the people cannot take the outside world seriously. Does it really exist? Perhaps, but it sounds like such a dull place that the governors of this community never have to worry that anyone would ever try to go there. Readers know that "Elsewhere" stands for two things: as the communities outside of this one, ones that we would consider "normal," and as the final destination of one who is released.

Thus we arrive at the companion term of "Elsewhere," the term "release." Such an unspecific word, it seems, cannot mean anything really specific to the people. They only have a vague sense of what it is to be released: for the elderly, it's a "time of celebration for a life well and fully lived" (*Giver* 7), and for the newborns, it brings "a

sense of what-could-we-have-done” (*Giver* 7). In fact, “release” means “death,” and the effect of this euphemism is to make the reality of death invisible to the people at large.

However, for the citizens who do know what release is, the ones who carry it out, the community “uses language and rules to condition its members to accept the extermination of those who are different” (Chaston 114). The Nurturers and Caregivers get used to using the word, and are desensitized to it. Orwell’s insights are again useful: “Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” 171). In this case, the term lends an ethereal quality to something brutally physical.<sup>17</sup>

Even the sound of the word itself, “release,” is an uneasy one. It seems to end on an uncertain sibilance, without the finality of the “r” sound in “murder.” Furthermore, the long “e” vowel in it carries an almost onomatopoeic mood with it. In “Language, Mind, and Reality,” Whorf says “when a word has an acoustic similarity to its own meaning, we can notice it, as in English ‘soft’ and German *sanft*. But when the opposite occurs, nobody notices it. Thus German *zart* (*tsart*) ‘tender’ has such a ‘sharp’ sound, in spite of its *a*, that to a person who does not know German it calls up the bright-sharp meanings, but to a German it ‘sounds’ SOFT . . . ” (Whorf 268).

Another huge problem is the belief that this society is founded on honesty when it clearly does not operate on that principle. Jonas finds this out when he gets his job information: the Receiver is allowed to use imprecise speech, and he may lie (*Giver* 69–71). As the most honorable title in the community, shouldn’t the Receiver be the most

moral, according to this society's rules? One would think so, but this ambiguity points to the fact that maybe this culture isn't as honest as it claims to be.

Jonas with horror realizes what is happening here. "What if they all had been instructed: *You may lie?*" Jonas wonders. "[H]e *could*, conceivably (though it was almost unimaginable), ask someone, some adult, his father perhaps: 'Do you lie?' But he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true" (*Giver* 71). Lying is the most imprecise use of language that exists, and perhaps every single person aged twelve or above lies regularly here. Nietzsche's definition of truth matches this community's definition of the word: truth is "the obligation to lie according to an established convention, to lie collectively in a style that is mandatory for everyone" (Nietzsche 250). Perhaps the only agreement in this society is that everyone lies but no one will admit it.

Using euphemisms and outright lies is one strategy for concealing any truth that might hinder the community's smooth functioning, but the strategy that shows the deepest and most pathological commitment to uncaring practicality is this: people of this society simply refuse to acknowledge the existence of certain words or concepts. These words will be treated as if they do not exist, and hopefully any people who still remember the ideas associated with these words will refrain from passing them on to the next generation.

On the most basic and simple level, there are the concepts that were removed in the transition to Sameness. According to this community, if there is no use for a word, such as for a concept or item that cannot be found here, then the word ought not to be

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<sup>17</sup> In an article on political correctness, John Derbyshire quotes Samuel Johnson: "the utterance of sweet nothings, once it becomes habitual, might seduce a lazy mind into thinking that those polite vapidities represent actual facts" (Derbyshire 7).

taught in school. For example, the children have only a vague sense of the word “animal,” living as they do in a community where there are no animals. For a time, the word lingers on, possibly because some children have overheard some adult use the word casually. In the case of Jonas and his sister Lily, “[n]either child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who didn’t fit in” (*Giver* 5). Because the children are not given a full definition for certain words, they can only use the terms in a largely metaphorical sense, which ironically is one of the least specific or literal ways to use language. And some words the children have never heard, like ones regarding colors, and weather patterns, and various geographical terrains.

Some of the removed words include those for certain emotions, especially the more passionate ones. The most astounding omission from the citizens’ vocabulary is the word and concept of “love.” Jonas can spontaneously intuit many of the words that have been repressed by his society, such as “sunshine,” but cannot intuit the word “love” when he first experiences it in his memories. He first encounters love when he sees the family in the Christmas memory, and can’t think of the word for it. The Giver says, “It will come to you” (*Giver* 123). Eventually the Giver has to tell him the word. “Jonas repeated it. ‘Love.’ It was a word and concept new to him” (*Giver* 125). When Jonas experienced sunshine for the first time, he was able to come up with the word for it without being told (*Giver* 85), but it would seem that the concept of love *doesn’t* really exist here, that it *doesn’t* lurk just beyond the curtain, like colors and sunshine do. Once he knows the words and experiences, Jonas is able to see things like colors in his everyday life.<sup>18</sup> But

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<sup>18</sup> In that aspect at least, Jonas’s world is socially constructed, according to Grace’s definition, as an “effective environment” as opposed to the “actual characteristics of the external environment itself” (Grace

Jonas only feels the sensation of love by living a memory from outside this place.<sup>19</sup> This is a place where love simply cannot exist, because of how people have been trained and manipulated, and in this way the founders have accomplished their goal, for the time being.

Jonas asks his parents if they love him, and they reply that he ought to use more precision of language, and that he used “a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete.” His mother continues, “And of course our community can’t function smoothly if people don’t use precise language. You could ask, ‘Do you enjoy me?’ The answer is ‘Yes’“ (*Giver* 127). Jonas, however, thinks of the memory of the family scene, and realizes that “[h]e had never before felt anything as meaningful as the memory” (*Giver* 127). Given that these people are not given the full range of language to describe their emotions, they have to force the emotions that they experience into their available terminology, which warps how they experience the emotions. Because his society refuses to use the word “love,” Jonas knows that his community does not take that emotion to be serious or important.

#### IV.

However, the one thing that the founders have no provision for is the possibility that the one wise, educated person in this society, the Receiver, might become dissatisfied

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3). Aspects of Jonas’s actual world can exist in an unperceived form, but for most people *those aspects effectively don’t exist*.

<sup>19</sup> It’s also possible that some words come to Jonas more easily, such as ones regarding the external world rather than the depths of the human psyche; relative to this topic, Whorf summarizes Jung, saying, “Thinking may be said to be language’s own ground, whereas feeling deals in feeling values which language indeed possesses but which lie rather on its borderland.” There are some things that are simply near inexpressible (66).

with this life, and might try to restore the world to how it was before Sameness. The founders forget that the one with all the language and all the power is The Receiver, and so he's the only one who can free the people. He can help the people pass through the veil that limits their perception.

The founders did not realize that while they can attempt to control language, they cannot eliminate the experiences that inspire it. There are some experiences that cannot be described accurately in words. For example, a thing like sunshine—we do have words to describe it, but all those words can really do is bring to life our memories of our own experience of it, and can never suffice to explain it to someone who has never felt it. In short, words cannot be a substitute for experience, but those who try to communicate with language just do the best they can.

Jonas somehow learns to use metaphors quite skillfully: he perceives that Gabe's light eyes have a certain "depth" to them, "as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet" (*Giver* 21). This moment is inspired by Lowry's own metaphor for history and memories as a river: "it becomes a torrent that enters the flow of a river turbulent by now, and clogged with memories and thoughts and ideas that begin to mesh and intertwine. The river begins to seek a place to spill over" (Lowry, *Newbery Acceptance Speech* 6).<sup>20</sup> This is a quite complex metaphor for someone who is urged to be clear and to use words literally. If he spoke his thoughts aloud, his parents might remind him that there's no logical way that an eye could resemble a river, and that the very comparison is foolish.

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<sup>20</sup> For Jonas, the potential for history and memories will spill over into Gabe, as Jonas progresses towards the realization that he has a responsibility for this infant, that he will need to transmit his wisdom and help Gabe learn.

Nevertheless we as outsiders can see that his metaphor is perfectly fitting. Clearly something has gone wrong in the community's attempt to establish a populace that speaks literally, efficiently, and pragmatically.

Part of the problem in expecting literalism is that some words really have no concrete or easily describable referent. In fact, indescribability is simply the nature of some concepts. Jonas comes to understand this: he is told not to discuss his training, but "it would have been impossible anyway. . . . 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" (*Giver* 89)? The way Lowry sets up the memory of sunshine in the book helps to describe the actual sequence of experience and afterwards the expression of it. First Jonas feels the warmth of sunshine, without being told the word. Then, the word "sunshine" comes to him with no hint from the Giver. This is a model for the generation of language: we invent new words as a way to describe new experiences to others, and if we cannot form a description that could give someone a full understanding, then we know it is simply an indescribable concept. The best any words can do for these concepts is act as a reminder to someone who has already experienced the words' referent.

Jonas's ability to perceive these experiences despite the governors' best attempts to hide them takes the form of a magical ability, called "the Capacity to See Beyond" (*Giver* 63). The Giver says that he cannot describe this ability and only name it, and so we see that it is a force that cannot be controlled of any person or precept of this society. Jonas can see beyond the blindfold this society puts on its members, in the form of seeing colors and many other attributes that exist just past the visual limits imposed on the



citizens (*Giver* 90–91). With his seeing beyond, Jonas is able to acquire the wisdom that would otherwise be denied him.

While his ability to see beyond does help Jonas in acquiring wisdom, the experiences he has really speak for themselves, and the language to describe these events necessarily follows. This is true in real life, in that new experiences generate new words to describe them. Lowry represents this causal relationship figuratively in the form of Jonas's seeing beyond, because when he receives memories, the words to describe them come to him spontaneously; the words appear out of necessity, so that two people with common knowledge, Jonas and the Giver, can speak in a common terminology. In this way Jonas learns to think abstractly about concrete objects, a thought process denied those who have to speak, think, and live with precision.

Jonas's experience teaches him that words mean nothing if they do not refer to anything, and that the experience is what matters; the words to describe the experience comes after. The Giver tries to explain snow to him, and Jonas has no idea what he is talking about. The words mean nothing (*Giver* 78). However, once he enters the memory of the snowy hill, he sees snow for the first time and immediately knows which of the formerly meaningless words it corresponds to; he finds the word with his ability to see beyond, a metaphor for the way that normal people see in normal places.

As we read *The Giver*, we notice that as Jonas gradually gains knowledge, he becomes able to formulate more and more complicated language, whether as inner monologue or verbal dialogue. Jonas's style of speaking is also affected deeply by the painful memories that he receives. When his blissful innocence is destroyed, so is the pure and simple style of speech that he used before he knew any better. He learns the real

meaning of words that had previously been exaggeration, and learns ways to express his newfound bitterness and anguish. As Jonas learns about the horrors of this society, he becomes less and less similar to his fellow citizens, and his style of speaking reflects that. He does not belong here anymore.

Jonas's new language awareness begins with the description of his first experience of the color red, on an apple. He has never before come across anything he could not describe, but he does his best with the vocabulary he has been granted: "the apple had *changed*. Just for an instant" (*Giver* 24). He realizes that it was a change of shade, because he sees that when the apple changes back, it is "the same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic" (*Giver* 24). He struggles but describes this new situation as best he can.

Incidentally, we as outside readers get a sense of the significance of this event because of an unmistakable echo of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. For Jonas, too, the fruit offers knowledge of good and evil. Jonas is the only one to see the redness of the apple, which corresponds metaphorically with how he's ultimately the only one with the knowledge of good and evil; this becomes clear after he sees his old friends playing pretend war games and is the only one who understands the true implications of the idea of "war" (*Giver* 135). He is able to articulate this idea in a surprisingly mature expression: "His childhood, his friendships, his carefree sense of security—all of these things seemed to be slipping away" (*Giver* 135).

Pain also gives Jonas the means of communicating orally without words. He finds that some emotions cannot be adequately expressed in a standard way, and agony is one of them. When he finds out what "release" really means, he is devastated: "Jonas felt a

ripping sensation within himself, the feeling of terrible pain clawing its way forward to emerge in a cry” (*Giver* 151). His society, which demands the sharing of feelings in a concise, precise manner, is not equipped to deal with any seriously unpleasant emotion, and the feelings that Jonas experiences when he discovers what “release” means have no place at his family’s dinner table.

When his wits return to him, Jonas feels bitter and for the first time he uses sarcasm to express himself. In regards to the practice of release, he says, “I will do whatever you like, sir. I will kill people, sir. Old people? Small newborn people? I’d be happy to kill them, sir. Thank you for your instructions, sir” (*Giver* 153). “Thank you” only applies if a person has a choice, and Jonas believes that he cannot take action that opposes his superiors’ wishes (*Giver* 64). Sarcasm is one of the most imprecise types of language, in that its superficial meaning directly contradicts the meaning that the speaker intends.

One of the major new types of communication Jonas learns is the expression of complex metaphors. After experiencing the sled memory, Jonas again is able to perceive things without being told beforehand. He is able to sense the various layers of meaning in the sled metaphor through a dream. “Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a *something*—he could not grasp what—that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the sled to a stop” (*Giver* 88). The Giver had introduced the sled memory as a metaphor for the memories and the life experience they represent: they are exhilarating at first, but after a while the more portentous ones weigh a person down until his or her progress is in danger of grinding to a complete halt (*Giver* 78). Jonas understands the metaphor partly since the Giver told him, but even the little bit of

experience he has had so far illuminates other meanings. The “destination” Jonas speaks of is a figurative one, that of gaining the experience necessary to be happy and healthy, and a literal one, that of arriving at the town at the bottom of the hill in the end of the book. The “*something*” he cannot name is home, and family, and love, just beyond the veil of this community.

Ironically, when Jonas uses the word “starving” earlier in the story, he is scolded for exaggerating, but by the end he can use the word with some authority (*Giver* 174). As he stumbles through the snow, the bike left far behind, he has no food and no means to acquire any. Figuratively, he is starving for love and affection, as all his community could offer him was “a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love” (*Giver* 174). It is just unfortunate that he has to experience suffering to understand the words for what he needs.

When he and Gabe escape, he finally fully understands the metaphor of the sled. Now that he understands the word “love,” he can truly integrate all the phrases running through his head. He thinks of his friends and family, and because of the love he has for them, he gains the strength to keep going through the snow. But these memories of his family are not like the second-hand memories he has been receiving all along. “[I]t was not a grasping of a thin and burdensome recollection; this was different. This was something that he could keep. It was a memory of his own” (*Giver* 178). He realizes one meaning of the word love, as a force that, while “risky” (*Giver* 126), can transfer strength to one who has it.

While Jonas isn’t able to say goodbye to the Giver in person, he finds a way to do so without words: “with his heart and mind, he called back and hoped that with his

capacity for hearing-beyond, The Giver would know that Jonas had said goodbye.” (*Giver* 164) We can believe that this attempt actually succeeds when we read the last page. “Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo.” (*Giver* 180) Jonas understands the true significance of his leaving, and constructs these thoughts into this eloquent metaphor. After hearing all of the anger and bitterness he had felt, this calm type of language reassures us that he and everyone else have the potential to recover; he cannot recover his innocence, but he can regain his well-being.

V.

From this examination of the language in Jonas’s culture, we can see the problems that arise when a group of people opts to suppress or deny certain aspects of their lives. The problem was not in their preference for specific language, which can be useful sometimes, but in their exclusion of all other types of communication. Furthermore, this society’s specific language was not really very specific at all, but was merely selective about what would be clear and what would be vague. Essentially, the plan of this society dictated what a person could learn and what he or she could not learn, and kept certain words out of the vocabulary to avoid awkward and potentially subversive questioning. Their keeping the population ignorant like this betrays a deep-seated insecurity, that if people were to know things, the community’s delicate structure would collapse.

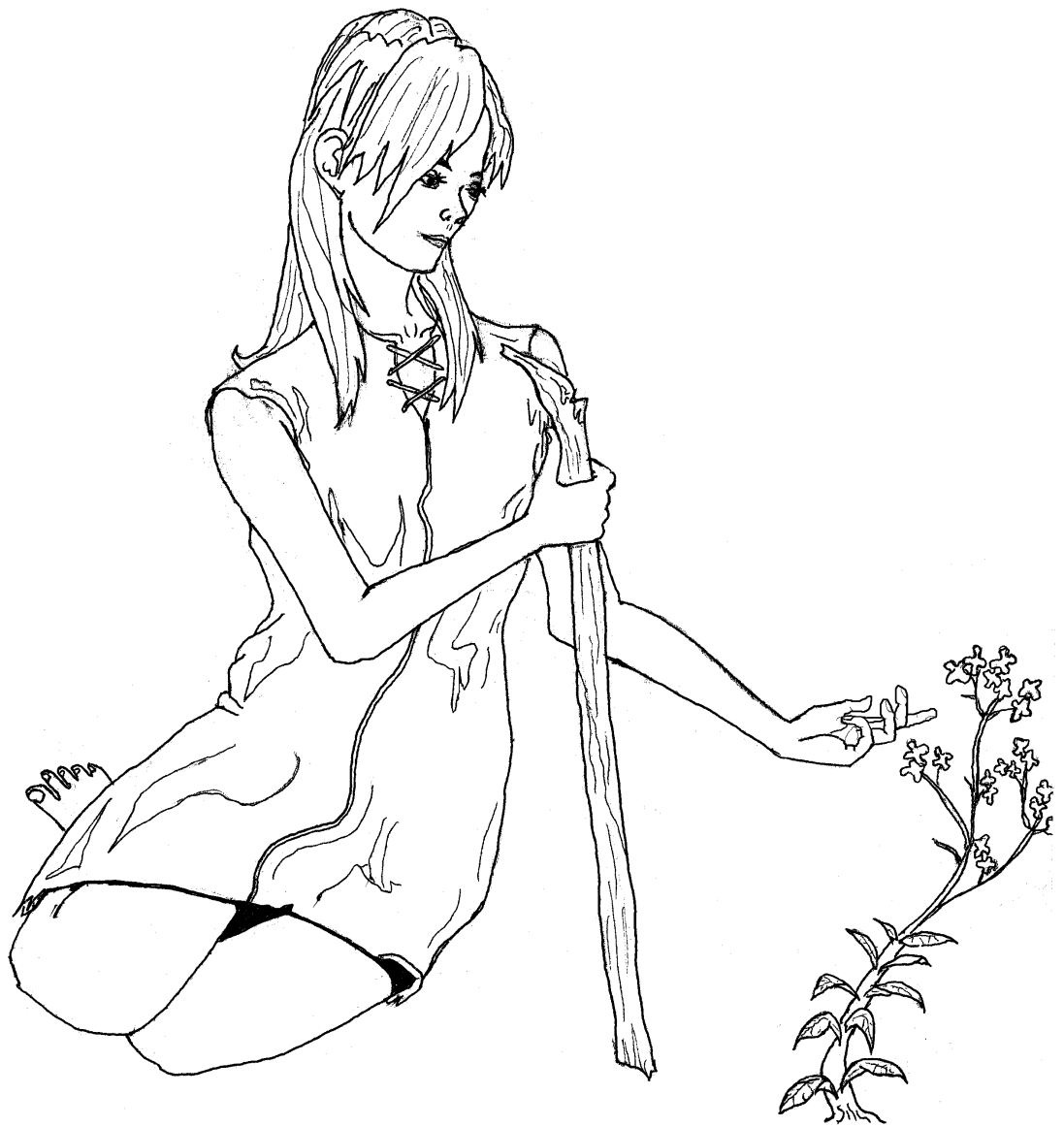
This insecurity is further manifested in the founders’ decision not to eradicate completely the concepts they chose to hide from the public: they kept the information alive through the Giver and his apprentice, the Receiver. They wanted to make sure to

have a kind of emergency escape plan in place, in case their society failed, and when it did, the Receiver was there to break them out.

With his superior grasp of language, Jonas is able to ask questions of the Giver, and the answers to these questions reveal what he needs to know to realize the true pathology of this community. He realizes how some concepts are indescribable, but that alone is no reason to exclude those concepts from everyone's lives. If an emotion or feeling is indescribable, then so be it! The word "love" cannot contain everything that the feeling *is*, but it brings to mind that warmth and contentment and happiness, and for earnest, truthful communication, that is enough.

*Gathering Blue*

Lois Lowry





Lois Lowry calls *Gathering Blue* a “companion” to *The Giver* rather than a sequel, as none of the characters or places in *The Giver* reappear here, except for a brief mention of Jonas at the end. We can tell that the story takes place in a society outwardly much different but inwardly somewhat similar to the society portrayed in *The Giver*. Most of the people here live in a state of almost medieval poverty, with hunting and simple farming to sustain them, and no advanced technology. There is nothing utopic about their existence, however; for them, the “simple life” does not beget simple happiness, but savage, unemotional practicality.

The higher class consists of lawmakers called Guardians, who live in a separated mini-dystopia with a certain amount of basic technology, such as indoor plumbing. The Guardians’ lives focus on art, law/government, and some kind of mysterious plan that they never mention. As in Jonas’s community, the common people only go to the governors when they have a question that they cannot answer, generally in the form of a legal dispute.

The protagonist of this book is Kira, a newly orphaned girl of about thirteen, whose father apparently died long ago and whose mother has just died of an undefined sickness. Because of Kira’s deformed leg and her resultant inability to produce her own food, the women of the village want to drag Kira off to the Field to die. Generally this society sends defective youngsters to the field, but Kira’s mother had fought to keep her when she was a baby.

Not brave enough to commit the murder she desires, the savage woman Vandara decides to take Kira to court before the Guardians. The Guardians deem Kira innocent of

any crime, and decree that she will go live in the Council Edifice with them. They want her to be the Threader for the Singer's Robe, which is worn by the person who sings the Ruin Song at the yearly Gathering; she will fix the worn parts that depict images from humanity's past, but more importantly fill in the white spaces on it with stories of the future.

While living in the Council Edifice, Kira is able to spend her free time with Thomas, the young Carver who works on the Singer's staff, and Matt, a mischievous little boy who has befriended the two artists. However, she spends most of her time at work on the robe. Her weaving skill seems to be magical, and she can even use it to tell the future. She begins to learn the process of dyeing fabrics from an old woman named Annabella who lives on the outskirts of this town's territory, and who can make every color but blue; the dyes to make blue cannot be found here, but only outside the community.

Kira and Thomas begin to get an ominous feeling when they see Jamison, the seemingly kindly Guardian, yelling at a tiny child in the basement. Later they find out that the child is an orphan like them and is in training to be the next Singer. Then Annabella dies mysteriously, right after telling Kira that the beasts that the villagers believe lurk in the woods don't even exist. Deaths seem to happen in a suspicious pattern in this place.

Right before the Gathering, Matt goes missing, and Kira hears that he has gone off to find some blue for her. At the Gathering, Kira sees to her horror that the Singer is kept in shackles and chains, and it becomes clear that the Guardians do not value art and artists in quite the way she expected.

Matt returns, and brings back not only the plant to make blue dye but also stories of a happier community that treasures every kind of person. And he also brings something even more unexpected: an old man named Christopher, who has been afflicted with blindness and amnesia because of a blow to the head from Jamison. And that old man is Kira's father.

Christopher and Matt at this point expect Kira to leave and go back to that pleasant village that rescued her father, but she decides to remain. The plant that creates blue grows as a symbol to remind her that there is hope here and that the more charitable aspects of society can be brought back to life, but only if she works to build that bright future,

I.

In *Gathering Blue*, parts of the community's language have developed naturally as most language does, as a function of what the society needs. In this case, the language of the common people is practical to a fault. Their language deemphasizes individual personality and treats people as being of value only insofar as they contribute to the survival of the community. The Guardians, however, are higher up in the social order and don't have the same concerns as the common people; the Guardians are in no danger of going hungry, for example. The Guardians employ heavily symbolic and twisted language to manipulate the populace; what is worse, the Guardians use this manipulation

simply to satisfy their own personal vendettas, and not as a way to stay alive.<sup>21</sup>

As in *The Giver*, the values of the village people are reflected in their naming system: in this one, the younger a person is, the less respect he or she receives from fellow community members. Most of us see our names as an acknowledgement that we exist, because it is how others refer to us. The same goes for any honorific titles, because they represent our status in the eyes of our peers. In this society, however, not many people get official titles, and some are not even granted a name.

For example, a newborn baby has no name for the first few days of life; it becomes apparent that this system tends to devalue young children when Kira talks with her mother, Katrina, about when the people wanted to discard her for her twisted leg. “They didn’t know it was *me*,” she says, and Katrina replies that, “It *wasn’t* you, yet” (*GB* 4). Even her mother, who wants to keep Kira and values every life more than most people here, has been socialized to think of new babies as lesser beings. The society chooses to think of babies as nameless to make them disposable; since newborns don’t have names, people are less likely to form attachments to them, thus allowing the deformed babies to be exterminated.

When a baby does get his or her name, the name consists of one syllable, to be added onto with time. Baby Kir became Kira when she got older, for example, and the oldest people of the town have four syllables in their names (*GB* 4; 25). The number of syllables in a person’s name determines whether or not others will take him or her

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<sup>21</sup> The term “Guardians” comes from Plato’s *Republic*. Joyce Hertzler in *History of Utopian Thought* summarizes succinctly the social hierarchy of the *Republic*. There are three classes: “the teaching and ruling class, the warrior class or guardians, and the working class” where the first class rules, the second provides defense and law, and the third “is made up of the great mass of people, the manual laborers (slaves), farmers, artisans, and tradesmen” (Hertzler 103–104). If Kira’s people were literate and could read Plato’s story, they might understand just how little their Guardians actually respect them, as compared to how they claim to respect artists here.

seriously; people receive these syllables without regard to the actual strength or wisdom that they may or may not have acquired, but only by virtue of their age. This system uses language to deemphasize the individual and his or her personal achievement.

The word for all small children, “tyke,” also suggests something disposable. Even Thomas, who appears to be a fairly thoughtful and intelligent person, thinks of them this way: “They’re only tykes. There are too many of them anyway” (*GB* 99). And he says this when Matt, a young boy that he has gotten to know personally, and who could perhaps even be considered a friend, is in possible mortal peril. The very fact that the word “tyke” is only one syllable, and a distinctly more harsh-sounding word than our customary term “baby,” signals the negative connotations of the word in this society.

In an ironic contrast to our society and Jonas’s, this society grants certain people honorific titles, but except for those denoted “Guardian,” these titles serve not to honor but to manipulate people. The prime example is the future Singer, Jo, a four-year-old who gets locked up to practice her art. Kira realizes that for Jo, Thomas, and herself, “[b]ecause they were artists, they had some value that she could not comprehend. Because of that value, the three of them were here, well fed, well housed, and nurtured” (*GB* 153). The typical villagers here never get a title, even the ones with easily recognizable professions, and they live a life of poverty. It is ironic, however, that the normal people have their freedom, and get to stay with their families, when the people chosen to be elite artists are made to believe that merely keeping their lives is a privilege. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu describes the manipulative power of a titling system: “the power of suggestion which is exerted through things and persons and which, instead of telling the child what he must do, tells him what he is, and thus leads

him to become durably what he has to be, is the condition for effectiveness of all kinds of symbolic power that will subsequently be able to operate on a habitus predisposed to respond to them” (Bourdieu 52). Their title makes them feel like they have been given special treatment, so they feel an obligation to comply with the Guardians. But what these children don’t know at first is that the Guardians are the ones killing their parents, in order to more fully control the young artists.

Kira does figure out why the Guardians wanted her in the first place, and realizes that they want to exploit her and all the other “mysteriously” orphaned, talented children, “*so that all their gifts would be captive*” (GB 210). She comes up with the right metaphor for their captivity, after seeing how the Singer is literally in chains (GB 211). We see that the title they receive is not a mark of distinction, but a tool to make the kids feel secure and important while the Guardians lock them away.

## II.

The Guardians use their powers to beguile the people through a deliberate manipulation of language, a practice begun by the founders of this society. Sometimes a word’s denotations or connotations change over time, or can differ between cultural regions: language needs to meet people’s needs for expression. While this is true in every culture, this society is distinctively malicious in that the Guardians create or enforce connotations of words in ways that benefit only themselves.

We see these principles at work in the case of Kira’s enjoyment of telling stories to her friends, for fun. Kira is a good storyteller, as her mother praises her for it (GB 6), but we see that using language in this recreational, non-functional way is discouraged

here. In fact, Vandara even uses it as a charge against her at her trial, saying that “she causes problems with the discipline of the tykes, telling them stories, teaching them games so that they make noise and disrupt the work” (*GB* 28). While Vandara may have been exaggerating to try and make a stronger case against Kira, she only brings this point up because she feels it might actually lend credence to her case: this society simply does not value Kira’s storytelling. In a community where getting work done is far more important to the people than any child’s intellectual stimulation, Kira’s weaving of stories has no place.

However, in the right crowd, her storytelling skills are like rare currency. Matt and his friends will help her build her new house in exchange for the stories she tells them (*GB* 40). We know Matt is the kind of person that can appreciate her ability, because his own talent and value comes from bragging to his mates (*GB* 65–66). Storytelling is the type of communication that meets his particular needs, with those needs being amusement, intellectual stimulation, and respect among his peers.

The Guardians have a conscious policy, inherited from the founders, to restrict reading and writing: the founders who made the rules decided to prohibit all women and most men from reading (*GB* 88). Only those who need to know how to read for their professions are permitted to learn.<sup>22</sup> This policy excludes from the people’s lives literature and other recreational, nonessential forms of writing, simply because a literate populace would be more able to make informed decisions (and thus be manipulated less easily).

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<sup>22</sup> And according to Rick Evans’ summary of Hirsch, even those who *can* read wouldn’t be considered “literate” by our standards, because “to be literate is to be ‘master’ of the ‘shared knowledge’ of one’s mainstream culture” and at this point, the majority of people here are outside the mainstream, as they are left out of the historical and political processes entirely (Evans 94).

Kira sees the power in writing when she hears Jamison read aloud the minutes he took for her trial: “Kira realized with awe the value of the repetition. There could be no argument, afterward, about what had been said” (*GB* 32). She notices also that the Guardians reference written rulebooks that state community policies (*GB* 33). Writing things down reduces ambiguity, and in not allowing most people to read, the Guardians keep those people in a state of uncertainty, thus allowing the Guardians to govern in any way they please.

For people who cannot read, in some ways any job they do is harder. Kira marvels at Jamison’s ability to remember things by writing them down, and she feels frustrated that she herself may not remember all her dyeing plants by writing down their names (*GB* 85). People who are forced to try to remember everything in their heads without written reminders are as a result less organized. They also miss out on the cognitive process related to writing: when people write, they have to think about concepts in a clear, understandable way, which may give them a fuller understanding of the concepts themselves. Writing also can be more sophisticated or subtle than spoken language, simply because a person has more time to think when writing as opposed to the way speech is often spontaneous. Without reading and writing, the populace remains disorganized and mentally disadvantaged, and unable to challenge the Guardians and change the way they live.

The Guardians have no plan for what they will do if an unauthorized person does learn how to read. Kira learns by accident, when Thomas offers to help her remember her dyeing knowledge. As he writes, she notices that when “he read the word hollyhock aloud with his finger on the word, she saw that it was long, with many lines like tall



stems” (*GB* 89). She slowly begins to learn to read from watching him. She notices the similarities between letters, and sees how the botanical words have a natural shape (*GB* 182–183). This process sounds like how humans first acquired reading and writing, starting with pictures on cave walls to tell stories, and eventually evolving into abstract representative symbols. The image suggests that writing is a natural process, one all people instinctively seek to develop, and we see how no efforts of the Guardians’ can stop Kira from learning.

### III.

Perhaps the most powerful example of how the Council of Guardians abuses its constituents is its use of Christian symbolic language without explaining the actual Christian doctrines and rituals behind this language. This society, while it has no real organized religion, has preserved the deep-rooted reverence and solemnity the people feel regarding religious symbols and words, from long ago when this was a Christian culture.<sup>23</sup> The strategy the Guardians use is one that “constantly confuses the categories and cells of the concepts by presenting new transferences, metaphors, and metonyms; constantly showing the desire to shape the existing world of the wideawake person to be variegatedly irregular and disinterestedly incoherent” (Nietzsche 254). The Council members use this confusion to their advantage: they live in what used to be a church, they reinforce homage to the Worship-object, they sponsor the yearly Gathering, and they speak in religious terminology.

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<sup>23</sup> “Utopia is not a religion; but without a religious underpinning, without the structure of belief and sentiment that religion incomparably provides, it is possible that utopia is not capable of arousing a significant and heartfelt response” (Kumar 421).

The Council lives in what obviously was once a church by its description, and the common people see how the Guardians are on a higher social standing than they are. In a village of rough huts and shacks, only the Council lives in a real solid building, one so strong that it is the only one that “remained standing and firm.” after the Ruin, which may have been some kind earthquake or other natural disaster, or perhaps a nuclear war (*GB* 22). Their house represents the ancient and mysterious past but has a new name, the Council Edifice, and so by association, the people feel for the Council members some of the same curiosity and reverence that the church once inspired in people.

Within the Council Edifice is an item called the “Worship-object,” which is a wooden cross on an altar, and which, as its name indicates, the people are expected to revere. All that Kira knows about it is that it “was said to have had great power in the past, and the people always bowed briefly and humbly toward it in respect” (*GB* 23–24). Here we see that the physical relics and the symbolic feelings of Christianity are still very much present here, especially in how Kira behaves toward the cross: as she looks at it, she makes a praying motion (*GB* 24). Kira is still made to feel in awe of this cross, but its actual significance to the story of Jesus has been lost or removed. Also, this suppliant behavior is unfair for the Guardians to expect of people, because essentially the Guardians are the keepers of the Worship-object, and so they are the ones being prayed to. This is certainly very far removed from the original meaning of the cross, and even the idea of a worship object seems to violate the commandment against idolatry. The Guardians use the citizens’ confused and vague reverence to their advantage: they have eliminated the people’s concept of God and have replaced it with themselves.

Another manipulative practice the Guardians use is the Gathering, a yearly event put on by the artists of the community, all of whom live in the Council Edifice and operate under the direction of the Council. The Singer chants the Song, the Carver works on the Singer's staff, and the Threader works on the Singer's robe, and all of these actions represent the will of the Guardians.

The Gathering's proceedings are reminiscent of the Catholic mass, with scripted response phrases and specific times to stand up and sit down. For instance, at a certain time the people bow toward the cross and say in unison, "We worship the Object" (*GB* 178). In order to get the people to unthinkingly worship the Guardians, the people are taught a routine to follow as if they have been conditioned.

Also fraught with Christian and biblical imagery, the Ruin Song is sung each year at Gathering. As the one cultural event of the year, the people take this event seriously, and so they listen to the Song with the utmost respect, although it is only a patchworked misrepresentation of the Bible; the chant starts with the very first line of Genesis, "In the beginning . . ." (*GB* 181; qtd. from Genesis 1:1). The inclusion of this phrase in the Songs suggests that the Guardians have ownership of the people's past, all the way back to the creation of the universe.

Another indication of Christianity's pervasiveness comes in the way that people tend to group statements in threes, as is thematically important in the Bible. In the trial scene, Vandara makes three accusations about Kira, and Jamison refutes them one by one (*GB* 32–38). In turn, Jamison asks Kira three times if she would like to speak, to respond to these accusations, and each time she refuses. In the words that ultimately get her killed, Annabella repeats that "there be no beasts" three times (*GB* 110–111). One cannot help

but be reminded of the groupings of threes in the Bible, which tend to hold power. For instance, Jesus successfully resists the temptations of Satan three times, to pass the test of the Spirit of God (Matthew 4:1–4:11), and Peter denies any affiliation with Jesus three times to fulfill Jesus’ prophecy (Matthew 26:69–26:75).

On a more personal level for Kira, Jamison lectures her using religious symbolism, which lends weight to his words. When she expresses her fear of traveling through the forest alone to Annabella’s, he tells her, “There is nothing to be afraid of there. . . . But stay on the path always. The beasts will not come near the path” (*GB* 127).<sup>24</sup> The “path” is a fairly common metaphor in the Bible; one must stay on the metaphorical path to avoid the temptations of Satan on either side from the devil. Examples include Jesus’ advice, to “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and spacious and broad is the road that leads to destruction” (Matthew 7:13). We find a similar warning in Jeremiah, in which the Lord says “See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death” (Jeremiah 21:8).

Jamison’s words mislead Kira, as they are a guarded threat that sounds like a reassurance. Jamison is suggesting that Kira must do what he and the other Guardians say or else she will be punished. On another level of deception, the punishment that Jamison threatens comes immediately and in an earthly fashion, when the punishment that Jesus and others speak of for straying from the path comes from the afterlife; this disparity adds more ambiguity and confusion to Jamison’s figurative threat.

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<sup>24</sup> It’s interesting that in his book *The Linguistic Construction of Reality*, George Grace uses the example of an adult telling a kid about a monster to illustrate his idea that when we’re told something it becomes part of our *conceptual* world whether or not it’s a part of our *actual* world (Grace 110–111). This is exactly what exactly happens to Kira and all the children of her community.

Jamison's invocation of the "beast" symbol, alludes to the book of Revelation. When he says in a "firm and certain" voice, "Don't forget, Kira. . . . I saw your father taken by beasts. It was a hideous thing. Terrible" (*GB* 128–129), we are reminded of the beast of the Apocalypse that is known to "utter proud words and blasphemies" and try to control everyone just as Jamison is doing in this part of the story (Revelation 13:5–13:8). From Jamison's tone of voice, Kira can discern his hidden meaning. The "beast" he means is a man, and this passage reminds us of another passage in Revelation: "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number" (Revelation 13:18). The references to the "path" in parts of the Bible suggest that the wrong path leads to Hell. And here we see that at the edge of the path that he urges Kira to take, Jamison is the beast that lurks, waiting for her misstep.

However, Kira proves to be stronger than any command of Jamison's. When Annabella, the one who had told Kira that there are no monsters, is found dead, this event seems to contradict Jamison's words, that one can be safe from the monsters if one is careful. With this discovery, Kira "turned away from the path," a phrase that denies Jamison's warning, and denies his authority over her (*GB* 133). She has come to see that there are no monsters, and that the people that have been supposedly taken by monsters have in fact been killed by Jamison and the other Guardians. Turning away from the path and the words of Jamison means *avoiding* monsters. Jamison's legend of monsters has come back to betray him.

In contrast to Jamison's path, the path described by the benevolent old woman Annabella is one that we can trust. Matt takes the path past her house to go find blue for Kira, and he trusts Annabella's word that there are no beasts out here. "I recollect where

she pointed. I just followed where her point went. There be a path. But it's horrid far" (*GB* 187). This path may be more akin to a positive path in the Bible: "You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence" (Acts 2:28). Matt trusts Annabella in the same way that people are intended to trust the safe paths laid out by God and Jesus.

The people of Christopher's village also can be trusted to be kind and take the correct path. As he is blind, these people take care of him. "Those who can see? They guide me" (*GB* 204). This sounds like an interesting and preferable parallel to Jamison's earlier threats: where Jamison commands Kira to follow a certain path alone, a path that is supposedly surrounded by beast, the people of Christopher's village offer to guide him along the path and keep him safe from whatever evils might be out there.

#### IV.

The real pathology of this society is not to be blamed upon one man or even just the Council, however. The problem is that the past is fading from this world while the future also looks dubious and unreliable, and the responsibility lies with the whole community. The fading of the colors from the robe symbolizes history's fading from the world. The one who can stop the fading process is Kira, the one who makes the color blue into a new symbol for this world to center upon, a symbol that stands for healing, restoration, and hope.

Kira would always study the robe, "marveling each time at the rich hues that told the history of the world. Golds and reds and browns. And here and there, faded pale, almost reduced to white, there had once been blue" (*GB* 42–43). The world once had a

rich history, and many parts of it remain, but a certain important element has faded and cannot be replaced by this society as it stands: the color blue, whose source plant cannot grow in this harsh environment. The plant that creates blue dye, the woad, has to be reclaimed by Kira, who can teach this society what it needs to know in order to regain what it has lost. As Jamison says about the robe, and thus metaphorically and ironically about the story that the robe depicts, “We must keep it intact. More than intact . . . our world depends on the telling” (*GB* 74).

The color “blue” has many symbolic associations. On one level blue is being equated with human life and experience. Annabella teaches Kira the terms used in dyeing, and tells her that “to use the knowledge of the threading, you must learn the making of the shades. When to sadden with the iron pot. How to bloom the colors. How to bleed.” Kira thinks to herself that these terms are very strange (*GB* 83–84). It is no coincidence that they can be likened to descriptions of how people grow and develop through suffering. Specifically, Annabella tells Kira how she must learn to dye “[a]s your mum did when she was a girl” (*GB* 83). Knowledge cannot come without experience, on two levels: Kira must learn about dyeing in order to make the robe, but she also must take up the lessons of her predecessors in order to have the knowledge to make the future through her art. Annabella uses symbolic language to give Kira these two overlaid lessons; she cannot say it plainly that Kira needs to learn history, because that would defeat the purpose of gaining one’s own experience, and historical information is not openly available in this culture anyway. Thus Annabella speaks in terms that Kira can understand.

This is directly opposite to how Jamison conducts himself. When Kira worries about how she will design the white spaces on the robe, Jamison reassures her, “We will explain to you what we want pictured there” (*GB* 116). However, Kira knows that what would really help her is for “the magic to come to her hands” (*GB* 116). These words symbolize that she needs to gain hands-on experience: magic in her hands is experience with weaving in a literal sense and experience with life in a metaphorical sense, with the white spaces on the robe being the path of the future that future generations must tread.

In this same way, Kira further proves that one cannot know how to do everything just from a verbal instruction. She realizes that there is no way she can weave a picture of a skyscraper accurately if she has never seen one (*GB* 169), and so a person’s description of something is meaningless if the person has never experienced it. Here Lowry suggests not only that words are not sufficient, as they can never be, but that they are particularly insufficient when coming from people like Jamison, who don’t bother to explain but only command.

We wonder, what experience do these people need to have in order to begin fixing their world? They must learn to treat each other with respect, like people do in the village where Christopher has been living. We know that the woad can be found in Kira’s father’s progressive community while it cannot be found in Kira’s regressive one. Christopher describes the members of his community as somewhat similar to those in his original one, except that they have a friendly and caring disposition: “They used our language, but with a different lilt, a slight change of cadence. . . . And their voices were soothing. Gentle” (*GB* 202). In Kira’s village, on the other hand, “Everywhere she heard arguing. The cadence of bickering was a constant sound in the village,” found among



men, women, and children alike (*GB* 10). The only way that Christopher and Kira see their people as a whole is in terms of the styles of language they use, and those observations betray their people's benevolence and virulence, respectively.

Sharing cultural knowledge is an important form of communication, and is another way to begin healing the world. Kira and her father share a moment of remembering her mother when they think of a lullaby she sang: "*Night comes, and colors fade away; sky fades, for blue can never stay . . .*" (*GB* 206). It's not the words in particular that give people comfort when they hear lullabies; it is the context, the fact that they have been sung over the ages in this culture, and so they bring a universal feeling of uniting with community members. Kira and Christopher take comfort from the fact that it was sung by a beloved wife and mother. Unlike all the Christian wording, this is cultural language that these people have created themselves, and thus it is one that no outsider or dictator can claim as their own.

However, the words themselves do have an interesting meaning in the context of the conversation that Kira and her father are having. In this community as it stands, "blue" indeed cannot stay, in that blue represents an evolution past the rigid stasis that this place has fallen into. Only Kira can propel her people back into motion.

The last and most important referent for blue is the hope for the future. In order to build a bright future, the community members have to become more considerate and empathic, and not be so vicious and acid-tongued to each other.

The paragon of tenderness of course is the Virgin Mary, which is appropriate considering that she is traditionally represented by the color blue. She is also considered to be the mediator between God and humans, and in the instance Kira, the cultivator of

blue, plans to mediate between this society's "deities," the Guardians, and the general populace. In order to restore balance and remove excessive negativity from this community, the government and the people must be realigned.

Blue is "the color of calm" (*GB* 118). Kira has a sense that the plant that is missing from her home is a metaphor for something else that is missing here: a sense of calm, of completeness, of rightness. She sees the blue parts of the robe as representative of the beauty and tranquility in certain points of humanity's history, and sees that it was different and better than as compared to where she is here and now. She builds connotative meanings for the word "blue" by herself, and in this we see how she has become capable of complicated and independent thoughts, despite the limitations placed upon her by her society.

And here again this color suggests future possibilities: blue is the color of Jonas's eyes. Matt tells Kira about Jonas's eyes "as if it might matter," and this detail is indeed significant in the context of all the blue imagery in the book. This image means that together Jonas and Kira will build a better society, and Lowry suggests that the two will build this bright future at least partially through their marriage (*GB* 213).

Kira completes the "blue" metaphor by anthropomorphizing the bundle of blue threads Christopher gives her: it appears to her "as if it had been given breath and was beginning to live" (*GB* 214–215). She connects the ideas of hope and the ideas of new human life, making blue correspond directly to her hope for humanity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Levitas describes the transition to utopia as follows: "The dream becomes vision only when hope is invested in an agency capable of transformation" (Levitas 200), and in this case that agent is both the color blue and its bearer, Kira herself. The transition will also require effort, which Levitas expresses in terms of Ernst Bloch's concept of the 'Not Yet': "not just wishful, but will-full thinking" (Levitas 88).

V.

In the end, Kira realizes just how malignant her society has become, because of the way that the rulers label people and manipulate people through the manipulation of language. The symbolic language from the Bible that the Guardians use for their self-serving purposes was never intended to be used to harm people, or at the very least it doesn't have to be used that way. For this community, however, the Christian undertones have come to mean something loathsome and corrupt. In response, Kira creates a new symbol that gives this community the possibility to begin to grow and heal.

At the very end of the story, when we are sure that she and her family will eventually escape from this horrible place, we are surprised by Kira's decision to stay. She realizes that she has planted the seeds for more blue, but if they are to bloom, she must stay to tend them. "It was those small living shoots she had planted, and something in Kira knew without a doubt that they would survive. She knew something else as well, and with the realization, she rose from the damp grass to go indoors, to find her father and tell him that she could not be his eyes. That she must stay" (*GB* 212–213). In a brilliant interpretation of the metaphor she herself has built, she realizes that no one is so willing and able to tend this garden and this community as she is, and to leave would be irresponsible. She will stay and maintain the symbol that she has created, and will help nourish and care for the new society that will come of it.

*Messenger*

Lois Lowry



The third book in Lowry's trilogy, *Messenger*, brings together the characters from the first and second books, in a community that appropriately enough contains some of the negative aspects of the places the characters came from previously, as well as many more positive elements. The place is called Village, and is the first of Lowry's communities to have a name. It is also the closest to being a real utopia: the people here have for the most part been victims of harsh treatment in communities like Kira's and Jonas's, often as a result of disabilities and deformities. In Village, however, these people are embraced, and even their flaws are seen as strengths in some ways. Being downtrodden causes them to be selfless and to want to help others in need, and this selflessness is the basis for Village's happiness. It seems ideal.

Matty, the young man who had been called Matt in *Gathering Blue*, is the main character in this book. He lives with Kira's father Christopher, whom we have also met in the previous book. In Village Christopher's true name is Seer, for his amazing perceptive abilities despite his loss of eyesight. Matty also has a special ability that he is afraid to tell anyone about: one day, he sees a wounded frog on the ground and with a power he cannot explain, he heals the frog's severed leg. The power makes him uneasy and he wonders what it's for.

Otherwise, Matty lives a happy life, and thinks that soon he might receive his true name, which he hopes will be "Messenger." He certainly has the abilities to make him a perfect messenger: he can talk to the animals, he can predict the weather, and most importantly, he can pass safely through Forest, the near-sentient mass of plants that won't let the people of Village go back to their former communities.

However, few people really want to leave Village. Everyone here lives a simple and pleasant life, until the encroachment of a practice known as trading interferes with their well-being. What used to be a simple process of bartering trinkets has become a process more sinister, with people negotiating with the mysterious Trademaster for things like superficial beauty by trading unnamed and invisible things. We wonder—what are these people giving away? Matty’s friend tells him that for a more pleasing countenance, her father had traded “his deepest self.”

Strange things start happening as well. Forest abruptly strangles a man, although it used to give ample “Warnings” first. People that had been very kind and scholarly grow petty and selfish, and neglect their neighbors. The people collectively decide that they would like to close the border of Village, and no longer welcome refugees from miserable places. The young man in charge of Village, Leader, whom we soon realize is actually Jonas, despairs that his people would choose this route, but he maintains the people’s rights to democratic decision-making. Unfortunately, these people are no longer who they used to be, and have lost all the good will that made this village a unique and wonderful place. It becomes more and more like the communities everyone here has left, full of hatefulness and deception.

Matty goes out into Forest to post signs to tell travelers to turn back, and to retrieve Kira, who is finally ready to live with her father, now that her work is done in restoring their former community. When he gets to her house, he offers to use his secret power, the one he has been slowly experimenting with: the power to heal. She does not wish to be something other than what she was born to be, however, and will travel to

Village with him on the twisted leg she has always had. It is likely just as well, as Leader told Matty to save his gift for the right time, and not to spend it a moment sooner.

When they reenter Forest, Matty and Kira see that it has thickened, and for the first time ever, it begins to attack Matty. As he and Kira travel deeper in, the vines and brambles grow up to attack them and block their path, and when Matty slashes through to the path, the sap drips on his arms and burns holes through his skin.

They fight their way through for days, and with Kira's magical weaving ability, she is able to find out that Leader is coming for them, if they can just hold out for a while longer. When their strength threatens to fail completely, Kira is able to contact Jonas magically. He tells Matty to use his gift.

With his last ounce of strength, Matty places his hands on the earth and summons all the healing power he possesses. He gives all of his energy and his life to the world, willingly, and we see that he restores all aspects of Village to a state of health and beauty. When the villagers have finally witnessed an act of complete and total selflessness, the community becomes the utopia that it had always been striving toward.

I.

One difference between the society of Village and the societies that its citizens came from is that here people embrace their histories as stories rather than hiding them.<sup>26</sup> They keep people's arrival stories in displays in their "Museum," such as Jonas's sled and the story of how it carried him to Village (*Messenger* 18). These displays do not

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<sup>26</sup> About the way that the Villagers view memories, we can say that, universally, "time goes on, and your life is still there, and you have to live it. . . . Then, gradually, the empty silent parts of you fill up with sounds of talking and laughing again, and the jagged edges of sadness are softened by memories" (Lowry, *Looking Back* 169; from *A Summer to Die*). They are able to remember the good parts as well as the bad.



mention the people's previous lives in other places because those were different and miserable times, but while there is no reason to focus on them, there is also no need to forget them, especially in context of how they brought the people to their happy present. The citizens proudly exhibit their stories of strength as histories to be remembered and treasured.

The Villagers do have the freedom to talk about their more distant pasts if they want. "Sometimes—not very often, for inevitably it caused sadness—people described their places of origin: places with cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty, or false comforts" (*Messenger* 25). In contrast to these other societies, in Village people are free to talk about their past, however unpleasant, as opposed to other communities where the governments hide a happier past to keep the people from knowing they have options. In Village, people do not wish to hide anything, because they want to maintain a society different from their previous ones, where people had suffered "from ignorance. From *not knowing*. From being kept from knowledge" (*Messenger* 25). In this way the Villagers talk about their former troubles, as Nietzsche says, "not to turn away from the past, but to put it to good use in the service of the present" (Booker 39).

Here, people need not fear the idea of spending too much time dwelling in their pasts. Forest excludes this danger: imposing a literal isolation, it bars these people from their own pasts, attacking them if they try to return to their former homes too often. Forest is used as a metaphor throughout the book. Its actions reflect the people's attitudes and desires, which in this case is to avoid tarrying in a depressing and unchangeable past.

The expressions that Villagers use also reflect those intentions and attitudes, which are sympathetic and caring ones. Their practice of "keening," a ritual of mourning

that originates from ancient Ireland, is particularly sympathetic. This onomatopoeic term describes a high-pitched sort of wailing, oscillating sound, an embodiment of “the sound of loss” (*Messenger* 11). This term does well to describe its purpose: to mourn the loss of a community member, to describe the sharp sense of loss that we feel when a loved one is taken. It’s like a part of our hearts is excised with a knife, and thus it is a “keen” feeling. And as we all grieve somewhat differently, among the group of singers in the keening “[e]ach has a different pitch” (*Messenger* 13). The people do not worry that this mode of expression is unspecific to the point of being nonverbal, because for them it best accomplishes the needs of the occasion.

Another aspect of the people’s consideration for others appears in the inclusiveness of their language; there are no requirements for specificity, for instance. This community allows for some inclusive definitions of some words, allowing a metaphorical or unspecific meaning to become an established one. For example, it is common knowledge that Kira’s blind father Christopher can “see,” as “Seer” is his true name: he sees truths for what they are, because he is perceptive and sensitive. Seer talks about “seeing” his daughter again, and Matty comments on it, saying, ““It always seems strange to me when you say ‘see.’” The blind man nodded. ‘I see in my heart, Matty.’ Matty nodded. ‘I know you do’” (*Messenger* 90). No one disputes this kind of usage, for if figurative language is what brings two people’s minds into congruity, then that is the usage that is most appropriate.

Another agreement that people have here is not to lie, as a result of the trust that people have in each other here. In Jonas’s old community, people were required by law to share their feelings, as if they could not be trusted to volunteer necessary information. By

contrast, here people can share or hide knowledge as they see fit, and the result is mutual trust. The people tend not to be secretive, and never feel the need to lie.

Out of that same respect for each person that Village cultivates, the naming system also does people justice.<sup>27</sup> Instead of being assigned a job title as in other communities, everyone gets something more personal: a “true name,” which can be in the form of a job descriptor, but which always stands for the essential character of the bearer. For example, the schoolteacher is called “Mentor” (*Messenger* 6), and the berry-harvester is called “Gatherer” (*Messenger* 12). The name can be less flattering, as when Matty imagines that his friend Ramon might have the true name of “Boaster” (*Messenger* 12), though likely Matty is just being facetious. With a fair Leader like Jonas choosing the names, the names will be nothing less than what the person has truly earned and worked towards.

Gaining a true name signifies that people have learned what they need to know, have found their place of usefulness in the community, and have earned the right to be called adults. They become full citizens then, and are allowed to vote (*Messenger* 80). At that point, they have proven their worth and that they are interested and educated. The people get a label, but it is not a demeaning or arbitrary one as in the communities in previous books; rather, being an adult represents having earned a true name and a place in the voting body.

One way that Village differs from the villages in the previous books is in its citizens’ commitment to learning for the sake of gaining wisdom, and learning about

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<sup>27</sup> In context of Lowry’s own view of what a village should be, Village’s name itself is very fitting. “For me, [“village”] means the self-contained place where the rules are known, the guidelines familiar, and where we feel safe” (Lowry, *Village of Childhood* 2).

language in particular. The level of education a person has cultivated determines whether or not he or she is ready for a true name and voting rights; this culture begets informed, conscientious citizens.

What people feel comfortable talking about says a lot about the ethics of this society. Matty brags to Kira that he can read Shakespeare, and she says that she can as well (*Messenger* 113). We can see that this skill is something that Village prizes, and that it's something to be proud of: they value education and intelligence here. We can see that since the events of *Gathering Blue*, Kira's society has also been at the very least moving in a similar direction, since formerly women there weren't allowed to read.

This encouragement of learning exists in direct contrast to policies in Jonas's community in *The Giver*, where people didn't want lively descriptions of things, but a more direct and practical speech; and there was certainly no reading allowed for pleasure or self-enrichment. The only books around were rulebooks, to be read only to make everyday, banal activities run smoothly. Jonas, as the leader of this new community, makes sure that his people are never denied the opportunity to read again, by insisting everyone "learn, read, participate, and care for one another" (*Messenger* 25). Jonas sees the connections between these activities, that perhaps having knowledge is one way to really appreciate the people around oneself.

Because of Jonas, his old community has also learned the connection between caring for one another and sharing knowledge with one another. After Jonas left, the people had received Jonas's memories and wisdom, the way that they were released to the community after Rosemary died (*Giver* 169). As a result, they give him back the power of language they had previously denied him, by sending him the books that the

Giver had, including many volumes. Jonas recalls, “It was only when I saw the books that I knew things had changed, that I was free, and that back there, where I had come from, they were rebuilding themselves into something better. The books were a kind of forgiveness, I think” (*Messenger* 29). Now that they have the knowledge to make their own choices, the people that we met in *The Giver* have chosen to embrace language and thank the one who gave it to them.

The freedom to choose is an important part of life in Village. The people here have a way of convincing people to behave in a certain way: instead of threatening harsh punishments, they focus on the positive reasons to live by the various written and unwritten laws they have adopted. The Villagers don’t need to command people to do anything, but only to tell them the benefits of one option or another, and then allow them to choose.

For example, when a younger Matty tells a lie, he doesn’t get a beating or trip to bed without supper, or even a harsh reproof. Instead, Seer tells him, “I’m sorry to punish you, Matty, but Village is a population of honest and decent people, and I want you to be one of us” (*Messenger* 26). His punishment is no lessons for the day, and while staying home from school actually sounds like fun at first, he hears the other kids laughing and learning at the schoolhouse, and wants to join in. The punishment strategy here does not use harsh words to humiliate, but offers a roundabout encouragement, to make the transgressor want to rectify his action without making him feel completely miserable.

Even the authority figures here are open to well-meaning criticism. Jonas aims to be very approachable, and “Matty liked that about Leader, that you could say what you wanted to him, that you could tell him what you felt” (*Messenger* 30–31). It’s much nicer

than in Kira's old community, where the wrong words could get a person killed, and more genuine than Jonas's old community, where a person was always forced to tell what he or she felt. Disagreement is acceptable and even encouraged here, as Jonas says when he addresses the Villagers: "The right to dissent is one of our most important freedoms here" (*Messenger* 50). The encouragement of free speech shows the good health of this democracy that the Villagers have established.

Jonas embodies another democratic principle in that he does not speak commands, but speaks to the people with mutual respect and love. For instance, they can adopt a new rule only after debate and a vote, and everyone has an opportunity to voice an opinion. Having no secrets in Village is a rule that "Leader had proposed, and all of the people had voted in favor of it. Everyone who had come to Village from elsewhere . . . had come from places with secrets" (*Messenger* 24–25). The fact that Leader "proposes" a vote shows his deep heedfulness of his fellow citizens; he might, without violating democratic procedures, put a rule up to vote without input. But the fact that Jonas goes about lawmaking in a way that invites approval rather than waits for disapproval shows that the Leader of Village does not consider his opinion to be of absolute importance but only one of many. Even when people want to close Village to new immigrants, an idea that he strongly opposes, "Leader's voice was, as always, calm" (*Messenger* 49). This phrasing echoes back to the description of "blue" in *Gathering Blue*, where blue represented calm and healing. Even when talking about something that pains and disturbs him so much, he still speaks in an unbiased way, and in a way to allay his neighbors' anxieties.

## II.

Everything about Village sounds ideal: people are considerate of each other and show it by their kind and welcoming speech patterns. However, when the people want to close Village and start to do other things uncharacteristic of them, we see how this society is losing some of the peacefulness that made it unique. To show us how things are beginning to go wrong, we see a reappearance of the “path” metaphor from *Gathering Blue*. Jonas looked “to the place where the path entered Forest and became shrouded in shadows. . . . It was blurred, but there was something in Forest that disturbed Leader’s consciousness and made him uneasy” (*Messenger* 18–19). The path that leads to a happy metaphorical destination has become obscure, as people start to get too involved with petty, selfish issues. Forest again acts as an agent of the people’s will, and its vegetation becomes more closed and unwelcoming as people’s attitudes towards outsiders change in similar ways.

Village differs from the society in *The Giver* in that here people are not denied a full range of words. However, while the people are certainly taught negative words, and are allowed to use them, they tend not to have occasion to do so. For instance, when Matty and Seer are speculating why Mentor would want to close Village to outsiders, they innocently consider logistical reasons first: could it be that there isn’t enough food, or enough housing? But it is nothing as simple as that. “More than that. I can’t think of the word for it. *Selfishness*, I guess. It’s creeping in” (*Messenger* 33–34). When the word “selfish” falls out of common usage, it is because the concept is not present, and that the word now becomes necessary suddenly is a bad sign. By contrast, Matty knows that “Village had been created out of the opposite: selflessness. He knew that from his studies

and from hearing the history. Everyone did” (*Messenger* 34). The word “selflessness,” however, is common enough that everyone knows it, but now its opposite has become necessary.

The naming convention also begins to change. Trademaster did not earn his name; he came to Village already named and trained (*Messenger* 58). And in choosing not to learn from the people of Village and take on what name Leader saw fit for him, Trademaster shows that he would not relinquish the ways of his old place and become a true member of Village. A true member contributes to this society by voting, a right which a person gains by earning a name, and he or she gets a name by accepting from the society its valued teachings. Trademaster does neither of these things; he neither gives nor takes from this community, and thus isn’t part of the community’s interdependent system.

The word “master” in his name also shows that he thinks he is superior to the average citizen here; even the specialists here do not wish to be called in such a way. For example, Mentor could have been called “Schoolmaster,” because he is the only one leading the school, and Leader could have been called “Villagemaster,” but such names imply a hierarchy that the Villagers have tried to avoid.

Trademaster also manages to take possession of people’s names, which here represent their true essence. When, at Trade Mart, Trademaster writes down something in his book, that writing seals whatever contract he makes with a person (*Messenger* 61). In this way, he has something physical to take away from his patrons, who also give up incorporeal things. This practice suggests that the Villagers are selling their souls to the devil, as each person’s “deepest self” might be considered a soul. As the “deepest self”



and the “true name” seem to reflect the same essential characteristics of the person, we can see that taking their names is the same as taking their souls. In this case, the name does more than represent the person, but *is* the person.

Village’s new atmosphere contrasts with the way Matty found it when he arrived. He had noticed the large “welcome” sign, but at the time he could not read. “The word welcome had meant nothing to him then” (*Messenger* 47). Lowry specifies that the word meant nothing to him, which makes sense considering how his former community had not been a welcoming one, but that the word had come to have meaning for him after living in Village. The Villagers would even gather into a sort of welcoming committee, to greet those who might not be able to read the sign.

Matty then has to deny the refugees that feeling of belonging, at the decree of the Village majority: he has to travel the countryside, putting up posters that tell refugees that Village is closing, and they should turn back (*Messenger* 91–92). The swap of “welcome” signs to “unwelcome” signs symbolizes the complete reversal of attitude and ethics here, from generous to greedy and selfish. This trade also shows a great disregard for the potential refugees, some of whom cannot read. There is no “unwelcoming committee” to interpret the signs on Forest’s paths for them. If the people cannot read the posted messages, they will end up trudging all the way to Village only to get turned away, at risk of bodily harm for those who had only the strength for a one-way trip and expected a warm bed to collapse into. And worse yet, they will have to head back into Forest, which grows more savage and violent every day.

The Villagers’ change in speech is perhaps most evident at the new event, Trade Mart. At first Trade Mart was fine, because they were trading only petty things of equal

value to the old things, such as an old bracelet for a new bracelet (*Messenger* 53). Matty equates it with Market Day, which is a perfectly benign gathering for these people (*Messenger* 53). But later, it gets more secretive. Matty goes to see his first Trade Mart, and notes that “there was none of the light-hearted banter that was ordinarily part of Village. There was an intentness to everyone, an odd seriousness, and a sense of worry—unusual in Village—pervaded the atmosphere” (*Messenger* 56). The people seem to have something to hide, as is apparent when we find out that people have been trading the caring and empathic parts of their personalities for good looks, or trivial material goods. This secretiveness is manifested as whispering and murmuring.

Mentor is one of the ones who has traded his “deepest self” (*Messenger* 69). His daughter Jean says, “Father always welcomed new ones. It was the most wonderful part of father, how he cared for everyone and tried to help them learn. But now . . . ” (*Messenger* 70). Furthermore, Mentor used to use poetry and literature as a way to convey how caring for one’s family is so important; the children remember how they felt when he recited for them a speech about family from *Macbeth* (*Messenger* 81). Mentor used to embody the ideals of the community in how he taught language: he believed that we should use language “to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived” (*Messenger* 82).<sup>28</sup> He did, after all, teach Matty to write and speak properly, and we see how Matty has become a productive and well-liked member of the community.

But now, the way Mentor speaks to others has changed. Now that he is trying to be a leader of the isolationist movement, he shouts in a voice “loud above the others”

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<sup>28</sup> Reading literature is one way that we, as Lowry urges, “ask ourselves again and again how we are connected to each other. And we should teach our children to do so, and not to turn away” (Lowry, *How Everything Turns Away* 25). Examining difficult situations in books helps us deal with them in real life, and not avoid them out of fear.

where he used to be soft-spoken and a good listener (*Messenger* 132). He even calls one of the slower wall-builders an idiot.

By contrast, the people who step up to speak against closing the border are the ones “untouched by trade” (*Messenger* 85). They cite their histories, tell how Village took them in when they were persecuted, and urge that they ought to continue to do the same for others. They speak for the oppressed because they have not lost the inner character that causes them to care, unlike those who have traded it away.

It is ironic that when Mentor’s isolationists want to close Village to outsiders, one reason they list is that “*They can’t even speak right. We can’t understand them*” (*Messenger* 85). The people from outside Village might speak in other languages, or might have bad grammar that they learned in places where education is not important. In Village and elsewhere, traditionally the teaching of literacy was designed “to unite the heterogeneous peoples of new nations and to eradicate the *superficial* distinctions that separated classes and cultures. . . . Simultaneously, linguistic differences readily identified the untrained, unassimilated, and uneducated, who were seen as threatening to unity and order” (Graff 290). Mentor’s group sees a threat in outsiders, but they themselves have stopped “speaking right,” or speaking according to the ideals of Village: Mentor and his supporters are no longer being straightforward, honest, and kind. These are the people who are hiding their actions, and hiding their trading plans with whispering and murmuring. The residents of Village who do live up to its ideals, people like Leader and Seer and Matty, are the ones who “cannot understand” the people like Mentor, who have taken to obfuscating the truth.

Mentor and his allies begin to use manipulative rhetoric. When the isolationists voice their opinions, which were previously not fully known by the townspeople, they try to make it seem like these are everyone's idea and that Mentor's group is speaking for the majority. They "went to the platform and shouted out their wish that the border be closed so that 'we' (Matty shuddered at the use of 'we') would not have to share the resources anymore" (*Messenger* 85). Using inclusive language in a statement of one group's opinion is an underhanded tactic in this context, used to get the crowd agitated and caught up in emotion.<sup>29</sup> It's underhanded because people tend to use the inclusive "we" in important and positive speeches, ones that have a broader impact on humanity as a whole, in contexts like "We the people" and "We hold these truths to be self-evident," etc. Using it in this context is abusing its power.

As things get worse and the people get nearer and nearer to closing off from the rest of the world, the path and Forest metaphors recur. "But ahead, Matty could see, the path was oddly dark. . . . [T]hings that had seemed easy and accustomed no longer did. Now everything felt a little different: slightly darker, and decidedly hostile" (*Messenger* 131). No longer is it only people who try to leave Village that are subject to Forest's wrath, but also people traveling on the path towards it. The Villagers have become almost fully closed-minded, and Forest portrays this decline into selfishness with a physical overgrowth.

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<sup>29</sup> Mühlhäusler supports interpretation: the academic "we" is used "to draw the listener into complicity. . . . The audience is not only passively following what is going on, but actively participating in the process of thought—and thereby committed to the results and conclusions of that process" (Mühlhäusler 129).

### III.

The most important metaphor in this story is the idea of Matty's hidden power as a gift that he must use sparingly. Jonas brings it to his attention before the story's final journey, but says ambiguously, "Don't waste your gift. Don't spend it" (*Messenger* 97). It is implied that he has to give it away willingly, but if Jonas were to deliver the idea directly to him, Matty's effort would be spurious and contrived, however unintentionally. By giving Matty the metaphor in words, Jonas helps Matty to come up with his own idea to take action and solve the world's problems, without relying on words to do it.

Matty still uses his encouraging language to get Kira to wake up out of her delirium just enough to weave again and look for Leader; depending on how close he is, they'll have to make a choice of what to do next in their greatly weakened state. He tells her, "Kira! Put the needle into the fabric. And try to *meet* him. Try, Kira! . . . *Again*" (*Messenger* 159). And she is able to do it. He comes up with the words to describe a concept that has never existed before, the idea of two magical gifts meeting to work together. He uses his well-developed verbal skills to tell her just what she needs to hear, to energize her again and to establish a formerly nonexistent concept in her mind.

And with Matty's new language development, Jonas is able to communicate with Kira in their two minds. "In the place called Beyond, Leader's consciousness met Kira's, and they curled around each other like wisps of smoke, in greeting" (*Messenger* 163). While they cannot actually speak aloud to each other, due to the distance between them and their physical weakness, their consciousnesses are able to communicate with each

other,<sup>30</sup> and this direct mental link eliminates the ambiguities of spoken or written language. We can tell that this is not the same kind of communication as audible speech, because Lowry describes it as “telling,” not “saying.” While “telling” might still be considered a label for vocalized speech, it implies a communication that is more direct and one that does not require a specific form (*Messenger* 163–164).

And after her communication with Jonas, when Kira says to Matty, “We need your gift,” he immediately knows what she means, just as Jonas let her know that they needed it and the world needed it (*Messenger* 164). In this society where people do not generally make demands of each other or speak in this somewhat terse manner, a phrase like this can be taken seriously. Kira is not being rude, but is simply expressing the gravity of the situation. He will need to use his power on a problem far more serious than a frog’s wounded leg. In response, Matty stretches out to touch the earth “with his arms outstretched” in a posture reminiscent of Jesus on the cross (*Messenger* 164).

Because he has had the necessary context of experience, Jonas’s metaphor that he didn’t understand fully before now makes sense. Using his gift on himself, on his own blistered and burning arms, would be “spending his gift” (*Messenger* 97), and because of Jonas’s words, he makes the connection between selfishness and wasting the gift he has. It can only be used wisely if he uses it to help someone else, and in this way live up to the ideals of Village: if everyone helps everyone else selflessly, everyone gets taken care of.

The way Matty feels when he’s lying there, starting to make the gift work, is very similar to what it must have been like for Jesus, with “the searing agony in his arms and

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<sup>30</sup> “The science-fiction writer frequently invents both message and medium. The conversations of his characters may not use lips and larynxes; they may not even use sound waves” (Meyers 69). For Kira and Jonas, where the medium—their minds—is the message, the fact that they can unite their consciousnesses shows both the strength of their wills and the urgency of their situation.

hands, the almost unendurable ulceration of his parched mouth, the feverish pounding of his head” (*Messenger* 165). As the healing starts to happen, the feeling changes to what the beginning of life must be like, when a collection of cells crosses that threshold into being an organism with its various parts. He feels his blood start to flow inside him, and travel to his heart and lungs and muscles, “and all of it was awake now, gathering power” (*Messenger* 165). Matty is able to equate the truth of self-sacrifice with the metaphor of rebirth, and this realization causes his gift to release its full potential.

As the gift really starts to work, Matty is able to release his power without words. “There was no sense of how to direct it. He simply clawed at the earth, feeling the power in his hands enter, pulsating, into the ruined world. He became aware, suddenly, that he had been chosen for this” (*Messenger* 166).

As we see a montage of how things immediately become better throughout Forest and Village, Matty’s spirit departs: “He floated above, weightless, watching his human self labor and writhe. He gave himself to it willingly, traded himself for all that he loved and valued, and felt free” (*Messenger* 166).

Just as the Guardians of Kira’s old community used echoes of Christianity to lend credence to whatever they are saying, Matty equates himself with John the Baptist and Jesus to see that sometimes, beauty or knowledge can emerge only from suffering. When Kira had started to weave a tapestry to try to help them figure out what to do next, Matty had thought bitterly that depicting their last hours in this form would be a waste of precious time. However, he thinks of all the paintings he’s seen that depict death scenes: “A severed head on a platter. A battle, and the ground strewn with bodies. Swords and spears and fire; and nails being pounded into the tender flesh of a man’s hands”

(*Messenger* 152). Through these images of John the Baptist and Jesus, he sees that suffering has to be recorded, that it's just another art of communication. "Painters had preserved such pain through beauty," and perhaps that is what Kira aims for (*Messenger* 152). Recording the pain is the only way to learn from it and to be inspired by some people's steadfastness in their last painful hours.

As Matty releases his gift, the forest path that had been obscured clears up immediately. Instead of being vague and even indiscernible in places, the path is now neatly lined with rounded stones (*Messenger* 167). This clear path symbolizes that the people's motives are no longer veiled or indistinct. The new path is easy for anyone to find, because Matty's action has revealed a way that anyone can travel on, both literally, as a forest path, and metaphorically, as a course in life for avoiding selfishness.

This ending is another part where words could never have been enough. No matter how much he tried to convince the people that being greedy was wrong, that it was ruining the wonderful place they were so lucky to have, they couldn't understand how serious he was being. Only by his action—by his symbolic expression of what was important, so important that he would die for it, with his message delivered directly to the earth—only by this action could Matty cause the Healing that needed to happen. Hertzler recalls Jesus' role in utopian systems, which is applicable here: "[Jesus] taught that wealth consists in character, not in possession. This revolutionary note also runs through the beatitudes for there we see that henceforth those were to be blessed whom the world had not blessed" (Hertzler 69). Matty does the same thing: with his sacrifice, he teaches that the meek really can inherit the earth, and the fulfillment of this prophecy is the fulfillment of utopia.



As a result of Matty's actions and the example he sets, Mentor gets his birthmark and frail physique again. These qualities could be seen as flaws, but in return he gets back his poetry too.<sup>31</sup> As a eulogy and in appreciation of Matty's life and death, Mentor quotes the second quatrain of the poem "To an Athlete Dying Young" by A. E. Housman: "To-day, the road all runners come,/ Shoulder-high we bring you home,/ And set you at your threshold down,/ Townsman of a stiller town" (*Messenger* 167). While the words themselves are moving, the parts of the poem that remain unspoken have just as a positive an impact. The rest of the quatrains discuss the evanescence of youth and glory in terms of floral imagery, and discuss the comfort one can take in knowing that this youth who has died at the pinnacle of his life shall never again know disappointment (Housman 32–33). The unsaid words of this poem strike a chord for anyone who has read it in its entirety, and give those Villagers a sense of its content without the presence of the actual missing quatrains. In this way one can embrace history without having to list explicit details; one needs only a reminder or an eloquent selection.

Matty's gift also created a new situation in which language isn't a problem or a cause of ambiguity anymore. Listening in to the results of his gift, he hears the new members of Village "singing in their own languages—a hundred different tongues, but they understood one another. . . . and the people of Village gathered to listen" (*Messenger* 167–168). They finally listen to each other again, and so they are able to come to an understanding that runs deeper than language or certain words.

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<sup>31</sup> This acceptance of imperfection is an example of how this story differs from the others in my selections and from many other utopias; "utopians are apt to present us with images of people minus all the faults of human nature" (Levitas 12). Levitas summarizes Moritz Kauffmann, who says that this expectation of perfection is why utopia is impossible, but Village allows for those flaws of human nature. There are faults, and the way to utopia is to learn to live with some of those faults while maintaining the effort to overcome others; this is the basis for this community's utopian success.

At this moment, we learn the meaning of the Forest metaphor: “It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything. Now it was unfolding, like a flower coming into bloom, radiant with possibility” (*Messenger* 168). This imagery echoes back to parts of *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*: the apple that Jonas sees, that begins to open his eyes, and the blue flower that represents for Kira the possibilities that she has of improving the world.

#### IV.

We see now that Matty gets his true name at the end of this journey, just as he wanted, and that he has earned a name that no one has ever had, that no one will ever have again. Kira says that he liked to call himself Fiercest of the Fierce, and Jonas replies, “He was that. But it was not his true name. . . . No, there have been other messengers, and there will be more to come. . . . Your true name is *Healer*” (*Messenger* 169). He gets a special name because he was a unique person, and so the Village’s naming system holds true, and rewards the valorous for their service. And as a similar honor, “tenderly, Leader picked up what remained of the boy and prepared to carry him home. In the distance, the sound of keening began” (*Messenger* 169). The Villagers unite in a language that has no words but has a clear meaning, their grief expressed in the language of keening. It’s just as Matty described the paintings he had seen. Pain is expressed in a beautiful way, sometimes without words, and that makes it a worthy expression, the recognition and honoring of people’s sacrifices. In the way that Jonas’s

elders thanked him for his childhood, the Villagers thank Matty for his life and the love that was worth giving it all up.

Conclusion

I.

This thesis has examined how language can be an indicator or even a cause of a society's dystopian condition. In this conclusion, I want to propose that the people in all the societies here discussed lacked or were denied a sense of their own history and were therefore vulnerable to powerful people who wanted to impose their own agendas on these societies.

Language can be a metaphor or symbol for many things, and history is one of them: language is a primary means by which people share the past and present to influence some kind of future. When we look at the human elements of these selected books as actual societies and people rather than fictional story components, we can analyze what it might be like to be a person in this kind of place, and how he or she might have lived in a world with much of its history hidden away.

We can see that language as a record of thoughts and history as a record of lives can be tied together very closely. For Lowry, *The Giver* itself is a metaphor for language and the history that informs language: "The man that I named The Giver passed along to the boy knowledge, history, memories, color, pain, laughter, love and truth. Every time you place a book in the hands of a child, you do the same thing. . . . It gives him choices. It gives him freedom. These are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things" (Lowry, *Newbery Acceptance Speech* 9).

In each subsequent book, we see a society that gets progressively closer to utopia, caused by the actions of the main characters as they learn more about their history. Shevek draws up the plans for change but we don't see them in action. Offred fails in her lifetime, but her society drags itself out of the dystopic stage it was in to another stage, one that seems ambiguous but is at least much better. Jonas learns all about an alternative

to his society and as a result is able to summon the courage to escape. Kira does the same thing, except she stays there and starts helping to improve her society. And Matty saves his whole community from being consumed by greed and closed-mindedness.

These societies begin to make progress when in each of them, someone eventually makes the choice to ask the right questions: “What is missing from our lives? Where did our history go? What can I do to restore it?” And our main characters are those people. What they learn helps show us how close each society got to reaching utopia, and why: those who succeed most in doing so are the ones who used their history carefully to build a better present and future.

## II.

Everyday life on Anarres, though it requires hard work, is seemingly fairly satisfying; the people’s physical needs are mostly taken care of. However, for those individuals with a curious, questioning nature, Anarres is a frustrating place. Questions never get answered, because there is no authority to ask. And furthermore, the Anarresti collective body of knowledge is limited by the fact that contact with Urras has been cut off,<sup>32</sup> and so all that they know is whatever knowledge the colonists brought with them and whatever they have since learned themselves.

This isolationist practice is particularly difficult for scientists like Shevek; he remained for many years ignorant of a great corpus of physics research simply because

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<sup>32</sup> While the Anarresti people are forbidden from communicating with Urras, they technically could go there if they chose to; however, their society discourages them from it by repudiating any who make that choice—thus isolating them from their native people—and by not allowing them to learn Pravic—thus isolating them from their potential new society.

the advances were made on Urras, and recorded in Iotic. When he finally got these works, they were far out-of-date, and catching up impeded his own research.

Part of the problem with Anarres and its language is that Pravic really *is* artificial, foremost in its construction, and through this artificiality it is inherently unfamiliar to those who first spoke it. This is, as Jacqueline Staples has said, the reason that the artificial language Esperanto failed to catch on: people felt a loss when their original language was no longer available, because to them the original language represented their roots and the history of their people. The Anarrestis can feel this lack of history, for example, in the ambiguities that the young language has not worked out yet, such as the ones in our earlier discussion of whether sole usage constitutes “ownership.” Pravic has not come up with solutions to problems like this yet.

And wanting to know one’s history is a common enough impulse for people to have, like how adopted children often seek out their biological parents. Many of the people of Anarres felt for Urras a curiosity about where they came from; Shevek and his boyhood friends spent considerable time speculating about life on Urras.

Anarres has not yet reached the point of utopia. At the time that we leave their story, these people seem content to accept their fate and really haven’t made any progress—except for the ansible. People are now going to have an interplanetary dialogue, and things are about to change, although to what extent we can’t know. The people will come to learn about Urras and its languages, and better understand their own language: while the first Odonians wished for Pravic to be independent of any previous language, those people can’t help but have been influenced and informed by growing up with Iotic and other Urrasti languages.

This society does take a serious step towards achieving utopia by the end, but the story is more like a snapshot of an important moment rather than the entire chronicle of a civilization. Leaving us with that ambiguity provides us with some realism: in real life we don't get a chance to look things over until after they're over. We see only a fraction of one man's life, and so we don't get the vast perspective that history gives us. As Anarres reconnects with the source of its own history, Urras, its people will regain that perspective and capacity for reflection.

Offred's society was a harsh world for her and all women, but the control was temporary: the government of this society didn't have the benefit of the passage of time. If this society survived for decades or even centuries, the citizens would become accustomed to living this way since birth and all of recorded history would eventually fade into a myth. Since the oppressed women could not write their histories down, their original stories would eventually be lost; there would come a time when children would be taught only what this government wished them to learn. In Offred's time, however, parts of their history were still being preserved through verbal and written communications.

The government was unsuccessful in trying to control the women's speech because they evolved their own language, a system of secret codes. For example, the term "May Day" circulated, and the old definition, *venez m'aider*, French for "come help me," survived: the women spoke it as a test to see if someone was involved with the resistance, and maintained caution by working it into a conversation about the weather. They learned to synchronize bathroom visits to talk to each other, and learned to read the posture of a



hat or the sweep of a cloth as a signal for what to do next. They simply learned different ways to communicate other than reading, writing, or talking openly.

Just through word-of-mouth, the resistance effort formed the Underground Femaleroad, which worked just like the Underground Railroad did: many women benefited from it, but some were captured. It was extremely risky, but they knew from historical example that at least some people would escape by this method.

However, this system was based on discretion. That was why Offred was caught: she (understandably) weakened under the strain of this miserable lifestyle, and spoke too carelessly. While she did get a lot of comfort from the small language rebellions she was able to make, even if they were only in her mind, she was too hasty to divulge her secrets. Whether a person is trying to use language to liberate or to dominate, he or she has to use communications *carefully* in order to be successful.

Part of the impossibility of the situation is that she wanted the means of communication that she was lacking, writing and speaking, but only language could have given her the wisdom to know when to keep silent. She needed some distance on her thoughts and her recent past; without the benefit of the mental processing of thoughts into words, she didn't have the mental clarity she needed, the perspective, "the illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface" (*HT* 143), and as a result her words burst out impatiently at the wrong time.

In Offred's society where the expression of a woman's true thoughts could get her killed, we know that the dystopian government still rules, and that the breaking point has not yet come; it does come eventually, but the result is still not a utopian society. Gilead had destroyed and modified enough of its history that later generations really couldn't

trust the accounts from Offred's time. The behavior of the scholars who study her account is unsettling also, in that their misogyny shows through in their objectification of Offred and her story. This is an example of how suppressing history can have long-term effects. The people have moved onto a better life and study the past to keep such a system from occurring again, but their outlook is still somewhat skewed by the events of a past that they still haven't completely understood.

Jonas's community was similar to Offred's in that the founders tried to pretend that the past had never happened, and got rid of any books that might lead to subversive or progressive action, either through physical removal of the books or through enforcing a sort of partial illiteracy. This government's goal is similar to William Steinhoff's interpretation of IngSoc's goal in *1984*: "It controls the past and future by creating a continuous present, thus destroying history and hope" (Steinhoff 150). Without a written or orally transmitted history, the people have no alternative to compare their own lives to. However, the control does not last in this society.

The biggest problem for this government in keeping its control is found in the things they *don't* abolish. They eliminate most troublesome words and concepts, but several important ones remain.

We can see that they do a fairly good job of eradicating history, when we see how one of their brightest young people has no idea what the concept of a "past" is: "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" (*Giver* 78). However, when we see the ways in which the elders accidentally acknowledge the past, we know they haven't done a good enough job. Jonas's parents claim that the word "love" has become

“obsolete.” The word “obsolete” inherently implies an earlier time when things were different, and the existence of the word might prove to an attentive person that things have *not* always been this way, and perhaps don’t have to be this way forever.

The government created even more trouble for itself with the books in the Giver’s home. The leaders decided to create the role of the Giver and to keep his books because they predicted or maybe even *knew* their society was going to fail. They could have burned the books and forgotten the memories, but they chose to keep them because they knew they needed someone wise to go to when they had unplanned-for problems—and they realized that the way to educate someone fully was to give him or her books to read.<sup>33</sup> In that way, they end up with two educated revolutionaries on their hands: the Giver, and Jonas, who leaves their society and upon his departure disperses the wisdom of his memories.

The community as a whole admits to Jonas that hiding their history was wrong, by sending him the Giver’s books after he goes to Village. They make the connection between the learning gained from books and the wisdom of establishing a good society, and they implicitly recognize that Village is a place where the people are encouraged to gain wisdom through historical and literary education. They show their support of Village’s governmental and social policies by liberating the books from within the Giver’s walls and sending them to Jonas to use in cultivating his society.

As soon as they were able to take their history back, the people of Jonas’s community could see their past and begin to shape their future to be more like the present

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<sup>33</sup> Lowry urges that we remember history when in duress, as a way of solving or coming to terms with whatever problem we’re having: “in these times that are the beginning of sadness . . . let us quietly write things down. Let us find words that others have written down, over generations and centuries. Let us read these things to one another, and to our children” (Lowry, *Beginning of Sadness* 11).

state of Village. We do not see this happen in this book, so we can't say that the society reached utopia, but we know it made progress towards that goal.

The next step in the evolution of Lowry's societies is Kira's village. Kira's society encourages people to work hard but denies ordinary people artistic fulfillment. Instead, those with valued skills are separated from the community and are made to feel important by getting a capitalized title; Kira's is "Threader." While threading is what she does, the finished product is more than just a well-ordered mass of string: it is a beautiful piece of artwork. However, Kira never gets to experience the full meaning of her creative work, because the Guardians never tell her the context for her artwork or explain the stories from human history that inspire these images. Without knowing the history and the reason, the work she does is hollow for her.

But, while they do get a strong degree of control, the Guardians do not create what we would call a state of utopia, in part because they manipulate history in a way that makes it meaningless, especially in the case of the Bible references. We see that new sacred traditions are founded on what has become gibberish. The people chant, "Ravaged all/ Bogo tabal/ Timore toron/ Totoo now gone" (*GB* 171–172), but they don't realize that these sounds refer to Bogota, Baltimore, and Toronto. These meaningless sounds are presented as cultural entertainment and are the only entertainment the people are allotted. They can't trust their language if its most sacred content has no discernable meaning: the citizen who most feels this lack of artistic/spiritual fulfillment is the Singer—the one who should feel the Song resonate most is the one who gets the least enjoyment out of it and would most like to escape. These people cannot trust the Guardians' version of the past—and their lack of literacy means that they cannot dispute it.

However, Kira establishes a symbolism that has meaning, and one that she builds herself without compulsion or threat of force: true, genuinely conceived art is represented by the color blue, and blue equals hope, so true art equals hope. She brings hope to her people by reviving a tradition that before that moment couldn't exist in this harsh environment. But now that it can, she knows her people are ready for change.

And perhaps the simplest indicator that the change endures is that Kira keeps her name. We know that she's older now, a young adult in *Messenger*, but she doesn't add a syllable to her name. She has made her name and her identity *hers*; her society allows her to do this without imposing an arbitrary naming system on her.<sup>34</sup>

And we know that the government has certainly become more reasonable when we see Kira in her shop later on in *Messenger*, working on her own projects unhindered. She and her people begin to rise out of the Middle Ages, and have the freedom to weave their own future as they see fit. As we don't specifically see anything else for results, we can't say this is a utopia, but it at least isn't a dystopia. We might imagine it's like a primitive but more humane version of our world, and that her society is back to square one, but with a great deal of motivation to go further.

With *Messenger*, we leave Jonas's and Kira's societies behind, preserved in a snapshot of the beginnings of change, and move forward with the benefit of what the revolutionaries of both societies have learned. Village is the first of the communities founded on the idea of embracing history with all its ups and downs: Jonas and his companions build Village with what Darko Suvin would label as "cognitive memory"—that is, drawing lessons about the open future as against the intolerable present out of a

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<sup>34</sup> Perhaps this is an indication of how Jonas partially failed his community in leaving them behind: his name is never mentioned in *Messenger*.

critically reworked past” (Suvin 267), to provide a place for refugees that could not survive any longer in their previous communities.

In spite of the problems that happen in this society (with trade mart, the motion to close the border, etc.), the language of Village is a positive one with a lot of positive symbolism behind it—and it is a symbolism that the townspeople are educated about and urged to understand and embrace, unlike in the other societies in discussed in this thesis.

Overall, the language aims to be inclusive, but more importantly it is *informed*, both by the experiences that the people have had and by their literary and historical education. In Matty’s case, the images of Jesus and John the Baptist, coupled with Jonas’s image of the gift and images of self-sacrifice, helped him to perform his final restorative action to the world. All of this helped Matty to give all of himself willingly, knowing how others had done so in earlier historical circumstances, and how much of an effect these images had on him; and this willingness is the only thing that made the magic work.

The people in all of these novels have a desire to work toward the creation of a world that will realistically have its merits and faults, but will nevertheless be better than what they know. Levitas quotes Sargent, who suggests that “few utopias are [intended to represent perfection], the goal being simply a very much better society” (Levitas 176). Matty’s society is not perfect; it balances on the edge and needs Matty to push it back over to harmony, and the struggle with greed and selfishness won’t end. Literary, artistic, and religious images are what help inform these efforts to move towards something better—the people are inspired and re-inspired by Jesus, John the Baptist, Shakespeare, A. E. Housman, and others. They integrate the lessons of these texts into their daily lives.

Utopia isn't a static condition that will take care of itself, and societies that assume that, including all the ones in this selection except for *Messenger*, inevitably fail.<sup>35</sup> What Matty's society seems prepared to do is accept that it will always be a work in progress, something that needs maintenance, and that sometimes a brave person will have to take extreme measures to maintain their balanced condition. The Villagers commit to considering the past and the future in their decisions; with the foundations that this place has, plus its genuine, wholehearted, and inclusive educational system, there is real possibility for them to, with the right efforts and attitudes, maintain a workable, practical utopia.

### III.

All that it takes to begin to move towards utopia is for the right person to notice that there is something missing in the life of his or her people, and to question it. For Shevek, it's the desire to feel like he belongs to Takver and she belongs to him. For Jonas, it's the struggle to find a way to express the warmth he feels when thinking of his family. The founders of these oppressive societies, in their attempt to remove old language conventions and build a present without a past, neglected to form an equivalent terminology to describe all the things that a person feels, and the people notice this lack.

But along with the importance of creating happiness in everyday life, history becomes important as a force that shapes the future. People need to look to the horrors of the past in order to prevent their happening again; however, people sometimes try to

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<sup>35</sup> Oscar Wilde characterizes true utopia effectively (though the quote is from Levitas and the brackets are mine): "And when Humanity lands [at Utopia], it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias" (Levitas 5). Sometimes people sail in the wrong direction, but the point is that they must keep moving.

avoid the pain of remembering it. Lowry discussed this with a German family member once: “Wouldn’t it . . . make for a more comfortable world to forget the Holocaust? And I remember once again how comfortable, familiar and safe my parents had sought to make my childhood by shielding me from ELSEWHERE” (Lowry, *Newbery Acceptance Speech* 5). The two of them agreed that remembering is more important than ever; forgetting the pain only risks allowing it to happen again.

These books show us a series of examples of societies that fail to reach utopia, and then one example of a society that does achieve a kind of utopia, although only through hard work. Only the people of Village with their careful consideration of historical and literary examples and cooperative efforts were able to persist in their harmonious state.

And, we can believe in this utopia: it feels real and natural—not sedated or manic or blissful, but *genuinely happy*. This is the best utopia humanity can strive for: for people to work together consistently to preserve their history and build their desired future, to remain happy in a changing world.



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### Author's Biography

Laura Katherine Latinski was born on July 14, 1984, in Commack, New York, to parents Joseph Walter Latinski and Joan Marie Little. She and her family moved to Sanford, Maine in 1986, and have lived there since. Laura graduated from Sanford High School in 2002.

After taking a year off from school, she began studying in the fall of 2003 at the University of Maine in Orono, majoring in English with concentrations in Literary Critical Writing and Technical Professional Writing.

She has been involved in several different groups during her time at the university. Like her grandfather before her, she plays the trumpet, and has participated in the following UMaine musical ensembles: concert band, marching band, pep band, orchestra, pit orchestra for *Chicago*, collegiate chorale, brass ensemble, and trumpet ensemble. She has also been a member of the Strafford County Wind Symphony, the Sebecook Valley Community Band, and the Sanford Town Band. She is a proud brother of Kappa Kappa Psi, National Honorary Band Service Fraternity. She has also recently become a member of Golden Key Honor Society, Phi Beta Kappa Society, and Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

Laura spent her senior year working as a student proofreader/copyeditor at University of Maine Cooperative Extension, and as a peer tutor at the UMaine Writing Center. She did her internship at the University of Maine Press. After she graduated on May 12, 2007, she started her first job in her field, as a full-time copy editor for UMaine Extension. She will attend graduate school several years in the future. Laura hopes to see more of the world and to eventually end up back in Maine.

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