

Food for Thought: Nurture and Nature in *The Giver*

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Abstract: Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* is usually addressed as a utopian/dystopian narrative. This essay adds a Food Studies framework both to the context of feeding the community and the reception of memories by the young protagonist in the story. The ontological ambiguities found in the novel allow the contemporary readers (and filmgoers) to raise questions about the importance of the choices and compromises we make, as well as to acknowledge that there are always consequences to our actions.

Keywords: Food, Nurture, Memory, Utopia, *The Giver*

Resumo: A obra *The Giver*, de Lois Lowry, costuma ser analisada como uma narrativa utópica/distópica. Este artigo aplica os Estudos sobre a Comida tanto ao contexto da alimentação da comunidade como à recepção das memórias pelo jovem protagonista da história. As ambiguidades ontológicas patentes na obra inspiram os leitores (e espectadores) contemporâneos a questionar a importância das escolhas e dos compromissos que fazemos, bem como a reconhecer que existem sempre consequências para os nossos actos.

Palavras-chave: Comida, Alimentação, Memória, Utopia, *The Giver*

This essay intends to address Lois Lowry's novel drawing both on a Utopian Studies and a Food Studies framework. It thus aims to look at food within the context of Sameness, climate and mind control in *The Giver*. It begins by presenting an outline of the utopian/dystopian narrative with the purpose of assembling the references to the actual process of feeding the members of the community — taking into account the production and distribution of food as well as access to medication — which can be found both in the literary text, published in 1993, and the film adaptation, released in 2014. It then examines how the reception of memories feeds the mind of the young protagonist in the story, developing his ability to question the values on which the community was founded. Ultimately, it argues that nurturing, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, not only constitutes a central theme in the utopian/dystopian communal way of life described in Lowry's novel but, by means of her fictional narrative, inspires the receivers of her message to get involved in a process of giving and receiving responses to questions raised in the minds of contemporary readers/viewers about their own lives, values, challenges and decision-making.

As is known, *The Giver* is usually examined from a Utopian Studies perspective with the purpose of discussing how the utopian narrative turns into a dystopia, but the novel can also be read from a Food Studies point of view in order to demonstrate how climate control had a clear impact on nurturing and feeding the community portrayed in Lowry's novel. Published in 1993, *The Giver* is set in the future and develops a plot that articulates science fiction with utopian hopes and dystopian fears of the capacity to see beyond. It eventually challenges the notion of living pleasantly, comfortably, orderly and safely. The awareness there was an alternative way of life is given by moments that recapture lost memories of the past by mental backward time travel, which means that progress and happiness were achieved by sensory oblivion. The book is dedicated to "all the children to whom we entrust the future" (Lowry 2014: 9) and is part of a quartet in which all the protagonists are young people — the second book, *Gathering Blue* (2000) goes back in time, in *The Messenger* (2004), the third book of the series, Jonas, the protagonist in *The Giver*, has become a man

and the leader of the community, and in the last book, *Son* (2012), the baby Gabriel grew up to be an adolescent.¹

As a best-selling American author and world-wide recognized writer of more than forty children's and young adults' books, Lois Lowry was given several awards and won the prestigious Newbery Medal for *The Giver*. Though her work is not intended specifically for young people, she is very sensitive to the new challenges and changes they have to face nowadays. As a matter of fact, she wrote that she "sat down in 1993 to write an adventure story" (Lowry 2014: n.p.) but added: "Somehow, unintentionally, I tapped into something that fed a hunger out there" (*ibidem*). On the one hand, she realised that her personal experience with her mother passing on to her the stories of her past (her mother as a giver of memories and she, Lowry herself, as a receiver of them), and her father's loss of pieces of memory, had made her wonder whether it would be good to forget memories that have been a source of pain or fear to us. On the other hand, she dealt with the question of what else would be lost if the human mind could be manipulated.² In addition to this, and in spite of the title of her novel, the old Giver of Memory is not the protagonist of the story but Jonas, a teenager who is appointed as the Receiver of Memory by the Committee of Elders. He is the narrator and eventually the person responsible for changing and improving the future as he sets out on a journey that postulates a progression from self-awareness to the deconstruction of reality as he knew it (Ramos 2016: 4), for his decisions affect not only his own personality but the immediate circumstances and the whole world he lives in.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with what seems an accomplished, ordered, perfect society without war, conflict, starvation, illness, envy, loneliness or suffering. Several pieces of information about the ordinary way of life help to build the whole scenario: tasks and ceremonies, clothing and undergarments, female and male haircuts, sanitation, dwellings, meals and packaged food (Lowry 2014: 22, 44, 48, 66-7, 100, 127, 173, 201). In fact, one of the things Lois Lowry points out in one of the many interviews in her book is that meals are delivered to the members of this community.³ People seem pleased, they live in good houses, life is made easy and predictable for them, but they also live by a lot of rules in order to create a stable, safe society. It can be argued

they live in what has been termed "the sterile eutopia of comforts" (Stableford 2010: 276). However, it is apparent that something is missing, in particular the possibility of individual choice. As for familial relations, Mother and Father take care of the children, as they are supposed to do as part of the daily ritual, but there is a lack of genuine bonding. This void of authenticity, added to a sense of an implicit danger or evil underneath the surface is something that Jonas has the ability to perceive.

In this technologically evolved community of the future, the eradication of memory has destroyed emotions as well as any kind of divergence from the pattern. In order to carry out the Sameness plan, not only are the climate and topography scientifically controlled but also the people, who on the one hand have no worries and no decisions to be made, but are deprived of reading books (these are all the Giver's property and kept at his home), seeing colour, questioning the rules, or being free. There is no specific information in the novel as to how this society became the way it is — the reader assumes there was a sort of cataclysm in the form of some kind of war, or some kind of nuclear or climatic disaster — although the film adaptation begins by stating that "From the ashes of The Ruin, the Communities were built, protected by the boundary. All memories of the past were erased" (Noyce 2014, 0:23). The image of the suspended island where the community lives is symbolic of isolation, and the sense of uniformity is enhanced by the black and white images (*idem*, 2:42).

In other words, the community members choose Sameness over individuality and security over freedom. The Giver, who is a former Receiver, is the keeper of all the memories of the world and responsible for passing them onto Jonas, the Receiver-in-training (Lowry 2014: 199), who comes to realise their way of life is based upon lies and secrets, the darkest of which is the so-called "release" of all of those who did not correspond to the expectations of the community or failed to comply with the rules (*idem*: 13, 19, 48, 68). Jonas eventually decides he must flee to the mysterious place called Elsewhere, a world with "all that goes beyond [...] and all that goes back, and back, and back" (*idem*: 103).

Thus Jonas is taught a different narrative, which opens a kind of Pandora's box for him. Through the Giver he receives the memories of the lost history of mankind and sees a whole new world that has been kept from him. If he lives in a place that appears to be

perfect but really is not, the reader may wonder whether this story is a utopia or a dystopia, expressing a genre blending (Ramos 2016: 5; Donaworth 2003: 29) that is consonant both with what the Giver tells Jonas in the book, "They can't help it. *They know nothing*. (...) It's the life that was created for them" (Lowry 2014: 192)⁴ and what he states in the film: "The way things look and the way things are, are very different" (Noyce 2014, 52:20).

In addition to this, and although the plot takes place over one year, the setting of the novel in an unknown future year in "almost December" (Lowry 2014: 11) brings it closer to uchronia. The month of December may act for the reader as a symbol of short, dark days and cold weather, a time when nature seems dead. As a matter of fact, throughout the course of the narrative, both Jonas and the reader become aware that snow and hills, among other things, like rain, sunshine and rainbows, oceans, mountain lakes and streams (*idem*: 112, 125, 166), for instance, are a very distant memory (*idem*: 110), something that existed before Sameness and consequently before climate control stopped the natural cycle of the change of seasons. The Giver explains: "Snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn't a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness" (*idem*: 110-111). It should be noted, therefore, that the choice of Sameness was made by the people a long time ago (*idem*: 124). Without Sameness, we are told, the community would be thrown into chaos and would destroy itself.

The fluctuations in the Earth's climate in the past — due both to human activity and natural phenomena —, climatic stability and the impact of climate change on the future of food production, have been the object of ecological concern inspired by food politics and notions of sustainability (Krebs 2013: 96-7). Awareness of the links between ecological endeavour and agricultural practice have forged a bond with the history of utopian thought expressed not only in eutopias and dystopias but in the development of ecotopias, based on the concept of Nature as being central to that bonding process. As part of the process of ecological adaptation or ecological defiance, the alienation of human existence from Nature seems inevitable in futuristic fiction (Stableford 2010: 259, 276).

Within this context, it comes as no surprise that food or any kind of either natural or

artificial nourishment should play an important role in the whole setting of mind control in the fictional world portrayed in Lowry's novel. In fact, it becomes apparent to both readers and viewers that order is kept in the community through drugging its citizens with pills and daily injections, although it is argued that this medication relieves pain so that no one suffers (Lowry 2014: 93-4, 142-3). It should be added that this has the opposite effect of what is described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's seminal dystopia, when Winston and people in general are administered drug injections to increase pain, induce doublethink and correct "defective" memories (Orwell 2000: 258).

In this regard Jonas makes the decision to stop taking the pills because he actually rejects the world of no feelings in which he has lived. Consequently, the stirrings return, together with the new, heightened feelings. Not only is he able to see all the colours but he can keep them too. Apples, for instance, "were always, always red" (Lowry 2014: 166).⁵ In compliance with the implicit biblical intertextual reference, the apple can be taken literally as food or as a metaphor (Westfahl *et alli* 1996: 3), notably for knowledge and temptation. For that matter, the reader is aware in the third chapter that Jonas had once picked up an apple from the basket where the snacks were kept, played throw and catch with his friend Asher, and took the apple home against the rules (*idem*: 39-40). This constitutes a crucial incident, because Jonas notices that, just for an instant, the apple changes its appearance. Above all, Jonas's mind is fed on a sensation of happiness, fulfillment and contentment. He experiences sadness, injustice, pain, grief, a variety of bad and good emotions, and it is a new depth of feelings that he is experiencing (*idem*: 167). Emotions are deep and they do not need to be told: "They were *felt*", and he feels happiness (*idem*: 168). Another relevant thread of thought is that it is not Fiona who tempts Jonas by offering him the apple, but the other way round, which represents a gender role reversal of conventional temptress behaviour. Most significantly, she has distinctive red hair, something that must have driven the genetic scientists crazy, as the Giver ironically comments (*idem*: 123).

Consequently, it is worth pointing out that the young protagonist in the story is being fed by the reception of memories and the perception of feelings and emotions, developing his ability to question the values on which the community was founded. Jonas

thus defies the established dynamics of power and the absence of resistance to power, which is why it can be said he becomes the embodiment of the possibility of a personal/social/political empowerment.

In addition to the results of this metaphorical nurturing, it is appropriate to discuss the role of literal nurturing in the outline of the events. There are scattered references to the actual process of feeding the members of the community throughout the book. Although scarcely any particular kind of food is actually described, it can be assumed that most of it is synthetic. It becomes apparent that there are dietary rules to be followed (*idem*: 118) and therefore some information regarding the impact of food on the community can be obtained. The reader becomes aware of the existence of food in the community for the first time on the second page of the first chapter (*idem*: 12) due to the comment that Food Delivery people, Street Cleaners and Landscape Workers were a busy crew that afternoon. The specific reference to the use of "a fresh cup of coffee" can be found at the beginning of chapter two (*idem*: 23), when the members of Jonas's family have a meal together, as well as juice and crackers being used as snacks for toddlers (*idem*: 76).

The reader has also knowledge that people in the community don't cook their own food, which in point of fact prevents the sensory experience of preparing food and the combination of practice and memory (Counihan/Van Esterik 2013: 299), although the table is indeed a centre of community interaction (Madden 2006: 3). They have to open a container that holds the formula and equipment for the feeding procedure with regard to the newchild Gabriel, as one realizes in chapter three (Lowry 2014: 41), but there is no information concerning the regular adult diet. The food for each meal is delivered to community members by people assigned as Food Delivery people and the Collection Crew are the people assigned to pick up food trays left outside of dwellings: "Mother tidied the remains of the morning meal and placed the tray by the front door for the Collection Crew" (*idem*: 54).

A relevant aspect concerning food is that mealtimes are what any ordinary reader relates to quality time. According to Barthes, food is a system of communication (*apud* Counihan/Van Esterik 2013: 23) and indeed each evening at mealtime the family members

share their impressions of that day's events and then comfort and support one another. In reference to Barthesian structuralism, it may be said that the authority of the meal structure displays a dominant familial ideology that occupies people's minds and actions and prohibits alternatives (Ashley *et alli* 2004: 5, 7-8). Meals also play an important role at crucial moments of the narrative, namely in the new-found process of making decisions. When Jonas eventually wants to devise a plan in order to escape the community, to get away and get to Elsewhere, the Giver tells him: "First, I will order our evening meal. Then we will eat." So Jonas asks ironically: "Then we'll have a sharing of feelings?" to which the Giver replies: "You and I are the only ones who *have* feelings. (...) And after we eat," he insists, "we'll make a plan." (Lowry 2014: 193-4). In fact, it may occur to the reader that the advice to think things over, usually expressed as 'sleep on it', in this community is equivalent to 'eat on it'. The time for Jonas's departure is also determined by the time when the Food Collectors finish picking up the evening-meal remains, which is midnight (*idem*: 199). For the purposes of this study, it is important to bear in mind that, although he only takes leftovers, robbing the community of food is considered a very serious crime (*idem*: 207).

The link between nurturing and feeding also becomes evident when, as early as in the second chapter, there is a reference to the Nurturing Centre where Jonas's father as a Nurturer feeds newchildren, and Gabriel in particular, every four hours (*idem*: 25), in a loving setting that is deconstructed when Jonas is confronted with the truth (*idem*: 185-190). As part of the birth rate control, only a maximum of fifty babies are born each year but certain family units can accommodate an additional child to the usual two. Women assigned to be Birthmothers do not work and therefore their task is not considered an important one, but they get "wonderful food" (*idem*: 36), although once again the reader does not know exactly what their diet is.

It is not a coincidence that both Jonas's father and Fiona do the duties assigned to a Nurturer, that is, they are the caretakers of infants. To this it should be added that caretakers, both female and male, also care for the elderly in the House of the Old. As for Birthmothers, they are always females assigned to give birth to three children within three

years, after which they become Labourers and do hard physical work for the rest of their lives, which is something not to be looked forward to (*idem*: 36-7).

Among the whole community, to be responsible for "all the physical and emotional needs" (*idem*: 18) of newchildren during their earliest years is regarded as a very important job. The Nurturers are therefore prominent members of the community. For instance, for the ceremony called the Naming, the Nurturers sit at the front and bring the newchildren to the stage.

However, it is also the case that, right from the start, in the first chapter, the reader is told that children who were not doing well were kept in an extra care section for supplementary nurturing but could in fact be "released" (*idem*: 19). Release is mainly a punishment, except for two occasions: release of the elderly, "which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived" and release of a newchild, "which always brought a sense of what-could-we-have-done" and this was "especially troubling for the Nurturers, who felt they had failed somehow (*ibidem*).

As he escapes the community and reaches Elsewhere, a place beyond the borders that can be interpreted either as an allegory of freedom, or as an actual place in the story, Jonas is able to save Gabriel from being "released" as much as he saves himself.⁶ Moreover, while almost everybody in the community has dark eyes (*idem*: 34), Gabriel has pale, lighter eyes, like Jonas himself, a characteristic the reader comes to learn is connected to the ability of seeing-beyond (*idem*: 197).⁷ It should be added that Jonas wonders if the choice to leave has been the right one and if he could keep Gabriel alive, for both he and the child become scared, cold, wet, weak, desperate and starving, as they leave behind some cultivated fields and finish the store of potatoes, carrots and berries (*idem*: 215-6). However, he realizes "he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for colour, for love" (*idem*: 217).

Although *The Giver* cannot be considered a critical utopia in the restricted sense (Fitting 2010: 136-7; Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 15; Lancaster 2000: 111-2), it points to ontological ambiguities. In fact, the open ending of the book allows the reader to experience the sense of hope for the future of both these characters and those they left behind. The

reader — as well as the viewer of the film — may make up their own mind. As Lois Lowry remarks, what every person sees in the book is not what she saw when she wrote it. because everyone can add their own imagination, their own memories, their own emotions, which is something that happens more in the reading of the book than in the viewing of the movie, because in this situation everyone sees exactly the same thing. This is actually good because the book and the film are different channels. A message that the author herself assumes as arising out of *The Giver* is the importance of the choices and compromises we make, as well as the acknowledgement that there is no good without bad.⁸ In sum, both the possibility of manipulating human memory and the constant human ability to question and/or challenge established narratives can provide 'receivers' of the book and the film with stimulating food for thought.

Notes

¹ As part of a literary series, these works will be examined over the long term within the ongoing research project ALIMENTOPIA/Utopian Foodways financed by FEDER/COMPETE 2020/FCT as POCI-01-0145-FEDER-016680 (PTDC/CPC-ELT/5676/2014).

² See Lowry's interviews "What if You Could Control Memory: Writing The Giver", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGcdEX8QeF4>> (last access 28/02/2017) and "2014 ALA Annual Conference — Lois Lowry on 'The Giver'", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_OWwVwUJfs> (Last access 28/02/2017). See also "A Note from the Author" (Lowry 2014: n.p.).

³ "Lois Lowry: THE GIVER", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ez2vF5XCJBc>> (Last access 28/02/2017).

⁴ Italics used in the original text.

⁵ It should be noted that an apple is depicted at the beginning of every chapter of the book edition used for this study.

⁶ Although in the book Gabriel eventually becomes a toddler, who takes his first steps and speaks his first words (Lowry 2014: 172), he remains a baby in the film.

⁷ In the film both Jonas and Gabriel have brown eyes.

⁸ "Newbery Winner Lois Lowry, Author of 'The Giver'", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKxy3IMzkEs>> (last access 28/02/2017). This interview features Lowry and the film producer, Nikki Silver.

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