

# A Foucauldian Reading of Power Dynamics in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*

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**Abstract**—Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) is a post-apocalyptic young-adult novel that shows a society which at first glance seems to be a utopia; however, underneath it represents a dystopian society. The novel may depict a peaceful world in which everyone is equal and has the same rights; however, this peacefulness comes at a cost. It represents a totalitarian regime that makes every decision on behalf of its citizens. The plot of the novel unfolds through the main character's journey. When he is assigned the unique and respected role of receiver of memories, he becomes aware that his community has been deprived of living a normal life. The novel displays a dystopian world and the consequences of enforced equality. Through the progression of the storyline, the reader realizes that it shows an unjust world where truth is meticulously controlled. The totalitarian regime creates the illusion of a world that appears peaceful, people are not allowed to choose their spouses or have the right to naturally reproduce. Thus, this present article attempts to analyze the representation of power dynamics through the lens of Michel Foucault's theories. Moreover, it explores the relationship between the citizens and the figures of authority. A Foucauldian analysis allows an investigation of mechanisms of power. Furthermore, this article explores how the novel represents control over sexual reproductivity, language use, as well as manipulation through surveillance.

**Keywords**—Lois lowry, Michel foucault, Power dynamics, Sexuality, The giver.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Giver* is a science fiction novel, originally published in 1993, by the American author Lois Lowry. The setting of the novel takes place in an isolated society, which is referred to as the "community." This so-called perfect society has low crime and total peace. The authorities provide no knowledge of the history of humanity, with the aim of eradicating violence, conflict, and the escalation of a war. Moreover, the community has eliminated sexist beliefs, so there is total equality between the two genders. The plot follows a young boy named Jonas who turns 12 at the beginning of the novel. It is considered to be a significant age; the community holds a ceremony where the Elders, who are the leaders, choose every child's future assignment based on their abilities and interests. In *The Giver*, turning 12 means that the children are now the new adults, they must receive their training, but must not neglect their school studies. Jonas is chosen for the role of Receiver of Memory, becoming the successor to The Giver and one of only two people allowed to remember the world's past. Although the community first appears to be a utopia, it gradually reveals itself to be a totalitarian society. Citizens live under constant surveillance with the

authorities closely monitoring every aspect of their lives. It is significant to mention that the term utopia was coined by Thomas More, and it comes from the Greek word "ou-topos" meaning "no place", suggesting that true perfect society does not exist (Harpfield, 1932). In *The Giver*, citizens have no independence in their lives. This is because of the strict rules forced by the Elders, which control every detail. For instance, children must obey the rules concerning clothing, hairstyles, as well as playing with their chosen toys. Under no circumstances are they allowed to lie or hide the truth. The authorities are also responsible for assigning a spouse for the adults, although they are not permitted to reproduce naturally. The Elders are also in total control of the use of language; people must be precise with their words. Children are punished when they are not careful with using appropriate words. Jonas' interaction with The Giver makes him realize that due to the policy of "sameness," his community lacks individuality and emotional depth. These enforced rules remove any sense of humanity and freedom from society; it sacrifices normalcy for the sake of equality. Nevertheless, people in the novel are not aware of these issues because the government provides limited knowledge to its citizens.

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Therefore, this present article attempts to examine *The Giver* by analyzing power dynamics, suppression of sexuality, language control, as well as the portrayal of motherhood by integrating Michel Foucault's theories on power relations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lois Lowey's *The Giver* has been investigated through various lenses, but mainly scholars have focused on the representation of a dystopian society. For example (Hanson, 2009) investigates the role of memory in the novel and connects the analysis to Ernst Bloch's theory about utopia. Hanson explains that like other dystopian narratives, the novel works as a warning about the dangers of a society deprived of memory; he describes memory as: "a tool of static totalitarian control and the production of infantile citizens" (p. 45). By applying Bloch's theory, Hanson further demonstrates Jonas' reception of memory from *The Giver* which dramatizes Bloch's utopian concept, positioning memory as a source of hope and a means of social resistance within the novel. Although Hanson emphasizes the utopian role of memory, this paper will take it a step further to make the argument that the utility of control of memory, and not just lack of it, is consistent with Foucauldian power processes.

Moreover, in contrast to the previously mentioned article (Yildirim, 2017) examines how fiction can be a part of the educational curriculum. The researcher argues that dystopian novels, specifically *The Giver*, can play a valuable role in schools because they address important issues such as: "social justice, indispensability of democratic thought, universal tolerance, anti-racism, gender mainstreaming, freedom, justice and equality are frequently handled in an apocalyptic, grotesque and emphatic style" (p. 130). The study highlights the pedagogical benefits of teaching *The Giver* and explores how it can encourage students' critical thinking skills and enhance their historical consciousness. Yildirim focuses on *The Giver* from an educational perspective; however, this present paper views the novel from a theoretical point focusing on the representation of a totalitarian society.

As in much of existing research on *The Giver* (Leine, 2023), delivers a comparative analysis of the novel with Thomas More's *Utopia*. By focusing on the representation of elderly characters in novels, who are generally portrayed positively, symbolizing knowledge and wisdom. For example, the character The Giver embodies wit, and he acts as an advisor to the committees if needed. However, the article also highlights instances of cruelty toward the elderly. In *The Giver*, older individuals are physically abused if they misbehave at the place called "The House of Old" which is the residence designated for them. Leine further explains the similarities in the treatment of the elderly in both societies; in *Utopia*, the citizens are advised to die voluntarily to avoid burdening the community, while in *The Giver*, ceremonies of "release" are held under the belief that the elderly go off to an unknown place and will not return. By the end of the novel, the reader discovers that "release" actually

means the elderly are murdered by a lethal injection. Leine's comparative study is made between *Utopia* and *The Giver*, and the representation of senior citizens, this present article differs in the sense that it concentrates on the Elders who are the symbols of authority. And how they insert their power by manipulating the truth for the benefit of total control.

Finally, Poorghorban & Sadjadi (2023) examine the power dynamics within the novel. Relying on John Fiske's theory of power. The researchers argue that the Elders maintain control through surveillance, monitoring every aspect of community members' and family lives. Family members, in turn, are encouraged to observe one another, with obligations to openly share their feelings and dreams while being strictly forbidden from lying or withholding the truth. According to Fiske, the exercise of power: "must occur at the most micro level, that of the body" (p. 111), resulting in a society that is completely dominated. While Poorghorban and Sadjadi concentrate merely on the implementation of power and how it assists in the identity formation of the individuals in the society, this article distinguishes itself from the previously mentioned articles by focusing on the misuse of power by the authorities from Foucault's perspective.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article intends to analyze *The Giver*, integrating the notion of power dynamics according to the French philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas. This section showcases some of his most significant ideas on power, which can be relevant to the analysis of *The Giver*. Foucault is known for examining power dynamics and relationships within society. He conceived power as a dynamic, challenging, productive system of relations circulating throughout society, which defines individuals and institutions. Since he explains that power: "must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization... Individuals are the vehicles of power" (1980, p. 98). Therefore, power functions as a network of relations among individuals. Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), discusses the term "panopticon" originally coined by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The panopticon is a prison design featuring a central watchtower from which inmates can be observed, though they cannot see inside the tower themselves. This awareness of potential surveillance encourages individuals to regulate their own behavior (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). Thus, this can be a metaphor for a society in which individuals are constantly observing each other, using surveillance as a tool of power to ensure self-discipline.

In addition to surveillance being a tool for disciplinary power, in his book titled *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault discusses the term "Bio-power" which is a mechanism used for the sake of taking biological control over the citizens' bodies. Furthermore, he explains that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the churches transformed the view on sexual activity, in the name of divine law and stripping

it of its connection with pleasure. The truth surrounding sexuality becomes blurred, leading to confusion. Sexuality became entangled with issues: “of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth” (p. 56). Individuals were forced to report or confess their actions to figures of authority within the church; this means confessing to a priest. Thus, Bio-power is a technique that authorities use control over populations, such as birth control, to manage and control demographic trends it:

...focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births, and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy, and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population (Foucault, 1978, p. 139).

Finally, it is significant to mention that self-disciplinary and biological control can be connected with Foucault's ideas on “pouvoir-savoir,” which translates to “power – knowledge.” He is considered to be the first philosopher to highlight the connection between power and knowledge. He argued that knowledge exists within the system of power, and that the two reinforce each other. This connection impacts societal beliefs and norms, as knowledge exists in power relations and dictates how individuals might perceive and understand the world around them (Foucault & Gordon, 1980).

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the surface, *The Giver* represents an equal society, one that appears to have successfully achieved in eliminating war, crime, and hunger. However, this section discusses how, in fact, the novel represents a community that is under total dominance. It provides an in-depth analysis of the power tools that the authority uses to take control over the people, aligning with Foucault's philosophy. Jonas' new role as The Receiver of the Memory provides him with the realization that his people have been deprived of living a normal life. For instance, one of the first things that Jonas realizes is that his world lacks color; people in the community are colorblind and perceive everything in grey. Although the novel never directly explains this, The Giver says it is because of “sameness”. Thus, it can be assumed that citizens cannot see each other's skin color. In addition, it is considered impolite if they comment on any physical differences between individuals: “No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals” (Lowry, 1993, p. 30). The Giver explains to Jonas that in the past, people had different skin colors: “there had been a time when flesh had different colors” (p. 140).

In addition to visual uniformity, the Community has invasive reach into its citizens' most private lives, especially through strict protocols regulating reproduction and family organization. The adults are only allowed to apply for spouses

and children, and the decisions are made by committees as they see fit. Although Jonas expresses sadness about this process, he also suggests that perhaps it is safer: “We really have to protect people from wrong choices” (Lowry, 1993, p. 138). The system of control represents one of how the Elders maintain total control over the people, particularly by suppressing their sexual desires. Jonas mentions a dream in which he sees his friend Fiona without her clothes on, and his mother explains that he is beginning to experience “stirrings.” Thus, his mother tells him not to worry, but he must start his treatment. After he takes what is known as “the pill” he explains to the reader that he slowly started to forget his dream and the feelings of pleasure that came from it. Therefore, from this we can understand that everyone in the community is infertile, excluding the females who are chosen to be “birth mothers”. This practice of power over human biology can be connected with Foucault's theory of Bio-power. The regulations and control of sexuality within the community mirror Foucault's assessment of how sexuality can be a tool of power that takes control over society. Thus, the citizens in the novel are subjugated and oppressed.

Moreover, in the novel, this dynamic of Bio-power is shown as the citizens are banned from reproducing naturally, and forced to take treatment which suppresses their sexual desires and makes them infertile. From Jonas' narration, we can fathom that when the characters experience “strings” it must be reported to the people in power and receive immediate treatment. Thus, they must take the pill from the age of puberty until they are senior citizens. Although it is not mentioned directly in the novel, it can be assumed that the characters do not seem to know the act of sex, or childbirth. Their limited knowledge about sexual reproduction can be connected with Foucault's concept of “power-knowledge”, which emphasizes that power and knowledge are interconnected and inseparable. In this context, it becomes clear that the Elders in *The Giver* maintain control by limiting access to the truth and knowledge about sex and sexuality and by making the citizens report their intimate thoughts and feelings. This can be seen when they command: “ATTENTION A REMINDER THAT ALL STRINGS MUST BE REPORTED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE PLACE” (Lowry, 1993, p. 52). The Elders in *The Giver* give treatment before people have the chance to fully experience or comprehend these feelings. Foucault, in his explanation of Bio-power, mentions that because of religion people's sexual thoughts, actions, desires, fantasies, and dreams were no longer private; these matters became subjects of discipline by those in power. People had to report their intimate thoughts to the institution of the church, and in *The Giver*, it is similar, which shows the citizens being forced to report their sexual desires to the figures of authority. Thus, sex and sexuality become a mechanism of power and manipulation.

The systematic dehumanization of the Community applied to the Birthmothers as mere vessels of reproduction and depriving their role of feeling and relationships is reflective of Foucault's idea of Bio-power. By reducing motherhood to a solely biological role, the Elders control and govern a certain portion of the population, resulting in

demographic plethora and genetic “Sameness” at the loss of individual identity and the maternal experience. In the novel, everyone is expected to respect each other’s privacy and to value everyone’s work highly, except for birthmothers, a role that is regarded as degrading. When Jonas’ younger sister expresses her enjoyment in playing with babies and suggests that she might like to be a birth mother at the age of 12 years, their mother responds with disappointment: “Lilly! “Mother spoke very sharply. “Don’t say that. There’s very little honor in that Assignment.” (Lowry, 1993, p. 32). Birthmothers are allowed only three births within 3 years, after which they are assigned to labor for the rest of their lives. This role is generally viewed negatively by others in the community. When Jonas volunteers in the House of Old, an elderly woman reflects on this fact during a conversation about a release ceremony for a former birthmother: “all lives *are* meaningful, I don’t mean that they aren’t. But *Edna*. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in the Food Production for years, until she came here. She never had a family unit.” (Lowry, 1993, p. 45). Although everyone appears to be equal, there is still a level of hierarchy within the community. While the reason why only birthmothers are allowed to have children is not directly mentioned, it can be assumed that the community intends to manipulate the babies’ genes to ensure regularity and consistency: “We’ve never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out.” (Lowry, 1993, p. 133).

Aside from total dominance over the citizens’ sexuality, in *The Giver*, language control is another tool that is used to suppress the individuals of the community. Linguistic suppression occurs when individuals are corrected using emotional words such as love, hate, and pain. The language is exceedingly institutionalized to guarantee order, clarity, and especially emotional suppression. Foucault explains how language creates discourse, and discourse in turn shapes subjects. *The Giver* prevents individuals from forming subjective or resistant identities. For instance, when Jonas uses the word love and his father reminds him of the importance of “precision of language,” it represents Foucault’s concept of the system of dispersion, in which language limits what can be thought, felt, and expressed: “Your father means that you used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete” (Lowry, 1993, p. 177). This is an example of Bio-power, a mechanism to remove individual agency and ensure the community’s obedience. By suppressing words or expressions like “love” in *The Giver*, the community uses language as a technique of control, which in turn suppresses emotional expressions to ensure order. This demonstrates that in *The Giver*, language is regarded as an active instrument of power, aligning with Foucault’s analysis that language is central for the implementation of power (Foucault, 2002, pp. 27-28). The narrator of the novel mentions that children from a young age, as early as three, are encouraged to be precise with their choices of words, and if they are not careful, they will be punished. Jonas mentions that his friend named Asher always used the wrong words while having conversations, when he

was three, he mixed the words “smack” and “snack” and the instructor thus smacked him to teach him a lesson about the acquisition of correct language: “The discipline wand in hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came across Asher’s hands. Asher whimpered, cringed, and corrected himself instantly. “Snack,” he whispered (Lowry, 1993, p. 76).

Moreover, language is used as a tool of power for discipline and punishment. Surveillance is another tool that is used by the Elders to keep the community under control. In *The Giver*, citizens live under constant surveillance. A mechanism, according to Foucault, is intentionally used by governments to ensure that people behave appropriately at all times, regardless of whether they are actively being watched. This constant sense of observation discourages illegal or undesirable behavior. It is also used as a mechanism to gather information about the children to see their skills and their behaviors, and what tasks will be suitable for them. This mirrors Foucault’s already discussed concept of the “panopticon,” in which it explains if citizens are under constant surveillance, then they will behave correctly according to the government’s standards.

By the end of the novel, Jonas realizes the injustice rules of his society and decides to escape the community with Gabriel in search of freedom. Gabriel is the infant that Jonas’ father brings home; he is a Nurturer who takes care of babies before being assigned to their family unit. When Gabriel does not meet the standard of becoming a family member, it is thus released from the Community. When the protagonist realizes the truth, he makes a plan with The Giver to escape the Community indefinitely. Jonas’ resistance to not accept the repressive rules of his society can be understood by Foucault’s philosophy: “where there is power there is resistance” (1978, p. 95). Meaning that power and resistance co-exist with each other. In the end, Jonas appears to have finally known what love and happiness mean by escaping the community, as can be shown in the following quotation:

All of it was new to him. After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road. He slowed the bike again and again to look with wonder at wildflowers, to enjoy the throaty warble of a new bird nearby, or merely to watch the way the wind shifted the leaves in the trees. During his 12 years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness (Lowry, 1993, p. 240)

Ultimately, the narrative underscores the dangers of societal conformity while tracing the protagonist’s awakening to systemic injustice. Those in power eliminate resistance by erasing historical memory, organizing medications to suppress sexuality, and discouraging the citizens from practicing freedom of choice or questioning the authority. Jonas’ journey as the Receiver of Memory awakens his consciousness, making him aware of concepts he previously could not comprehend. Eventually, he realizes the cruelty of his community and decides to resist by escaping with Gabriel, seeking a life with greater freedom.

## V. CONCLUSION

This article analyzed *The Giver* by focusing on the portrayal of power dynamics. *The Giver* shows a seemingly idyllic world. The novel displays a society in which everyone is equal because of the policy of “sameness”. Through a Foucauldian analysis, this present article showcases different power tools that are utilized by the authorities to have total dominance over the citizens’ lives. It discussed that the deliberate suppression of sexuality can be directly interconnected with Foucault’s concept of Bio-power. A term which is used to describe tactics of power over human biology and population demographics. People’s prohibition from natural reproduction is an intentional power tool that allows governments to subjugate human bodies. The characters’ lack of understanding of sex and sexuality was connected to Foucault’s idea of power-knowledge, which permits the rulers to dominate the people by limiting their access to the truth. It was explained that through the interconnectedness of Foucauldian philosophy, it can be understood that the novel demonstrates a society that is ordered by shaping people’s thoughts, which sacrifices every normal aspect of the character’s lives. In conclusion, it can be fathomed that power is not always led by violence, it can be enforced with hidden tactics and manipulations, it can be through suppression of sexuality, precision of language, and surveillance.

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