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## Emerging to Elsewhere: The Giver and The Concept of “Elsewhere” in Secondary Curricula

Kayleigh Capers

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Emerging to Elsewhere: *The Giver* and The Concept of “Elsewhere” in Secondary  
Curricula

by

Kayleigh Capers

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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May 2023



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## ABSTRACT

*The Giver* has maintained its popularity through its timeless commentary on universal human experiences like identity, maturation, and mortality. In this thesis I have established its universality, especially in how the concept of Elsewhere expresses mortality, maturation, agency, and free will, along with discussing the importance of including the novel in secondary curricula. I have also limited the focus of popularity to its continued use in classrooms despite its controversial nature. I address common reasons for the banning and censorship of the novel and discuss how to include the controversial topics in the classrooms.

**Keywords:** *The Giver*, Lois Lowry, Elsewhere, Universality, Teaching, Popularity

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family. To my father for his encouragement and humor to push me through hurdles. To my mother for her encouragement and input when I lost my words. To my sister, Kenslie, my best friend, and comic relief when I am overwhelmed.

Thank you for your love and support.

I love you mountains.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO ELSEWHERE

Despite its controversial nature and placement on the American Library Association's "Most Frequently Challenged Children's Literature" list, Lois Lowry's young adult novel *The Giver* continues to challenge and inspire readers through asking timeless questions. *The Giver* is applicable to many readers because it addresses issues faced by young adults, including individuality and the importance of history and memory. The novel also discusses some of the most universal issues such as free will, mortality, and maturation. Lowry's complex concept of Elsewhere<sup>1</sup> represents mortality and the possibility of something more. Through its ambiguous depiction, the concept of Elsewhere creates a sense of freedom and infinite possibilities. Elsewhere provides a physical threshold between childhood and adolescence through its boundary between The Community and the outside world.

In the novel, the character Jonas lives in a community that has erased all knowledge and memory of the world outside of its boundaries, and one that decides how each member of that community will serve it. At the ceremony marking the end of childhood, Jonas is assigned the mysterious role of Receiver of Memory. Prior to his assignment as The Receiver, the only mentions of Elsewhere are through Release, which is later revealed to be euthanasia, although its true meaning is withheld from The Community. Release is only vaguely referenced in the narrative as something that is normal and necessary for the population. It is initially introduced in chapter four when

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will be capitalizing the terms Elsewhere, Release, Stirrings, The Community, The Receiver, and The Giver to refer to these specific concepts in *The Giver*. These terms are not capitalized in the novel, this is just a way to avoid any misunderstandings in my analysis.

Jonas's friend Fiona discusses the Release of Roberto, an elderly citizen, that morning. When Release is discussed in the beginning of the novel, it is only in relation to three different issues: the elderly, infants, and individuals who break the rules three times, which are only mentioned individually until page 192, where Jonas states the conditions in one sentence. After Jonas receives memories from The Giver, he learns that the previous Receiver requested to be Released because of the memories she received.

The nature of Elsewhere is also mysterious. The first reference to Elsewhere, besides the elder's Release in chapter four, is when Jonas's sister, Lily, asks her father where the infants that he Released would go. She theorizes that a family from Elsewhere would come to take the Released infant and raise him. Their parents neither confirm nor deny Lily's theories; they rather encourage her ability to tell stories. In the conversation between Lily and her father, she theorizes about the communities from Elsewhere, and her parents' inability to verify her theories shows their limited knowledge of what lies beyond the boundaries of The Community.

Jonas gradually learns that there is an outside world beyond the boundary of which the citizens of The Community have no knowledge. He is initially introduced to the boundary through the ceremony of loss for a child who drowned in the river at that edge of The Community. In this case, the boundary of The Community separates life from death. The ambiguity of Elsewhere also creates infinite possibilities of what lies beyond The Community, from death to the possibilities of freedom and escape.

The concept of Elsewhere was inspired by events in Lowry's own adolescence. In middle school, Lowry lived in Tokyo, Japan in a fenced, post-WWII American military community. Lowry would ride her bike out of her community into a neighboring town to

escape the mundaneness of her American enclave. Lowry recognizes that these experiences inspired the utopian society in *The Giver*. In the American military community, she experienced the same safe but sterile environment that Jonas experiences in her novel, but her exploration of the unknown inspired what she labeled as Elsewhere in *The Giver*. She modeled Elsewhere not necessarily on a definite place but rather as an exploration into the unknown. In her Newbery Medal acceptance speech, she explains, “But each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom. Those are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things” (Newbery 9). Considering Lowry’s depiction of freedom through her own experience with her personal Elsewhere and escaping the boundaries of her own community, I argue that Elsewhere can also be associated with choice and exploration.

The ambiguous concept of Elsewhere has not attracted much critical notice beyond discussions based on religion, such as Graeme Wend-Walker’s article “On the Possibility of Elsewhere: A Postsecular Reading of Lois Lowry’s *Giver* Trilogy.” Wend-Walker identifies Elsewhere as a representation of an afterlife or “nonmaterial institution” (154). Wend-Walker analyzes *The Giver* through a postsecular lens and comments on both secular and religious arguments about the text. He notes that while there are many biblical allusions throughout the novel, the novel can also be analyzed with secular terminology. Wend-Walker also sees Elsewhere as an allegory for belief in secular or religious ideologies. In this thesis, I will not be focusing on the ideological responses to Elsewhere, but rather on the connection between Elsewhere and mortality and the influence it has on young adult literature.

In young adult fiction, the topic of death is introduced to the main character and fosters growth and change in their character through a loss of something or someone close to them, which provides the main character with the agency to accelerate the narrative. Roberta Trites identifies the treatment of death as one factor that separates children's fiction from young adult fiction. The treatment of death in children's literature typically symbolizes "a degree of separation from one's parents," while in young adult fiction, "death is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality" (118-119). According to Trites's model of differentiating children's literature from young adult literature, *The Giver* is a young adult novel due to Jonas's acceptance of mortality and his choice to leave his Community. Jonas learns of death through a memory of a soldier dying in a war. In this memory, he not only witnesses the death of the soldier but experiences it himself. At the end of the memory, Jonas is listening to the war while lying in the trenches alongside the soldier. They were both dying, but Jonas witnesses the other soldier's death before his own. As he experiences his own death it is narrated that "Finally, when he knew that he could bear it no longer and would welcome death himself, he opened his eyes and was once again on the bed" (151). In this scene, Jonas experiences mortality by means of someone else's memory but also accepts "the permanence" of death through his knowledge of mortality.

Knowledge is important in young adult literature, especially when accepting one's own mortality. Knowledge is what initially introduces adolescents to issues such as mortality, sexuality, and identity. In *The Giver*, Jonas gains knowledge through receiving memories. This new knowledge is what introduces Jonas to death and life before The Community. In the novel, Jonas is at the threshold of adolescence as he is maturing and is

assigned the job of Receiver of Memory. Throughout the novel, the nature of Elsewhere has been kept vague by governing the Committee of Elders to shield The Community from the truth. Jonas finally matures into adolescence when he learns of the mortality that results from Release. Eric Tribunella discusses the importance of knowledge when progressing from childhood to adolescence. While he also discusses mortality like Trite's model of differentiation between childhood and adolescence, Tribunella focuses on knowledge and trauma as an agent for maturation. He says:

Adolescence is effectively defined by initiation into knowledge and the loss of childhood, both of which can be experienced as trauma. The depiction and inducement of traumatic loss and knowledge are hallmarks of the YA novel.

Ultimately, the use of trauma is one way of signaling the legitimacy of the form.

(53)

Tribunella identifies the initial shift from children's literature to young adult literature as the loss of one's childhood. The knowledge Jonas gains through the memories results in a loss of innocence. He learns of famine, war, and death from The Giver. Jonas's exposure to the reality of mortality and suffering ultimately leads to the loss of childhood innocence, which is referenced in chapter 16, following his receiving the memory of the soldier dying at war. Lowry writes, "[Jonas] wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games" (152). Through the trauma of the memory, Jonas experiences a death of his childhood.

Death is a universal experience. Mortality is inevitable. As Kathryn James says, "death is one of the few subjects that is of truly universal concern; throughout human history, this sense of ending has had an impact on the ways in which we order and give

meaning to our lives” (1). While death is inevitable, The Community in *The Giver* has found a way to control its universality. To suppress feelings and emotions, The Community has changed the word *death* to the phrase “Release to Elsewhere.” Through the act of Release, The Community can control death, but cannot eliminate it, which admits its universality. They can control when people die of old age through the Release of the Old or even to create a stronger society through killing infants. The Release of the elderly is accompanied by a celebration rather than a memorial. In the chapter where they release Roberto, a resident of the house of Old, they describe the celebration in detail. The other elders tell Jonas that the ceremony for Roberto consisted of “the telling of his life . . . then the toast . . . we chanted the anthem . . . He made a lovely good-bye speech” and he “bowed . . . then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness” (41). They explain that despite participating in the ceremony of celebration, they do not know what happens, and that they “don’t think anybody does, except the committee” (41). The true nature of the act of Releasing is hidden from the general public, and those who administer the serum do not understand what they are doing.

As The Giver says when referring to those who administer Release, “They can’t help it. They know nothing,” (191). As Jonas receives memories, he begins to understand the nature of death, but he still does not know the nature of Release until The Giver finally shows him a tape of his father Releasing an infant. As Jonas realizes what is happening, he is appalled and cannot fathom his father’s participation in the procedure. This close encounter with death is what urges Jonas to leave The Community. Before he leaves, he steals the infant, Gabriel, from the Nurturer center where his father works.

Since Jonas now understands the concept of death and understands that the Community's collective ignorance is causing harm and taking innocent lives, he takes Gabriel and leaves The Community in an effort to save not only the baby but The Community, which, as I will explain below, would release the memories to all members of The Community. In the final scene of the novel, Jonas and Gabriel sled to the bottom of a hill. As they do so, Jonas begins to lose consciousness as he sees a home with Christmas lights and hears music and laughter. Until the publication of *Messenger*, the third book in The Giver Quartet, it was not clear whether Jonas and Gabriel survive.

In classrooms, *The Giver* is typically read as a stand-alone novel, without reference to the rest of the series. This separation from the sequels allows students to ponder the ambiguity of the initial ending and thus learn how to analyze complex topics. An important element of young adult literature is the ability of readers to identify with characters and their situations, which can be created through recognition, or identifying similarities between a narrative and one's own experience. Cristina Bruns discusses what can be gained from recognition: it can remind us that we are not alone, and it can bring to mind latent or forgotten emotional states to consider and resolve (20). Recognition in literature provides an opportunity for students to recognize in literature problems that they are experiencing in their own lives. Bruns's argument for recognition through reading literature is that its presentations of modern problems can create a connection between the student reader and the novel. The continued ability of *The Giver* to provide recognition lends to its continued popularity.

Of course, a novel's popularity can be determined by sales, awards, and reader reviews, but I have chosen to focus primarily on its popularity in secondary curricula.

This thesis will focus on how the ambiguous nature of Elsewhere aids in the universality and teachability of *The Giver*. In chapter 2, I will discuss the universality of *The Giver* through the ambiguous concept of Elsewhere. In this chapter I specifically describe the mortality, maturation, agency and free will represented by Elsewhere. This chapter's purpose is to present the universal topics that Elsewhere represents in the novel to show the possibility for students to recognize their own experiences in the novel. In chapter 3, I will discuss the teachability of the novel in secondary classrooms. In the first section, I discuss the controversy of the novel, while specifically discussing its controversial content. In the second section, I focus on how including *The Giver* in curricula is beneficial through the nuance of Elsewhere and the novel's textual complexity. In the final section of this chapter, I include suggested approaches for teaching the novel in classrooms, specifically providing examples of incorporating teaching strategies to discuss the controversial content. This chapter's purpose is to present ways to facilitate discussion in classrooms to promote the discussion of the controversial topics *The Giver* presents.



## CHAPTER II: THE UNIVERSALITY OF ELSEWHERE

### Introduction

The various possible interpretations of ambiguous concepts like Elsewhere lead to the complexity of *The Giver*. This chapter examines three examples of universal topics represented by Elsewhere that contribute to the nuanced complexity of mortality, maturation, and agency. For the section on the mortality of Elsewhere, I engage with Claire Bradford, *et al.*'s chapter on New World Orders and Transformative Possibilities, specifically the subsection "Border Conditions as Dystopias," where the author discusses metaphorical and physical boundaries in dystopian fiction. This scholarship supports my reading that Elsewhere could represent a physical and metaphorical boundary for Jonas.

For the representation of maturation in Elsewhere, I engage with scholarship by scholars Peter Hunt and Emily Lauer. Peter Hunt discusses how responsibility and its lack distinguishes adolescence from childhood and thus helps to establish my argument that Elsewhere represents maturation in terms of how Jonas accepts responsibility for himself, Gabriel, and The Community. Lauer also examines the difference between adolescence and childhood, but her selection argues that maturation also requires the adolescent to become independent from adults and to observe the imperfections of adult authority figures. I trace Jonas's growing independence through the knowledge he gains from the memories.

Finally, in my section on agency I depend on Bradford *et al.*'s chapter on "Communities and Utopianism" to discuss the agency for change that Jonas gains in the novel, which results in his escape to Elsewhere. The work of these scholars identifies the character traits that typically show a character's agency, all of which Jonas demonstrates

when he decides to leave The Community. This chapter serves to explore the universality of *The Giver* through the ambiguity of Elsewhere and its ability to represent universal concepts like mortality, maturation, agency, and free will.

### **Introduction to Elsewhere**

Prior to the ending of *The Giver*, Lowry offers no definite description of Elsewhere. Other communities exist at the edge of The Community, just before the boundary that separates The Communities from Elsewhere, but in chapter 13 Jonas mentions that only certain individuals may cross the bridge to Elsewhere. He says that one must be on “official business” to be able to travel to the outer edges of The Community, which shows how the knowledge of Elsewhere is guarded and how only select individuals are able to know what lies beyond The Community (134). When he is made The Receiver, Jonas becomes one of these select officials. But even with his assignment, Elsewhere is still not fully explained. In the rules for his assignment, he is told that he is “not permitted to apply for release” (87). He learns while training that this rule has been set into place because of the previous Receiver, Rosemary. The Giver explains that while she did not suffer physical pain, she did experience pain through “loneliness . . . poverty. . . hunger . . . and terror” (178). He explains that due to the severity of the memories her demeanor changed and she was unable to live with the knowledge. After five weeks of training, she requested to be Released and her memories were thus released to The Community causing chaos and widespread panic because of the overwhelming knowledge (180).

Like the discussion of Rosemary’s Release to Elsewhere, the only other references to Elsewhere prior to the ending regard the topic of Release, which in the

world of *The Giver*, means euthanasia. It is typically used on the elderly, infants deemed unfit, and individuals who repeatedly break the rules of The Community (192). When an infant is Released, it is “Released to Elsewhere,” and authorities claim that the child is being given to communities outside of The Community. It is this explanation that Jonas’s father repeats to Jonas’s little sister, Lily. When he Releases infants, a family in Elsewhere takes them. But there is no family on the other side. The Release to Elsewhere is ambiguous.

### **Mortality of Elsewhere**

Elsewhere represents physical and metaphorical mortality. The physical aspects of mortality are observed through Release and Jonas’s near-death experience at the end of the novel and its physical boundary between The Community and the outside world. This boundary can also represent mortality by creating a physical boundary between life and death. There are then the metaphorical deaths witnessed through the death of Jonas’s childhood and beliefs. Both the physical and metaphorical aspects will be discussed further in this section.

The first example of Elsewhere as mortality is in its relation to Release. The topic of Release is left ambiguous in the beginning of the novel, as one of the first references to Elsewhere only refers to its separation from The Community. Lowry writes, “Those who were released--even as new children--were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community” (54). Without references to specific details of Elsewhere or its landscape, Elsewhere becomes anything outside of The Community and a physical destination of Release. Before Jonas decides to leave The Community, it is revealed that Release to Elsewhere is a form of euthanasia. As described in the first chapter of this thesis, Jonas

sees the truth behind Release when watching a video of his father Release an infant through administering a lethal injection.

After Jonas watches the video, The Giver explains that when the previous failed Receiver, Rosemary, received memories of the past she could not mentally handle the responsibility. She requested to be Released and was given the injection. When she died, all of the memories she had received were released to the people in The Community, which caused momentary chaos because average citizens were overwhelmed with the new knowledge. The Giver adds that “memories [come] back to the people. If you were to be lost in the river, Jonas, your memories would not be lost with you. Memories are *forever*” (180). The release of memories through death is important because when Jonas journeys to Elsewhere the memories are still released. So since Jonas’s memories can be released to The Community despite his being alive, there is no need for death in order to release the memories. With the knowledge that crossing the boundary releases memories, The Giver and Jonas plan for Jonas to journey to Elsewhere. The only stipulation that The Giver gives Jonas is that he “can never return,” which is similar to the inability to return after death (194). As Jonas plans to leave, The Giver explains what will happen when The Community receives the memories that had been given to Jonas, and he mentions that there will be a ceremony of loss where The Community will collectively mourn for Jonas. Through The Community’s mourning, we see the duality of the meaning of Elsewhere. It can either represent death through mourning and a ceremony of loss, or through a celebration of life with the elderly. Through this complexity of Elsewhere, it represents both death and an existence of a better place outside of the dystopian Community.

While the journeys labeled as Releases to Elsewhere were literal deaths, Jonas's journey to Elsewhere complicates the previous knowledge of Elsewhere as his journey also represents a metaphorical death. The memories from Rosemary were released because she died, but when Jonas chooses to release his memories there is no physical death needed. He is only required to cross the boundary between Elsewhere and The Community. Often boundaries in literature represent thresholds of change. They create a physical representation of a change that takes place in the main character. While these changes can be seen physically, the change can also be mental and metaphorical. Bradford *et al.* explore the metaphorical boundary that is represented by borders in young adult literature. The boundary may begin as a physical indicator of geography, similar to how Elsewhere is everything outside of The Community in *The Giver*. But as one journeys across a border, the border "[makes] space and time ambiguous, as meaning slips metonymically between the literal and figurative" (27). Elsewhere begins as a physical destination outside of The Community, but as Jonas begins to journey past the boundary, the physical destination of Elsewhere becomes figurative as he discovers freedom and identity through his separation from The Community. In this sense, the literal destination of Elsewhere becomes figurative through Jonas's development. But, as Jonas reaches Elsewhere at the ending of the novel, the certainty of reality also becomes ambiguous. The language used in the final scenes references a memory given to Jonas at the beginning of his training: sledding down a hill. At the end of the novel Jonas begins to sled down a hill, "The runners sliced through the snow and the wind whipped at his face as they sped in a straight line through an incision that seemed to lead to the final destination, the place that he had always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their

future and their past” (224). The meaning of the passage shifts from Jonas and Gabriel’s literally reaching Elsewhere to the metaphorical destination of Elsewhere as the existence of something more than The Community.

Although there is not a physical death, Jonas suffers the death of other aspects of his life. For example, he experiences the death of his beliefs. When he begins to receive memories, his new knowledge contradicts what he has been taught growing up in The Community. For instance, he has grown up in a world without color. After receiving memories from The Giver, Jonas now sees that the world is full of it. He learns that there are many truths that are hidden from the citizens of The Community, like the topic of Release. His revelation is what ultimately leads him to decide to leave The Community and release the memories to the people in The Community. For Jonas, Elsewhere creates a physical boundary between life and death but also represents a metaphorical death through the death of his childhood, which is maturation.

### **Maturation**

Traditional maturation through puberty for adolescence is observed in the novel through Jonas’s Stirrings. He experiences a sexual awakening in chapter five and is given a suppressant pill that the adults in The Community are required to take that suppresses feelings. Jonas’s maturation into adolescence begins with these Stirrings and escalates through his knowledge gained from The Giver and his responsibilities as The Receiver.

In The Community, Jonas longs for individuality and choice, but as he matures, he becomes more aware of those around him, which is indicated by his increased sense of responsibility towards Gabriel. While he is in The Community, Jonas is cared for, and all decisions are made for him. There is no freedom to choose, so he lacks the need for

responsibility. As Jonas is leaving The Community, he realizes, “The community where his entire life had been lived lay behind him now, sleeping. At dawn, the orderly, disciplined life he had always known would continue again, without him. The life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without color, pain, or past” (207). As Jonas leaves, he is reflecting on his childhood while journeying to Elsewhere, which represents adolescence through his acceptance of responsibility for himself and Gabriel. Jonas’s maturation reflects the state of maturation from childhood according to Peter Hunt who says that “childhood can be defined in terms of responsibility versus lack of responsibility” (175), meaning that adolescence begins when the child begins to assume forms of responsibility since childhood is without responsibility. The acceptance of responsibility in adolescence is also observed through Jonas’s growth through knowledge.

One moment when his greater knowledge forces Jonas to mature a bit is when the children of The Community are playing a common game that he now understands as “a game of war” (167). Jonas flashes back to the memory of war that The Giver had just given to him. Because of Jonas’s knowledge, he forces the game to stop and leaves the group. Jonas finds a bench and is overwhelmed with “feelings of loss,” because “His childhood, his friendships, his carefree sense of security—all of these things seemed to be slipping away” (169). In this moment, Jonas acknowledges that knowledge has separated him from his friends and community.

As Jonas gains more knowledge of The Community, he learns that the Elders consult with The Giver when making decisions because they do not have the knowledge from the past. As Jonas begins to gain intelligence through the memories, he begins to

know more about the past than the Elders, which allows him to begin to critique how The Community functions. Jonas's newfound distrust in the leadership of The Community follows Emily Lauer's observation that as children progress into adolescence "they learn the adults in authority are not necessarily good or trustworthy, which can serve as a symbol for [ending] dependence we associate with childhood and assuming the responsibilities of adulthood" (46). Lauer in this sense agrees with Hunt's assessment that childhood is defined by a dependency on adults and a lack of responsibility. As Jonas gains knowledge from The Giver through his training, he also learns of the system that governs The Community, where The Giver is called upon to advise The Committee of Elders through his wisdom. Despite their lack of experience through having memories, the committee rarely asks for his advice. The Giver says, "Sometimes I wish they'd ask for my wisdom more often—there are so many things I could tell them: things I wish they would change. But they don't want to change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable—so painless. It's what they've chosen" (130). Because of Jonas's new knowledge, he begins to lose trust in The Committee of Elders and accepts the responsibility of showing the people of The Community the memories and wisdom that has been withheld from them. Alongside his responsibility to save The Community as he slowly matures into adolescence, he gains the ultimate responsibility of caring for another life, that of Gabriel. When he leaves The Community, Jonas becomes solely responsible for the baby. His sense of responsibility is exhibited while they are journeying to Elsewhere, as he begins to suffer from hunger and the weather. At one point Jonas weeps. "He was afraid now that he could not save Gabriel. He no longer cared about himself" (218), an emotional



state that indicates his maturation into selflessness. He takes sole responsibility for Gabriel's survival and neglects his own needs to save the infant.

Jonas's protective feeling for Gabriel is initially demonstrated when he decides to save him from being Released, a procedure which Jonas's father has planned for the following morning. Jonas decides to leave The Community earlier than he and The Giver had intended. Jonas's concern for Gabriel is also demonstrated when Jonas instinctively protects Gabriel as they are travelling through Elsewhere and Jonas loses control of the bike and falls. Jonas instinctively grabs for Gabriel. The baby strapped tightly in his seat, is only frightened, but Jonas's ankle is twisted, and his knees are bloody, scraped, and raw. Despite his own injuries, he reassures the baby. Jonas does not acknowledge his own injuries; instead, he fixes the bike and reassures Gabe, which shows his affection and care towards Gabriel and his tendency to put Gabriel first. This responsibility becomes instinctual, and he becomes the individual depended upon rather than depending on adults in authority, as he had done in The Community.

Another distinguishing quality of Jonas's maturation is his separation from The Community and its rules. When Jonas becomes The Receiver, he begins to question his previous beliefs through new knowledge supplied to him through the memories from The Giver. He begins to learn about the past, about emotions, and even about color, all of which were hidden from most of The Community to create a homogenized utopian society. As Jonas matures through his newfound knowledge, he becomes dissatisfied with the lack of choice and diversity. When he finally breaks free from The Community and is trekking to Elsewhere, Jonas begins to observe the diversity of nature in Elsewhere compared to The Community:

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 wind shifted the leaves in the trees. During his twelve years in the community, he never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness. (216)

Jonas's joy through his newfound freedom shows that despite his struggles and difficulties during his journey, his escape to Elsewhere has improved his life.

### **Agency and the Freedom of Choice**

While Elsewhere represents maturation and a growth away from The Community, it also eventually represents agency and free will. Jonas witnesses the need for change in the lives of those in The Community. As he learns of emotions and colors through his memories, he begins to mourn for the people in The Community and all that they will never have the opportunity to experience. Jonas's emotions for The Community's ignorance begins as anger because "they were satisfied with their lives which had none of the vibrance his own was taking on" but his feeling soon shifts to anger at himself because "he could not change that for them" (124). His pity for their lives manifests first as anger, but it becomes a way for Jonas to assume the responsibility of releasing his memories to The Community. Bradford, *et al.*, discussing agency in contemporary young adult literature, treat how agency can "position readers to hope in the possibility of agency capable of transformation by representing young characters possessing intelligence, compassion, and resourcefulness in their dealings with others and in the political action they take" (129). Jonas indeed gains agency due to his compassion for his

friends and family in The Community and the memories and knowledge that they are shielded from. As Jonas becomes more intelligent through the memories, his sense of agency begins to increase as his view of the world begins to change.

At the climax of the story, there are three notable forms of agency. First, there is the agency that Jonas exhibits to save himself from the mundane and censored life in The Community. As they are travelling through the unpredictable Elsewhere, Jonas begins to long for the safe predictability represented by The Community despite its lack of choice. As he is reconsidering his decision, he realizes that “If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love” (218). Despite the comforts of The Community, Jonas chooses to endure Elsewhere because of its greater possibilities. Jonas’s perseverance through Elsewhere represents personal agency; where Jonas chooses to improve his own life to explore the freedom that Elsewhere provides.

The second form of agency is when Jonas recognizes the mortality that faces Gabriel. The night before Jonas has planned to leave, his father tells the family that Gabriel has been marked for Release in the morning because he still is not up to the standards of the Nurturers. When Jonas learns of this, he chooses to save Gabriel, which results in Jonas taking the infant with him when he leaves The Community. As they journey to Elsewhere, Jonas begins to long for the comforts of The Community while suffering from hunger in the wilderness, but he realizes that it was necessary for him to leave. He recognizes that his life would have no meaning and realizes that “for Gabriel there would have been no life at all” (218). The threat of mortality exhibits Jonas’s agency to change the original plan that he and The Giver had initially created, which had

been to leave quietly during the annual age ceremony for the children of The Community later in the week that the whole community would be attending.

A third form of agency occurs when The Giver and Jonas recognize that it is necessary to force The Community to change. Earlier in the narrative, as they were discussing the incident with Rosemary, the previous Receiver, The Giver explains that the memories would be unloaded on the population of The Community if The Receiver were to be Released. The flood of memories from Rosemary's Release sparks the idea of Jonas's escape. When discussing the need for change and the loneliness that comes with bearing the memories for The Community, The Giver says "Memories need to be shared . . . and having you here with me over the past year has made me realize that things must change. For years I've felt that they should, but it seemed so hopeless" (193). Jonas's presence and enthusiasm for change has provided The Giver with the agency to finally execute the change that is needed to improve The Community.

### **Conclusion**

The universality of Elsewhere is primarily due to its ambiguity and multiple meanings. As the surrounding land outside of The Community, Elsewhere represents both a physical and metaphorical boundary of mortality, but also represents the boundary between childhood and adolescence represented by Jonas's maturation during the narrative. Jonas's decision to journey to Elsewhere also represents his agency when faced with mortality and responsibility once he leaves The Community. Elsewhere's ability to be closely read as various universal experiences is valuable for teachers to include when teaching *The Giver* in classrooms.

## CHAPTER III: THE TEACHABILITY OF *THE GIVER*

### Introduction

As already noted, popularity can be measured through book sales, ratings, reviews, and more. For this chapter, I have chosen to narrow the scope of measurement to focus on how the novel's inclusion in secondary classrooms indicates its popularity and also complicates it. While *The Giver* is a Newbery Medal winner, it has also been a notoriously challenged book. Following its original publication, the novel has been contested in schools and was even temporarily banned, such as the case in a California school district in 1994, the same year it was awarded the Newbery Medal. Like the case in California and many other school districts, the challenges raised against *The Giver* concern its mentions of infanticide and its discussion of Jonas's Stirrings. While these controversial topics may raise valid concerns, they also represent real issues for adolescents, who experience puberty and discuss abortion. Thus, while the novel does have serious subject matter, it also discusses topics relevant to the student's own development.

In this chapter, I focus on two issues concerning *The Giver* in classrooms. First, I identify the controversy surrounding the novel, using the American Library Association's list of banned books from 2000-2009 and 2010-2019 to show the controversy over the novel through two decades following its publication in 1993. I also discuss specific subject matter that raises challenges, along with examples of arguments against reading the novel in middle-grade classrooms. Particularly useful scholarship in this regard is that of Arabella Reece, who discusses the novel's frequently contested aspects. Reece also discusses specific instances of schools banning and challenging the novel. Reece's

scholarship helps to establish the controversial nature of the novel and how schools have responded to its controversial content. I also include a report about two attempts to challenge *The Giver* in an Ohio school district in 1999 that was included in a list made by the American Library Association in 2000. This report lists the people who challenged the book, their evidence for the challenge, and how the school district responded. Another useful piece of scholarship is by Angie Beumer, Laurel Haynes, and Jessie Nastasis who had adults reread the novel and then discuss its textual complexity and whether it should be taught in middle grade classrooms given its topics of sexuality, mortality, and identity.

In the second section, I discuss why teaching *The Giver* is beneficial despite its controversial topics. Throughout this chapter I reference the National Library of Medicine's information on Erik Erikson's "Stages of Psychosocial Development" and *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development* to analyze Jonas's adolescence through Erikson's stage of identity vs. identity confusion. In this section, I also include the official Lexile scores of the chapters in the novel that exceed the college and career standards to show the complexity of the narrative.

In the final section of the chapter, I include suggested approaches for teaching *The Giver*. In this section, I use Jeanette Sanderson's "Reading Guide to *The Giver*" to show how teachers can scaffold instruction to promote higher thinking and complex analysis of the novel. In Lynn Weber Cannon's article on facilitating discussion in the classroom she shows how scaffolding can promote academic discussion of such complex and ambiguous topics in the novel as Elsewhere. Sue Kimmel and Danielle Hartsfield address what they call "preemptive censorship" among educators, that is, how educators refuse to raise or acknowledge controversial topics. All of these sources argue that the

controversial topics in *The Giver* can nevertheless benefit curricula. Particularly helpful for addressing “appropriateness” in classroom curricula is Vicky Greenbaum’s article on “The Myth of Appropriateness,” in which she argues that students can only discuss complex topics if taught how to critically analyze texts and to contribute to academic discussion. Finally, Cristina Vischer Bruns demonstrates how recognition and representation are important in literature because students can have similar experiences to the character’s experiences. Utilizing *The Giver* in curricula, despite the controversial issues, is important because students can identify with the experiences of the character of Jonas, like his maturation from childhood to adolescence.

### **The Controversy over Classroom Use**

Although *The Giver* attained critical acclaim through awards such as first being recognized as a Boston Globe-Horne Book Honor book in 1993, then receiving the Newbery Medal and Regina Medal (1994), and then the William Allen White award (1996), its inclusion in classrooms was met with apprehension.<sup>2</sup> The first notable case of banning occurred in the Bonita United School District California school district (1994). The book was banned because parents were concerned about the sexual and violent passages in the novel (Reece). These concerns about the novel’s mentions of mortality and sexuality have resulted in many parents urging schools to eliminate the novel from

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<sup>2</sup> The Boston Globe-Horne Book awards began in 1967 and is given to children’s and young adult literature published in the United States. The Newbery Medal is awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children for the most distinguished American children’s literature for children. The Regina Medal award is given by the Catholic Library Association for distinguished contribution to children’s literature. The William Allen White Award was established in Kansas (1952) and the committee that selects the recipient of the award are Kansas schoolchildren.

curricula. According to the American Library Association, *The Giver* is among the most frequently challenged works of children's literature. In 2009, the novel ranked at number 23 on the top 100 banned books from 2000-2009. Currently *The Giver* ranks at number 61 in the list of the top 100 banned books of the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite its controversy, the novel continues to be implemented in curricula.

According to Reece, the primary reasons for the controversy surrounding *The Giver* are due to its portrayals of infanticide, suicide, euthanasia, and sexuality. The portrayal of Jonas's Stirrings through puberty and the act of Release are frequently cited to support banning the novel, despite these issues' real-world applications to the student's lives. The primary audience of *The Giver* are adolescents who are themselves maturing and experiencing puberty. The novel itself addresses the suppression of sexual feelings by Jonas's Community, along with any discussion of the sexual Stirrings that occur in puberty. In the novel, Jonas's feelings are suppressed by a pill that stops any sexual urges. Since every adolescent and adult in The Community takes these suppressive pills, the real-world censorship of Jonas's fictional Stirrings ironically mimics the censorship in The Community of *The Giver*. When Jonas begins to experience the Stirrings he shares with his family a dream in which he attempts to convince his friend Fiona to let him bathe her. His parents ask him how the dream made him feel. Jonas says, "I knew that she wouldn't. And I think I knew that she shouldn't. But I wanted it so terribly. I could feel the wanting all through me" (46). This description of his desire to bathe Fiona is his

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<sup>3</sup> The top five books of this list are *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, The Captain Underpants series by Dav Pikey, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, and *George* by Alex Gino.



unconscious sexual attraction to Fiona. The “wanting” he describes in his dream exhibits the natural process of puberty and emerging sexuality experienced in adolescence. The Stirrings are important because they can show adolescents that what they feel is normal and that they should not feel ashamed of it.

*Release* is a term coined by Lowry; in the real world the act would be classified as euthanasia, abortion, or assisted suicide, all of which contribute to claims that the novel should be banned or censored. For instance, the American Library Association reports a challenging of *The Giver* in 1999 at an Ohio school district. It was challenged by a pastor and a parent. Both individuals referenced themes of euthanasia and infanticide as reasons to pull the book from schools. But although mortality and infanticide are problematic topics, their treatment in *The Giver* also demonstrates that there is no perfect society, even one as utopic as Jonas’s Community, which is ultimately revealed to be a dystopia. The topic of Release continues to be relevant to students, particularly in its similarity to abortion and even more recently the recent overturning *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. Public discourse over the ruling has emphasized the continued relevance of *The Giver*. Including the novel in classrooms helps students to discuss controversial topics like mortality, especially when they are relevant to their current society.

Alongside concerns for the controversial content, another concern with *The Giver* is the ambiguity of the ending. In Beumer, Haynes, and Nastasis’s study of reading *The Giver* at various stages of life, they interviewed a group of adults who read the novel in terms of the novel’s themes and ambiguity. While most of those individuals found the ambiguous ending refreshing, there were some who wished there were a definite sense of

how the narrative ends. In fact, Lois Lowry herself reports that she gets many questions about the ending, but that she does not directly answer such questions, because:

*The Giver* is many things to many different people. People bring to it their own complicated sense of beliefs and hopes and dreams and all of that. I don't want to put my own feelings into it, my own beliefs, and ruin that for people who create their own endings in their minds. (Sanderson 49)

In many such interviews, Lowry emphasizes that she aims to make the readers think for themselves, rather than her answering such questions. In the classroom, the ambiguous ending can lead to further discussion of the novel and beneficial student interaction using critical analysis and contextual evidence. While it may be easier for older readers to articulate these nuanced concepts due to their life experience, this novel is a good way to introduce students to critical and complex thought.

### ***The Giver* in Curricula**

Many lesson plans for *The Giver* emphasize memory and individuality as integral parts of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> Teaching students the importance of memory and individuality can help students' psychosocial development because the main task of adolescence is discovering one's identity. In Erik Erikson's "Stages of Psychosocial Development," adolescence is categorized as the period of Identity vs. Identity confusion. This stage means that adolescents begin to recognize societal expectations and develop their own values and identities. *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development* explains that

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<sup>4</sup> The lesson plans I referenced are Lisa Gaines's "Memoires Matter: *The Giver* and Descriptive Writing Memoirs," Barbara M. Linde's "LitPlan Teacher Pack for *The Giver*," Kathryn Milschewski's "Examining Utopia & Dystopia in *The Giver*," and Louisiana Department of Education's "Grade 7 Sample Unit Plan: *The Giver*."

according to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in adolescence "The motivated agent chooses those life goals to pursue, those values to personify, and those relationships to cultivate and then if all goes according to the Eriksonian plan, sticks with the choices" (91). The motivated agent modeled in *The Giver* would be Jonas and his life goals and values would be his acceptance of individuality and knowledge of the importance of memories. The relationships he creates could be his relationship to The Giver as a mentor but it could also apply to the relationship he forms with Gabriel as he begins to accept the responsibility as the caregiver and provider for the child. While Jonas's experience of adolescence is fictional, students' own development into adolescence will help them to understand more complex topics like individuality and memory that are mentioned in the text.

The ambiguity of Elsewhere also contributes to the nuance of the novel. The concept of Elsewhere represents many topics like free will, mortality, and maturation. Elsewhere represents free will through Jonas's voluntary choice to leave The Community in order to return memories to them. Jonas thinks, "If he stayed, his life was no longer worth living" (194). Jonas's choice to leave represents his acceptance of free will despite living in a community that discourages individual choice. From what family units they inhabit to their professions, everything is chosen for them, but in this moment, Jonas is choosing his own destiny. Elsewhere also represents mortality through its association with Release and memories of death that Jonas receives from The Giver. After learning that Release is murder, Jonas recognizes that Elsewhere is a way for The Community to disguise murder. Instead of admitting the killing, they make it seem as if the individuals Released are still living and only sent out of The Community to live somewhere else.

Elsewhere also represents a maturation from childhood and adolescence. Creating a physical boundary between The Community and Elsewhere, Jonas's choice to cross the boundary represents his maturation from his childhood (The Community) to adolescence (Elsewhere). His separation from The Community as a representation of his growth into adolescence is supported by Erik Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion. The National Library of Medicine states that this stage of psychosocial development requires a recognition of "societal expectations" while "establishing values and finding themselves." In the novel, Jonas recognizes the standards that The Community expects of him, like sameness, and chooses to develop his own values, like individuality. Jonas's maturation is highlighted by his acceptance of responsibility for the infant, Gabriel. Jonas chooses to leave The Community earlier than he had planned because he wants to save Gabriel. This choice exemplifies his maturity by his putting someone else's life above his own. While Jonas is travelling, he becomes "newly aware that Gabriel's safety depended entirely upon his own continued strength" (215). Jonas uses the responsibility he feels for Gabriel to drive himself forward despite his hunger, exhaustion, and injured ankle.

Since the novel is typically considered a middle-grade text, it can introduce students to deeper narrative meanings, especially since it is also fairly short with only 225 pages. The narrative is also easier to read because it has only one narrator and does not shift to other voices, which would be difficult to follow for certain readers. The novel is classified by the official "*The Giver* Lexile by Chapter Guide" as an easy-to-read text with an overall Lexile score of 760. This guide also shows the individual Lexile scores for each chapter of *The Giver* compared to the traditional college and career readiness standards for grades six through eight (925-1185) with many chapters ranging between

700-800, though a few of them score higher. Significantly, the three chapters that do so are chapter four (930) where Release is first discussed; chapter six (1000), concerning the annual age ceremonies for the children of The Community; and chapter twenty-two (920) when Jonas and Gabriel begin their journey to Elsewhere. Chapter three describes the celebration of Release for Roberto, a resident of the house of the old where all elderly members of The Community live. Chapter six first discusses Jonas's father's effort to save Gabriel from being Released and then details the significance of the annual ceremonies. Chapter twenty-two follows Jonas and Gabriel's journey to Elsewhere and includes Jonas's internal struggle of leaving The Community and his obligation to create a better future for Gabriel, himself, and The Community. All three of these chapters discuss Release and Elsewhere and also provide background for The Community and its traditions.

Despite having three chapters that meet the college and career readiness standards, the novel also has a few chapters that are lower than 700, like chapter eighteen (score of 500), where The Giver explains Release to Jonas. The range of levels of each chapter provides more complex texts for proficient readers but also provides struggling readers with easier passages that, accompanied by the more difficult chapters, could help improve their reading comprehension. Thus, the range of complexity of this novel and its readability allows students to grapple with ambiguity and forces them to find contextual evidence to support their interpretation of the text.

### **Suggested Approaches for Teaching *The Giver***

Due to the novel's complexity, nuance, and ambiguity, scaffolding is important. It can be incorporated through initial introduction of topics to guide student reading, class

discussion to help students understand complex topics, and even reading to serve as reference material for students to help them to understand the content. To help students dive into deeper meanings, Jeannette Sanderson has created a reading guide, including authorial background that provides moments from Lois Lowry's life that influenced the text; historical background on utopias, which identifies traditional features of utopias to find or contrast in the novel; and chapter reviews with questions to promote deeper thought about meanings. The guide also has a thematic section to help students analyze ambiguous concepts like Elsewhere. The specific details from Lois Lowry's life suggest that Elsewhere may represent free will and choice, like her decision to ride her bike outside of her own military community to explore the surrounding city. Were I to use this reading guide, I would use the chapter "Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?" to introduce students to the setting of *The Community* and the history of utopias, so that they can compare the traditional features of utopian societies to *The Community* in *The Giver*. The two chapters "Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway" and "Glossary" would provide a list of the characters with short biographies and glosses for difficult words in the text. I would save the biographical information on Lois Lowry until after the students had read the novel, when I would facilitate class discussion on links between the biography to the novel.

For the chapter "Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It Really Means," I would use the list the themes referenced in the reading guide to scaffold analysis through class discussion. I would write a few of the themes on the board and would walk the students through an analysis of one of them. I would then have the students work with a group or partner to select another theme to analyze on their own, after which, I would ask

each individual group to share their analyses. After that, I could assess their individual abilities to analyze the text by assigning the analysis of an aspect or theme of the text. This method models a sample analysis that provides a means of practicing that model.

Classroom discussion of ambiguous topics can be daunting, and many educators will avoid it to prevent conflict, even implementing the “preemptive censorship” to prevent controversy (Kimmel 345). This form of censorship can avoid discussion on certain topics, skip passages that have controversial content, and even virtually alter passages by eliminating words or phrases deemed inappropriate for the students. A problem with avoiding ambiguous topics is that it leaves the students unprepared for discussions on these topics in the future. In her article on censorship in high school reading in classrooms, Vicky Greenbaum argues that students need to be exposed to uncomfortable conversations, since “We may no longer be so desperately uneasy in the face of difficult texts if students are able to read closely and make sense of what emerges from between the lines” (20). It is important that students understand how to critically analyze texts because literature can have many meanings beyond the plot. Greenbaum discusses teaching students how to critically interact with complex topics in texts and how to introduce the proper methods and standards for discussing these topics. To prevent this censorship, the teacher must be vigilant to ensure that they are not subconsciously censoring content. To properly implement discussion on the ambiguous topic of *Elsewhere*, the educator must first introduce standards for discussion.

To scaffold discussion, Lynn Weber Cannon emphasizes the need to set ground rules before facilitating discussion (133). She explains that using ground rules and staying attentive to the direction that the conversation is following helps students to

contribute to academic discussions of texts and complex topics (133). The teacher could create a preliminary list of expectations for discussion with the students, such as requiring students to demonstrate respect for their classmates when they are talking and to think through their responses before speaking. The teacher might additionally require that each comment or response in the discussion be informed and supported with evidence. The teacher could then ask the students for possible rules to add to the initial list, allowing students to select subjects or specific aspects of discussions that they would like to set parameters and rules about, such as including controversial topics or even structuring how the discussion is facilitated by the teacher. When introducing *The Giver*, the teacher could also address Release and mention that it represents euthanasia, abortion, or assisted suicide. The teacher could also introduce the Stirrings as physical and emotional responses to puberty. Addressing controversial content before reading the novel also gives students content warnings to prepare them before reading the novel, which can prevent inappropriate comments, confusion, and possible triggering subjects for students.

An important element of young adult literature is the similarity of characters and their situations with their readers. The universality of experiences within a novel can create opportunities for recognition, which is when readers can identify similarities between the novel and their own lives. Cristina Bruns discusses the importance of recognition through its ability to help readers to understand the world around them because “These experiences of recognition are important for self-knowledge and at times for comfort or consolation, but they can also serve an even more valuable function as the words of texts can give tangible shape to aspects of our own experience that we can’t otherwise grasp” (19). Through universal experiences, representation and recognition in



novels allow students the ability to feel seen and understood. The need for discussion on universal experiences emphasizes the importance of including discussion on the universality of Elsewhere as it represents mortality, maturation, agency, and free will. Alongside the traditional discussions on identity and memory, students can identify with Jonas's struggle with his identity and separation from The Community. Through discussing complex topics like identity and mortality in the text, students can grapple with the experiences that, Bruns claims, we cannot otherwise grasp (19). Providing students with the space and opportunity to explore ambiguous topics like Elsewhere and its representation of complex topics like mortality, maturation, agency, and free will helps to both strengthen their critical analysis of literature and provide insight into universal experiences.

## **Conclusion**

*The Giver* as a complex novel has faced controversy, banning, and censorship in schools. But despite its controversial nature, the novel is still included in classroom curricula because of its timeless human experiences like identity, maturation, and mortality. When included in curricula, the novel is used to engage students with complex topics such as memory and identity, but the topics of Release and Elsewhere are typically neglected or only briefly mentioned. Through its easy readability and nuance, reading the novel in classrooms becomes substantially beneficial when the students are given the opportunity to discuss the controversial topics presented in the narrative. Providing the resources and strategies of dissecting these controversial topics and participating in academic discussion can help students in their futures as these controversial topics become more frequently discussed in adulthood.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

*The Giver* has maintained its popularity through its amalgamation of universal experiences, especially for adolescents. Although there are many important concepts in *The Giver*, I judge Elsewhere to be a key feature of the text and have chosen to narrow the scope of my research to focus on its inclusion when teaching the novel. Through my research, I supply pedagogical methods of including controversial topics like Release and Stirrings into classroom discussions through modeling academic discussion, setting standards for discussion, and addressing the controversial content with students before engaging with the text.

With this thesis, I hope to add to the inclusion and academic discussion of *The Giver* in secondary curricula through providing insight into a specific aspect of its continued popularity. In a time where books are contested, censored, and even banned, it is imperative that we address controversial topics and find ways to discuss the literature in classrooms because neglecting to discuss these topics does not eradicate the existence of the universal experiences, it only creates ignorance, much like The Community in *The Giver*. While there are many aspects that contribute to the popularity of *The Giver*, I hope that my research, discussion strategies, and analysis of the universality of Elsewhere can contribute to pedagogy when including *The Giver* in curricula.

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