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Unusual Children: Queerishness and Strange Growth in *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Giver*

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Unusual Children: Queerishness and Strange Growth in *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Giver*

Abstract

This project examines two different pieces of modern children's literature, Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, in terms of their protagonists' respective strange identities. I begin with Katherine Stockton's theory of sideways growth, which outlines the unusualness often found in child protagonist. I use Stockton's work as a jumping off point to examine the queerishness of two protagonists, L'Engle's Meg Murray and Lowry's Jonas. Meg is unfeminine, and her experiences with language and definitions defy gender binaries and easy definitions; throughout the course of the novel, she learns to embrace her "flaws" (her unfeminine, difficult to define traits) and use them to save her family. Jonas lives in a dystopian society that has embraced Sameness and which reflects Foucault's hypothetical Panopticon. It uses surveillance to make sure its citizens and the language they use are easy to categorize. When he is chosen as the Receiver and charged with the burden of all the memories his community has forbidden, he is symbolically reborn. Through his connection with his mentor, The Giver, and an infant named Gabe who is physically growing the "wrong" way, Jonas uses his strange individuality to build his own queerish family and challenge his community's oppressive power structures.

Executive Summary

In this project, I use queer theory and theories of childhood gender and sexuality to open up modern children's literature to the possibility of queerness (or at least "queerishness"). I begin with Kathryn Stockton's theory of "sideways growth." This theory, elaborated upon in Stockton's essay "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Innocent, and the Interval of the Animal" and later in her book *Queer Child*, posits that many young fictional characters have strange, undefinable individualities that are unique to childhood. Although I use the basis of her theory of strange growth, I veer significantly from Stockton by also relying on other queer theorists such as Foucault and Derrida.

The first chapter focuses on Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. I argue that the protagonist, Meg, is a strangely growing character who skews gender norms in unusual ways. Meg is picked on in school because she is unfeminine, expresses her emotions in the wrong ways, and is bad in school — despite her mathematical brilliance, she receives poor grades for solving problems using unconventional means. When Meg is taken away by three "witches" to rescue her father, her undesirable differences become her greatest weapon.

I rely largely on post-structuralist theory, which argues that identity (including sexual and gender identity) is constructed and performed. Post-structuralism treats words as signifiers that are culturally rather than naturally defined, and identity as something formed and categorized by those signifiers. Meg is treated with disdain by her peers because she is hard to pin down and does not have a conventional relationship with language. Further, she defends her brother Charles Wallace, who falls under Stockton's category of a "ghost" — a child who is polite, obedient, and overly mature in order to cover up his inner strangeness or perversity. Charles Wallace has a strange knowledge of others' feelings and of events to come, and his vocabulary is

far beyond that of the ordinary six-year-old. Like Meg, he is not growing or solving problems in the correct way, and Meg's defense of him serves to make her even stranger and more undesirable in the eyes of her peers.

I address Meg's identity from several different angles. I engage with a feminist critique by Katherine Schneebaum, who argues that the narrative of *A Wrinkle in Time* takes Meg from unconventionally masculine girl to acceptably feminine. I push back against this assertion, arguing instead that Meg is more interested in embodying her father than her mother and that her journey does not end with her embracing womanhood, but rather with her embracing her own strong feelings in order to rescue two male characters (her father and her brother). I also focus on the creatures Meg meets, such as the witches, who, while referred to with female pronouns and titles, are essentially genderless — one in particular is impossible to define, being described as a fog or an indirect gleam. Aunt Beast, too, is a faceless, genderless being who heals and mentors Meg. Aunt Beast has little knowledge of gendered terms, and does not even recognize Meg as a girl; her own title of "Aunt" is given by Meg, not herself, and Meg also considers titles such as "brother" and "father." She cares for Meg and her friends while skewing binary gender. She and the witches are metaphors with which Meg identifies, and they encourage her to embrace her strange growth and individuality as positive, powerful tools.

In the second chapter I focus on *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, a story of a dystopia disguised as a utopia. Using the "strange growth" theory laid out in the first chapter, I argue that the novel's protagonist, Jonas, has a strange, even perverse relationship with language. I focus largely on Foucauldian theories of power structures and surveillance, starting with his Panopticon, a hypothetical prison that surveils its occupants only part of the time, yet keeps them in check with the sight of a central surveillance tower that compels the prisoners to regulate

themselves. Jonas' community operates under Sameness, and its constant threat of surveillance (its cameras and public announcements indirectly but obviously aimed at individual community members) keep its citizens in line. Despite his self-regulation, Jonas is unable to hide his own strangeness. Unlike the rest of his community, he can see flashes of color, which he experiences both in his female friend's hair and an apple he tosses with his male friend. This corresponds with his "stirrings," the initiation of pubescent sexual feelings.

These differences, which are initially punished, result in the community selecting Jonas as the Receiver. Mentored by an old man called The Giver, he receives memories from a time before Sameness, taking them on as a burden so that the rest of community doesn't have to. He is symbolically reborn, adopting a "new consciousness" within the memories, which introduce him to forbidden concepts such as weather, family, and war. Through The Giver's memories — and the symbolic presence of his bookshelves — Jonas engages with a sort of queer archive, a hidden collection of knowledge. He reforms his identity to embrace new language, language usually forbidden by the community because words like "love" are "too generalized." This new embrace of language corresponds with the arrival of Gabriel, an infant who is literally growing strangely. Gabe is too small and too fussy, so he is unable to be placed with a family. He also reminds Jonas of himself. Jonas shares his memories with Gabe to calm him, creating a bond — a "found family," a trope in queer narratives.

The climax of the novel focuses on Gabe. Jonas realizes that violence has not been eliminated by Sameness but rather concealed. Gabe is still not growing correctly, so he is scheduled for "release" to "Elsewhere" by Jonas' father; Jonas learns that release is actually execution by lethal injection. Jonas flees the community, releasing the memories he's received and raising questions of revolution. Jonas and Gabe are pursued, but they don't see their

pursuers. They gradually leave all signs of the community behind, instead embracing and battling with nature to survive. Half-dead from cold, they reach a house celebrating Christmas, and the narrative closes with Jonas hoping he can hear singing coming from the place he left. Foucault rejects the idea of a sudden political revolution, an immediate overthrow of corrupt power structures; however, the narrative leaves this revolution vague, instead focusing on a story of individual and family survival.

The purpose of both of these chapters is to open up children's stories to new possibilities. These queer readings embrace the unique nature of childhood gender and sexuality and discusses the ways in which they can be uniquely powerful.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Executive Summary.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Chapter 1: On <i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Charles Wallace, Calvin, and Meg as “Ghosts”.....	7
Meg’s Witches: Role Models in <i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>	13
Conclusion.....	26
Chapter 2: On <i>The Giver</i>.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Language and Control: Resisting a Dystopia.....	29
Jonas’ Attractions: Asher, Fiona, and Stirrings.....	39
Jonas’ Individuality: Gabe, Family, and Revolution.....	42
Conclusion.....	61
Works Cited.....	63

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Chapter 1: On *A Wrinkle in Time*

Introduction

A girl who is too good at mathematics, who gets into fights defending her too-mature younger brother, is whisked away by three celestial beings to save her lost father. Along the way she traverses space, skews time, and meets a host of bizarre, alien creatures, only to find her own strength and self-confidence. It's a story that has enchanted generations of children since it won the coveted John Newbery Award in 1963. Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* is demonstrative of the imagination and encouraging themes that prevail in modern children's fantasy novels.

Among these themes is one of individuality, of respect for and valuing of oneself. The protagonist's realization of her own unique value comes after a certain narrative: The beginning, in which the child feels othered by or is even picked on by her "normal peers" is followed by a period of exploration; after the journey, the child realizes her own unique power as an individual and becomes at peace with herself. This is a seemingly straightforward path, and its purpose is similarly easy to decipher to anyone who is dedicated to viewing children's literature as a one-dimensional medium. This is a lens through which *A Wrinkle in Time* can be viewed; after all, Meg Murray is at some point early in her story considered "different" by those around her, only to realize the strength of those initially "strange" traits. Most notably, Meg's stubbornness, which initially alienates her

from her peers, helps her resist the evil IT. As Jon C. Stott says, she “learns that the qualities which had often made her unhappy at home will be valuable here [in her rescuing her father]...[She] recognizes the value of her individuality” (Stott 26-37).

Some might say that, considering the young age of their intended readership, this theme is driven home with a special, even characteristic lack of ambiguity. This simple reading, one that sees individuality in children’s books as straightforwardly presented in order to empower young readers, is both popular and understandable, and in many ways important — empowerment, straightforward or otherwise, is undeniably a significant purpose of a genre meant for growing minds. What, though, of alternative significances of this presentation of individuality? In books that very rarely contain obviously non-straight characters, what does “be yourself” mean from a queer perspective?

The answers to these questions are complex, and they are in part addressed by Kathryn Stockton in her essay “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Innocent, and the Interval of the Animal,” as well as in the book that followed, *Queer Child*. In these, she introduces not precisely a queer lens so much as a funhouse mirror; she has young literary characters identifying in strange, queerish ways, though they are only “officially” queer children when viewed in retrospect by their adult selves. She calls this “growing sideways,” a term that intentionally contrasts — or intersects, or stands beside — the conventional idea of growing up. For Stockton, growing sideways refers to a child’s tendency not to label her sexuality or gender expression the way an adult would; she likely does not think of herself as gay or transgender, and if she does, she uses the terms in a way adults can’t quite understand. Instead she uses metaphor,

surrounding herself with concepts and imaginary creatures that she relates to. It is only in retrospect that the child becomes gay; that is when her adult self labels her. Stockton uses the example of a fat queer boy (one who literally grows sideways and is teased for it). His adult gay self sees the ghost of him hanging in a garden surrounded by flowers, a metaphor for his inability to survive amongst beautifully growing things. Nat Hurley, too, touches on the subject, pointing out that Anderson's classic, now Disneyfied tale *The Little Mermaid* "has developed into an icon for transgender children" (Hurley 127). The story of a young person who does not fit into her own body, who wants to change it in a way her undersea culture deems unfit and grows not up but into a new form, can resonate deeply with children who identify themselves as something society does not accept. In turn, they see themselves as mermaids — a nonhuman, nonexistent creature, certainly not something the adult sees as an acceptable identity. Their individuality thrives on fantasy, on the figurative: "My experience is like that of a mermaid. I am a mermaid." These children appropriate concepts as their own, perverting them in the process.

A Wrinkle in Time's protagonist Meg Murray, who is rejected by her peers for the strange ways in which she shapes her identity, is one such sideways-growing child, and this identity is also presented in a manner that is largely post-structuralist. There is a tendency in children's literature, especially texts that seek to construct a theme of empowerment, to rely on the concept of a "core self" — what is often called the soul, a consistent and unchangeable inward identity. This is a traditionalist notion, one that posits an essentialist view of the self. Interestingly, *A Wrinkle in Time* in some ways seems to be radically dedicated to the post-structuralist view of identity. Post-structuralist theories revised traditionalism; for theorists such as Judith Butler, identity is not an unchanging internal

force but rather an outwardly performed one. Individuals are not pure autonomous selves but subjects of societal influences. Language is a force that shapes a subject, including the ways in which she presents her gender and sexual identities.

L'Engle's text is often almost startlingly post-structuralist: She imagines characters that don't always use language to communicate and have identities wildly different from human ones and apparently less restrained, and in doing so recognizes just how restrictive language can be. Language as defined by post-structuralists is not a natural entity created to express ideas that already exist. A word, of course, is a relationship between a signifier and the thing it signifies — the word *dog* is a signifier, the idea of a dog is the thing it signifies, and the two combine into a sign that is a word. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, this relationship is completely arbitrary. There is no natural reason that the syllable *dog* was chosen to signify a dog; it is only because it does not already signify something else. Language is a system of differences, with ideas becoming concrete only because they are different from one another. Furthermore, the association between signifier and signified goes both ways, as "each recalls the other." (Saussure 66) Language does not exist to express ideas; ideas exist in an understandable form because of language. L'Engle's alien characters attempt to find a space outside of this system, and become role models to the young Meg Murray, who is frustrated by the way her own society restrains her identity.

However, Meg's growth is not entirely post-structuralist. In fact, the text contains a grain of traditionalism. Meg's growth is sideways because it is constructed in strange ways by an arbitrary language, but it is positive because there *is* some unchangeable core to her,

and even her traits perceived as “flaws” by many reinforce her inherent goodness.. In its effort to represent worlds without binary language, the book leaves one binary intact: Good versus Evil. The narrative emphasizes Meg’s goodness and continually places it in opposition to the inherent evilness in IT. Thus *A Wrinkle in Time* constructs an odd view of identity. The purpose of this paper is to delve deeper into the tension between the text’s post-structuralist and traditionalist uses of the subject and the individual and the ways in which it defines Meg’s growth as a sideways protagonist. Examinations of Meg’s non-heteronormative tendencies will be key to an analysis of her individuality and the ways in which it contributes to her growing sideways, but this paper will not be a “queer” reading in the traditional sense — that is, it will not try to peg her as gay, transgender, or any other well-defined category. Instead it will examine the ways in which the performance of herself, paired with her core goodness, is in itself non-heteronormative. In defining both Meg’s goodness and the ways in which her “flaws” play into that goodness, we may construct a sort of sideways, positive queer narrative that is perhaps unique to modern children’s fantasy and science fiction.

Because individuality is a very broad term, I will define it in terms of this paper. I will be using individuality to refer to the characteristics that mark characters as “different” from their peers — something often emphasized in the beginning of children’s novels. It focuses on flaws, traits considered odd by heteronormative society precisely because they are not heteronormative themselves. In a post-structuralist sense, these characteristics are performances that are considered unacceptable or inappropriate by the homogenous society. In this novel, these characteristics ultimately become a key tool used in the defeat of evil. To use *A Wrinkle in Time* as an example, Meg is clearly demonstrated to be clumsy,

not conventionally attractive, bad in school, and overly emotional. Meg's self esteem clearly suffers from her differences, as she is friendless and bullied. When she faces the ultimate evil IT, however, one of her mentors tells her to use her flaws — turning Meg's initially negative differences into a righteous weapon.

Finally, it is important to define just what the dominant growth and coming out narratives are, so that we may examine how Meg subverts them. Coming out is generally thought of as the moment of self-acceptance through revealing a previously hidden gender identity or sexuality: Put simply, "A person may be considered closeted if they live without disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. Alternatively, someone who declares their sexual orientation or gender identity publicly may be construed as having come out." (Rasmussen 144) Lies Xhonneux states,

A coming out story contributes to the social and discursive construction of identities in at least two ways: it provides people who are discovering their sexualities with a vocabulary to talk about their emerging feelings (for example, the very term 'the closet'), and it depicts queer lifestyles on which readers can model their own experiences (Saxey 2008, 3). [96]

The coming out novel contributes and takes from the dominant conception of coming out as a process and catalyst of the self-acceptance of and emerging, definable identity; "the closet" is the inability to accept oneself by not telling others of this hidden gayness. The coming out novel is all about visibility of a labeled identity. Jeanette Winterson's semi-autobiographical *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, for instance, details the protagonist's journey to hide her lesbianism from her evangelical Christian adoptive mother, and then to

maker her accept and understand it. The progression is well-known: become aware of non-heterosexual identity, accept it in oneself, make it visible to others (these last two steps often happen simultaneously). The cultural conception of adolescent growth functions in much the same way: The child is pure and nonsexual, and then she grows up into adulthood, into a sexuality or a preconceived gender identity. Culturally, children are viewed as futures: future men or women, future gay or straight people. Their unambiguity is due merely to their place in time.

A Wrinkle in Time, with its mixture of post-structuralist and traditionalist identity and its sideways growing protagonist, presents its child characters as people in their own right. Relying both on a Stockton-esque archetype and on the role model convention of children's literature, L'Engle reshapes our idea of the child and its potential queerness.

Charles Wallace, Calvin, and Meg as "Ghosts"

For Stockton, sideways growing children fall into several archetypes, or a mixture of several. She herself admits that her list (contained in the title of her original "Growing Sideways" essay) is not exhaustive, and most of her archetypes are not especially relevant to *A Wrinkle in Time*. At their center, though, is an archetype that serves as a basis of her theory: the ghost or the "ghostly gay." This is a child who, afraid of the way her undefinable strangeness may be seen by her family, adopts a persona: "an obedient child persona, as if that would overcome the blow that would ultimately come" (Stockton 285, quoting the 1996 help book *Not Like Other Boys: Growing Up Gay: A Mother and Son Look Back*). This is a trope seen frequently in fiction — a child so polite, so adult, so perfect, that it is unnerving

(hence, “ghostly”). Consider, for instance, the boy in M. Night Shyamalan’s seminal film *The Sixth Sense*, the boy who knows and sees too much, knows far more than the adults around him; or the too-good little girl in Henry James’ ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*. The ghostly child is not necessarily hiding that she “is gay,” but rather is hiding some perverse strangeness. Paradoxically, she emphasizes the presence of this strangeness by trying to conceal it. The identity she constructs is both too perfect and too strange.

Although Stockton tended to apply the theory of the ghost to books containing children as secondary characters rather than to children’s books themselves, her categorization of the ghost immediately brings to mind a particular figure in *A Wrinkle in Time*: Charles Wallace, Meg’s six-year-old brother. Charles is defined by his strangeness; the first thing we learn about him is that he has “an uncanny way of knowing when [Meg] was awake and unhappy...would come, so many nights, tiptoeing up the attic stairs to see her.” (L’Engle 5) Before we even see him (at this point Meg is merely noting that he is still asleep in his room), we know that he has an odd knowledge of his sister, and we soon learn that he can read his mother in the same way. Charles Wallace’s speech pattern is characteristically unrealistic for his age, beyond Meg’s own and perhaps even more sophisticated than Mrs. Murray’s. “Let’s be exclusive,” he says, while the three of them sit in the kitchen. “That’s my new word for the day. Impressive, isn’t it?” (L’Engle 7)

Charles Wallace’s defining characterization is that he is strange; he knows too much. He is not necessarily hiding that he’s gay, but he is undoubtedly covering up his strangeness. He is overly polite and even silent around strangers, and it works. He is not considered as overtly strange as Meg, neither by his peers nor his mother. He is teased behind his back,

but this is more at Meg's expense than his. Meg's tormentors use her "freak" younger brother as further ammunition against her. Charles Wallace is too calm, self-possessed and, perhaps, unnerving to be worth teasing. His facade, his lack of individual character, is a successful shield. He is a good ghost; he hides his sideways growth behind a facade of politeness and successfully protects himself. His persona, although too polite and too mature, is well-defined and solidified, so much so that his peers seem inclined to classify it as some sort of mental disorder: "*We* know he's bright," says his brother Dennys, "but he's so funny when he's around other people, and they're so used to thinking he's dumb[.]" (L'Engle 24) Charles is unperturbed by this characterization, as demonstrated by his "placid" reaction to Calvin's calling him a "moron": "Thinking I'm a moron gives people something to feel smug about. Why should I disillusion them?" (L'Engle 31-32) This sentiment almost startlingly recalls the post-structuralist Barbara Johnson's critique of binary languages: "Nothing could be more comforting to the established order than the requirement that everything be assigned a clear meaning or stand" (Johnson 30).

This first interaction between Charles Wallace and their new friend Calvin categorizes both as taking on the "clear meaning" Johnson criticizes. Both are revealed to be "different" from most children: Charles is startlingly intelligent but does not talk around people he doesn't know, and Calvin is a fourteen-year-old in eleventh grade who has an uncanny ability to know where he needs to be ("When I get this feeling, this compulsion, I always do what it tells me...That's all I know, kid. I'm not holding anything back." [L'Engle 33]) Each boy presents his oddities in an acceptable way. Charles avoids talking to those he doesn't know, resulting in a character that others are satisfied to classify in their own way (i.e., as a "moron"); Calvin plays basketball "because [he's] tall," playing into others' expectations and

handling his special ability with simplicity. They are identifiable, classifiable, and like any good fantasy heroes, they are both naturally adept at the supernatural: They tesser (travel through time and space) with ease.

Charles' ghosting of himself results in an easily (although wrongly) classified persona that is utterly unlike Meg's. This is something Charles seems to perceive, to some extent: When Calvin asks if Meg is "one of us" (someone with a special ability, like Calvin's "compulsion" that leads him to special places), Charles replies, "Meg has it tough. She's not really one thing or the other." (L'Engle 33) This line illuminates the key difference between the brother and sister: Calvin uses language to construct himself in a way that is acceptable, accepting words and binaries (such as "bright" and "moron") that Meg does not. Meg *does* have it tough because of her "differences," the words with which she refuses to identify. Her teachers fail her for not coming to the correct answers in the "right" (most direct and accepted) way; her principal scolds her for being rude and scolds her for not "facing facts" about her father — but Meg's facts are different from his, and she retorts, "I do face facts...They're a lot easier to face than people, I can tell you." (L'Engle 26) She insists that she is unashamed of her beliefs concerning her father, and her principal is exasperated at her unwillingness or inability to embrace the school's standards: "Do you enjoy being the most belligerent, uncooperative child in school?" and then, "Try to be a little less antagonistic. Maybe your work would improve if your general attitude were more tractable." (L'Engle 26-27) Meg is seen as troublesome because she is not growing in the way the school demands; her very identity is labeled intractable and unpalatable because she has what is seen as a perverse definition of "fact." She is constructing herself in ways that are indirect and uncooperative; she is escaping easy categorization. What's more, she

doesn't seem to have any desire to be "tractable." She talks back to the principal, indicating that she doesn't have much of an interest in conforming to homogenous expectations. Even Sandy and Dennys grow tired of this: She must act more like a conventional girl, they say, referring specifically to her tendency to engage in physical confrontations — thus eschewing a socially accepted language binary (violence as male and demureness as female). They, as the elder boys of the family, should be the protectors, not Meg. Meg is picked on because she does not act as a "girl" "should"; she does not perform a gender that is easily categorized by those around her.

Nor do Meg's problems disappear when she is whisked away by the witches. Unlike Charles Wallace and Calvin, she has difficulty tessering, often to her own detriment: Even tessering with the experienced witches is "strange and fearful" for her — tessering with anyone else, such as her less experienced father, is like "being torn apart by a whirlwind." (L'Engle 162) The experience is so painful for her that she loses consciousness. It is made abundantly clear that Meg cannot compete with Charles or Calvin when it comes to moving forwards in time and space: "She's backward," Calvin claims when Meg wants to go back for Charles Wallace, illustrating how differently Meg experiences time. Although she is even better than Calvin at math and science and knows just as well as Charles does that her father is still alive, she is not an easily classifiable fantasy hero. Her oddly constructed, sideways growing identity does not occupy a solidified place in language, time, and space like the boys' seem to — she has difficulty navigating all three.

Reading the beginning of the book, one might be tempted to predict that Meg's eventual self-confidence will arise from her catching up to and perhaps even surpassing Charles' and

Calvin's growth, that she will learn to ghost herself successfully and translate her brilliance into a conventional practicality. She will learn to tesser better than anyone, and will return to earth together and well-adjusted, no longer stubborn, no longer prone to fighting her classmates. Importantly, this is not what happens. In some ways, *A Wrinkle in Time* transcends Stockton's archetypes: Meg never defines herself in a way that conforms to anyone or in a way that other people understand. She does not become Charles or Calvin; she does not ghost herself, does not need to convince anyone to see her as a girl-who-will-be-a-woman. Instead, she learns to appreciate what she already is. Charles is susceptible to IT's influence; his body is taken over by the monochromatic evil on Camazotz. By becoming polite and quiet, by using language in an acceptable way, he is taken over by the oppressively categorical adult standards on that dystopian planet. Meg, on the other hand, has always been unable to conform, has only ever been able to embrace her strange growth, and so she resists IT. Her use of (supposedly male) stubbornness becomes a weapon against conformity; she is more in-tune with language's capacity to shape identity, more experimental with her own identity, and this works to her benefit.

In this way, *A Wrinkle in Time* transgresses many of the assumptions inherent in Stockton's growing sideways theory. For one, as previously mentioned, Meg does not fit into any of Stockton's archetypes. For another, Stockton's analysis always centers, in truth, around adults, especially queer ones: They are looking back on their former sideways growth, which they now deem queer. There is necessarily a sense of melancholy nostalgia to this, of lost potential — even a happy adult cannot see his past self hanging in a garden of growing things without feeling unnerved. However, because she is the protagonist of a novel about children, there is no adult looking back at Meg in order to place her in a binary.

The book ends with a sideways growing, strangely constructed child being *happy* with her inability to ghost herself and reconcile her identity with acceptable language. Her abilities are unique in the narrative to her supposedly perverse flaws, and she does not have to change in order to be successful. In the end, her stubbornness and willingness to fight, so at odds with her society's binary expectations, are of more use than her ghostly brother's meticulously constructed identity; the narrative favors a resistance to ghosting, an unwillingness to, as Johnson argued, "be assigned a clear meaning or stand." This is one reason why *A Wrinkle in Time* can't be read through a single queer lens like Stockton's — it exists in a category (children's literature) that skews many of the expectations of a theory like Stockton's.

Meg's Witches: Role Models in *A Wrinkle in Time*

What, then, *is* Meg, if not a ghostly queer child? Whatever her individuality, there is certainly something queerish in it. Most notably, she warps the feminine — something that many other critics have noted. In her essay "Finding a Happy Medium: The Design for Womanhood in *A Wrinkle in Time*," Katherine Schneebaum points out that Meg's unconventional but brilliant approaches to math and science and her "sharp and unabashed tongue" (Schneebaum 30) separate her from "normal" society precisely because they are traditionally seen as masculine characteristics. She "is constantly being told that she must learn something or change something about herself; this message comes from her mother, her brothers and herself...[her family] tell her she needs to seek 'a happy medium' ...the 'most fortuitous sphere' in which she, as a woman, can function."

(Schneebaum 31) This struggle within Meg, her wish to be more “normal,” is emphasized later in the book with the appearance of a character actually known as the Happy Medium. The pun is that this female character is both happy and a psychic medium — but as Schneebaum points out, she is not a happy medium but rather “a creature of extremes, and in particular one of very ‘feminine’ extremes.” (Schneebaum 32) She is essentially the embodiment of a housewife, preferring to watch the other characters’ science fiction journey through her crystal ball rather than accompanying them. Notably, Meg rejects following in the footsteps of this Happy Medium who is no medium at all; she is too traditionally feminine to be of any real role model to Meg, who is unable or unwilling to place herself at the extreme feminine end of the male/female binary.

In some sense, then, Schneebaum paints Meg’s story as an unconventional one: Meg is juxtaposed with the vision of what she is “supposed” to be in the eyes of traditional society and chooses instead to embrace her less feminine “faults” (anger, impatient, and stubbornness). She does not follow a traditionally gender- or heteronormative narrative, instead choosing to reject those metaphors (such as the “Happy Medium”) that do not suit her. Schneebaum, however, doesn’t go far enough in this analysis. She considers *A Wrinkle in Time* and Meg’s growth in particular through a feminist lens. Indeed, this is the basis of her entire essay, as she writes in the opening sentence that many find that L’Engle’s work “presented a view of women which was ahead of its time.” (Schneebaum 30) Certainly, a growing-sideways story can be and perhaps even necessarily is a feminist one, if feminism is understood to value the warping and even the outright rejection of gender roles; a growing-sideways reading is not opposed to a reading through a feminist lens like Schneebaum’s. The problem is that Meg is not, as Schneebaum implies, a woman — she is a

child, and therefore unable to confront her own gender expression with any such “adult” labels. A reading that regards her as a “woman” is a sketchy one at best, as it does not take into account the parts of Meg’s experience that are unique to childhood.

Schneebaum’s argument is largely focused around the concept of the role model. She compares Meg to her mother, a liberal feminist’s dream: Mrs. Murray balances home and work, childrearing and an ambitious scientific career, beauty and brains. She is the queen of the adult world, able to cook in the kitchen as well as conduct experiments in the lab attached to her house. According to Schneebaum, the titular “design for women” in *A Wrinkle in Time* is this: Meg is similar to her mother in that she embodies both caring and intellectual qualities, and that the balance between them that Mrs. Murray has struck is the “happy medium” Meg should strive to obtain. Mrs. Murray has embraced femininity, and Schneebaum thinks the narrative favors Meg doing the same, and that she is striving to be her mother. For Schneebaum, this complicates that L’Engle’s work is a feminist one.

This is all well, but, as previously observed, Meg is not a woman. She doesn’t refer to herself as one, and her journey does not end with her doing so. Schneebaum’s claim presupposes that Mrs. Murray is the book’s primary role model. Meg does begin the book feeling inadequate in comparison to her mother, but there is far less of an emphasis on Mrs. Murray as a role model than there is on many others: For example, Meg’s unconventional but brilliant approach to math and science (one of the driving forces of the science fiction narrative, and something that earns her reprimands from her teachers) is, according to Mrs. Murray herself, much more akin to her father’s than her mother’s. It is clear that Meg, who is obsessed with her missing father, has a more significant obsession with her male

parent, and the narrative never condemns this. Already, then, it doesn't make sense for Mrs. Murray to be cast as her primary role model — there is no indication that Meg is striving to emulate her. More importantly, Meg *does* have visible role models in this novel, and they all warp the conventional binary applications of language: the three “witches” Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit; and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the healing alien Aunt Beast.

We begin with Aunt Beast, the strange creature who heals Meg after tessering through “the Dark Thing” renders her unconscious. Aunt Beast is warm and caring, and Schneebaum argues that Meg “learns from [her]...how to be a woman and a mother.” (Schneebaum 35) It's true that Aunt Beast could be seen as traditionally feminine, as she heals Meg's physical and emotional wounds, but the fact remains that she is neither a woman nor a mother. Aunt Beast's people are said to be gray, eyeless, with “four arms and far more than five fingers to each hand, and the fingers were not fingers, but long waving tentacles”; many of their facial features, too, such as their ears and hair, are replaced with tentacles. (L'Engle 173-74) These appendages automatically alert us to the creatures' strangeness, and they are not ignored. In fact, they are mentioned repeatedly throughout the chapter, reminding us of Aunt Beast's appearance, which is not only unfeminine but entirely inhuman. Her society on Ixchel communicates through thought, not spoken word, because they quite literally do not have mouths. These creatures have no concept of gender, and in fact it is noted that they literally cannot see any gendered identifiers in Meg: When Aunt Beast first picks up Meg, she asks, “And this little—what is the word?”, to which Calvin (not Meg) responds, “Girl.” (L'Engle 178)

Aunt Beast, then, is imagined to exist beyond the conventions of binary gender. She does not see Meg as a girl or an almost-woman because she has no grasp of those concepts at all. In the real world, nobody is exempt from the constructions of language, but Aunt Beast lives on a totally different world. Supposedly, she is utterly exempt from human perceptions of gender and sexuality. Perhaps she even recognizes the difference between the humans' perception and her own: "It must be a very limiting thing, this seeing," she tells Meg (L'Engle 181), and calls her "a funny little tadpole" (L'Engle 180), referring to the child as something that does not grow up but in stranger ways: outward, inelegantly, into another world. It is implied that *tadpole* refers to the child state of Aunt Beast's race (after all, how else would she know what a tadpole was?); if this is the case, then she is likening Meg's strangeness to her own inhuman identity.

Nevertheless, despite her decidedly unfeminine appearance and her distance from binary language, she is indeed referred to by a female title and female pronouns. It's important to recognize that this is not her own doing; she doesn't construct herself as a woman, but rather lets Meg construct her as one. We return to Butler. Perception of gender is based on one's performance of it. No human is exempt from societally structured gendered stereotypes, not even Meg. In fact, her discomfort with her peers is based primarily in this idea; she knows that she can't grow and perform femininity in a way her culture deems acceptable (or, perhaps, even perform it at all), and so she doesn't fit in. As a human, she thinks in binaries: "Western thought...has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference, mind vs. matter, *man vs. woman*, soul vs. body, life vs. death, nature vs. culture, speech vs. writing" (Butler viii, emphasis mine). It makes perfect

sense, then, that she would see femininity in a creature who is warm and caring and who sings to her when she's ill — these are traits that, in her own hegemonic society, indicate femaleness.

Meg's many possible names for her new role model are certainly binary in nature: She considers father, mother, brother, and sister, as well as nongendered titles such as teacher and acquaintance. Although Meg is thinking in primarily gendered terms, Aunt Beast's reasons for passing over certain titles are not. She rejects mother because it "is special, a one-name; and father you have here." (L'Engle 184) She does not pass over father because she is a woman or mother because she is a man, and it is reasonable to assume that she would have been just as satisfied with "Uncle" as she would with "Aunt." It is Meg who thinks of her in gendered terms, not Aunt Beast herself — if her mind went first to the female "Aunt" instead of the male "Uncle," it is not because of Aunt Beast's actual gender identity but because of the stereotypes that have been present in Meg's world all her life. In fact, despite Meg's unconscious gendering of Aunt Beast, the narrative itself resists the latter's becoming female by repeatedly mentioning her odd tentacles and eyeless face. The contrast between Aunt Beast's perception of gender and Meg's own reveals linguistic binaries such as "aunt" and "uncle" to be arbitrary. Providing role models such as Aunt Beast is the novel's way of imagining radical beings that are (comparatively) free from linguistic restraints, which in turn may encourage Meg to explore her own gender expression. To relate back to Stockton, Aunt Beast is one of the metaphors — paradoxically a supposedly language-less one — with which Meg identifies and that enhances her strangeness.

Aunt Beast is not the only bizarre character in the book with whom Meg identifies, nor is she the most important one. Even more essential to the narrative are the “witches” who serve as Meg’s guides through time and space — Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit. Although they are first introduced as old women, their actual identities are revealed to be much stranger, as well as thick with metaphor: Mrs. Who is actually a strange flying centaur-like being who can carry all three children on her broad back, and speaks primarily in quotes from famous thinkers, relating more to literature than to “real” (in the context of the narrative, human) life. Mrs. Which is ancient, and usually appears as merely a gleam, her strange speech rendered in capital letters and repeating consonants. Mrs. Whatsit was once a star, the growth and death of her celestial self decidedly opposed to the straightforward growing up we usually apply to human children (stars, after all, literally grow outward instead of up).

All three of them demonstrate the arbitrariness of language and the ways in which outward identities are constructed. They represent the infinite possibilities that lie beneath or within the supposedly female form — and they are, like Meg, only *supposedly* female because of the way their bodies initially appear to others (for the witches, “initial” refers to their first appearance in the book, while for Meg it refers to her birth — the moment when, presumably, doctors and her parents decided she was female based on her genitals). They represent the disconnect between children’s bodies as conceived by homogenous society and children as they see themselves; even while in their physically “human” forms they are strange. Mrs. Whatsit, for instance, demonstrates what might be considered rather perverse clothing behavior, as a child might: She lives in an abandoned house and steals sheets to make into clothes. Clothing is generally considered an indicator

of identity, specifically gender; experimenting with it has visible consequences on one's perception of oneself as well as the way one is perceived by others. This is why dress codes are often restrictive — adults used them to make sure that children's, especially girl's, "gendered/sexualized sartorial selves...[are] 'officially' regulated and the division between acceptable/unacceptable and girl child/girl pupil maintained." (Renold 48) Children experimenting with clothing, wearing outfits that are deemed outside of the norms for certain situations, is seen as unacceptable and even perverse. Mrs. Whatsit doesn't know how to use clothing correctly, because she has not grown up in human society. She clothes herself presumably to avoid alarming the people around her, but she hasn't assimilated the intricacies of clothing performances the way a real human would, so she experiments much like a child. As a result of these mistakes, she and the other witches are unnerving to outsiders, humans. Like Meg, they are hard to categorize, but unlike Meg, they are unperturbed by the societal expectations and binaries they don't adhere to. This is all despite the fact that their strange performances are noticed and negatively labeled by others. Meg's twin brothers, for instance, utterly reject the strangeness of her alien mentors: "If you're going to let old tramps [Mrs. Whatsit] into the house in the middle of the night, Mother, you ought to have Den and me around to protect you." (L'Engle 23)

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Whatsit herself points out, any body she or her sisters choose or are forced to take is "only the tiniest facet of all the things [she] could be." (L'Engle 93) They do not behave or grow in ways that make sense to our language. Mrs. Whatsit, as a star, grew outward from the center instead of up, dying in a blaze that can consume worlds. Mrs. Who expands out of her human form, growing wings and extra appendages and literally carrying the children — a flight that carries them upward, yes, but in a strikingly unconventional

manner. Mrs. Which is so difficult to capture that she literally cannot be seen except as a gleam (a word that implies reflection [in this case off of Mrs. Who's glasses], therefore necessarily involving indirectness). They even use language incorrectly, because they are so unused to it. Mrs. Whatsit speaks mostly in quotes, taking words from famous human speakers and emphasizing that language is necessarily derivative rather than natural or inherent. Mrs. Who speaks in capitals and repeated letters, her voice echoing because she has a less than human grasp on language. Their true identities can be neither constructed nor ascertained using language, and their names play into this: We cannot tell for sure just who, which, or what these beings are, and that is precisely the point.

To be clear, neither Aunt Beast nor the witches can truly be constructed without language by virtue of their being literary characters. They can exist *only* through language. They are imagined to have identities outside of and beyond social constructions, but this is impossible. This is an interesting tension within the novel, one that is perhaps unavoidable in a text that attempts to imagine a radical alternative to binary language. Paradoxically, Meg accentuates her sideways growth by surrounding herself with and learning from metaphorical figures who attempt not to be defined by language — they are written as distant beings (stars, mythical creatures) who only use human language when they choose too. At best, the reader must suspend her disbelief in order to accept this, because metaphors are *necessarily* constructed by language; they cannot opt out of it. Thus it would be disingenuous to assert that any of these beings are truly exempt from language. Nevertheless, their imagined distance from human society allows them flexibility in playing with their identities. In fact, their incomplete distance from language may make them

easier for Meg to relate to — if they were truly unformed by societal expectations, she would probably not be able to understand them at all.

These are the figures who are the most constant source of inspiration and guidance for Meg, both in her journey through time and space and in her character growth. They do not, as Mrs. Murray seems to, want her to change, even when her difficulty with tessering proves to be impractical. Further, they actively encourage an experimental identity in Meg by insisting she be the one to rescue Charles Wallace from the evil IT. Schneebaum argues that this is because rescuing Charles Wallace is a feminine duty, one that requires the heart and not the mind (Schneebaum 36). Indeed, it is Meg's love for her younger brother that is her most important weapon in resisting IT; however, her anger — which, as she herself points out, leaves no “room to be scared” (L'Engle 97) — was crucial to her previous journey on Camazotz, and her stubbornness almost certainly helps her resist the pull of IT's influence.

Before arriving on Aunt Beast's planet, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace travel to the planet Camazotz to rescue the long-missing Mr. Murray. Camazotz has been taken over by the evil IT and is now a dystopian vision: a whole planet in grayscale, with identical houses, streets, and flowerbeds, its citizens moving “in rhythm. All identical. Like the houses. Like the paths. Like the flowers.” (L'Engle 103) A young boy who is not in sync with the rhythm is whisked back into his house by his fearful mother in order to hide him from his peers. As Charles Wallace, possessed by IT, explains, “On Camazotz we are all happy because we are all alike. Differences create problems. You do know that, don't you, dear sister?” When Meg denies this, he continues, “Oh, yes, you do. You've seen at home how true it is. You know

that's the reason you're not happy at school. Because you're different." (L'Engle 140-41)

This calls back to Charles Wallace's ghosting, his construction of an easily categorized self. He makes a direct connection between this horrible homogenous world and the world in which Meg has grown up, and says of Meg's witchy role models, "They want us to go on being confused instead of properly organized." (L'Engle 142) IT-Charles is embodying the adult world as a child might see it: oppressively consistent and organized, opposed to the "confused" identity of the strange child. IT has created a binary world, one that is literally black and white; IT is an exaggeration of the binary language that so rigidly defines Meg's world, and IT hates the ways in which the witches encourage her to experiment with language and identity.

Shortly after reuniting with her father, however, Meg comes to a revelation of her own: "Like and equal are two entirely different things." (L'Engle 160) Significantly, this is not something she realizes with direct influence from the witches but realizes on her own, as a child. This line constitutes a significant theme in the story, and is immediately praised by her father: "That a girl, Meg!" The fact that Mr. Murray immediately genders Meg even in praise of her revelation further demonstrates that it is the witches, not her parents' categories, that are most important to her growth. Even Mr. Murray, it seems, is complacent in the "organized" world that makes Meg feel "different." Meg, however, has now realized the merit in attempting to grow outside of the expectations of that world, that she can be totally unlike the people around her and still worthy of humanity. This is our first hint that Meg's growing sideways is positive. It is a moment of strength for our protagonist, one in which she stands up to faceless evil, and it is important that this moment comes with the revelation that she is "different." Meg does not have to be *like* the hegemonic ideal of

femininity in order to be equal. This is her beginning to accept her own strangeness, refusing to hide it the way the little boy in the street must.

As IT-Charles suggests, the witches encourage this line of thinking. When they insist that she must be the one to rescue Charles Wallace from IT, both Mr. Murray and Calvin object, the latter claiming angrily that “she’s backward” — likely referring to her difficulties in math class (this is what Meg seems to think, as she retorts, “I’m better at math than you and you know it”), but perhaps also to her strange non-linear growth and approach to identity. Mr. Murray, meanwhile, is by Mrs. Whatsit’s assessment “angry and suspicious and frightened” at the prospect of his child embarking on so strange a quest alone (L’Engle 197). The witches, though, particularly Mrs. Whatsit, continue to argue for her liberty to travel alone, to literally separate herself from others. Mrs. Whatsit encourages Meg to embrace herself by explaining the form of the sonnet: “You’re given the form, but what you write is completely up to you. You have to write the sonnet yourself,” or, as Calvin puts it, “A strict form, but freedom within it.” (L’Engle 199) Meg is in many ways bound by her own human body, one that she does not have the ability to alter (particularly not without the permission of her parents). Within her body, though, is endless possibility: Meg is whoever and whatever she chooses to be, and she can choose to resist It and rescue her brother.

This reflection on the sonnet is another instance in which the witches demonstrate their understanding of language as a constructing force. What’s more, Mrs. Whatsit endeavors to *teach* the children how it affects their own individualities. “Sonnet” can be used as metonymy for language itself: It is a structure, even a binary one, in which meaning can be constructed. Although the sonnet as a form certainly developed, like language, over time, to

each individual poet the form is unchangeable. Mrs. Whatsit doesn't view this immutability as a negative thing. Instead, she compares it to poetry, a thing of beauty, and encourages Meg to explore ways to grow and define herself within this structure.

Although the witches attempt to posit identities that are exempt from binary language — and in doing so recognize that human identities *are* subject to language — they do not adhere entirely to post-structuralism, complicating their determinedly radical ideals. Before Meg's first journey to Camazotz, Mrs. Whatsit "gives her her faults." (L'Engle 86) These are the traits that make Meg "different" from her peers — the traits that indicate her sideways growth, her stubbornness, her aggression, her strange approach to math and science. It is this stubbornness that allows her withstand the evil influence of IT. This on its own does not negate the idea that Meg's flaws are constructed. However, when the witches continue to tell Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace about the Thing, the faceless Darkness (of which IT is a part) that blots out the stars themselves, Mrs. Whatsit suggests that the children are inherently good. The darkness, she says is ageless, is as old as humanity itself, and has been held at bay by figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Einstein, and, perhaps most significantly, Jesus: "*And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not,*" she quotes. (L'Engle 89) Christ is a figure whose self is not seen as constructed; he is inherently divine and inherently good. By drawing a parallel between him and Meg, the latter's constructed sideways self is complicated. She is filled with possibilities, says Mrs. Whatsit, defying binaries, but one binary remains: Good versus Evil. She falls back on a traditionalist view of the self. There *is* an unchangeable core to Meg, and it is the same core as in Jesus Christ and other beloved

figures; Meg's goodness is immediately recognizable because it is compared to a Western culture ideal.

This is where Meg's role models turn into something more complex than simply attempted post-structuralist ideals. The text's embrace of a "core self" in the children might be read as a conflict, but it's important to recognize that Good versus Evil is the only binary that the witches seem to think is inherent. By existing beyond their constructed human forms at the same time they embrace a form of goodness that is unchangeable, they create their own version of individuality, one that is built around the arbitrary power of language as well as a deeper, inherent sense of goodness. This is likely a result of the text's effort to construct an obviously positive growth in Meg; her strange growth, her learning to accept that she uses language to construct her outward in odd ways, is made possible by her goodness. It is the novel's particular take on empowerment: No matter how Meg experiments with her identity, no matter how sideways she grows, she will always be inherently good.

Conclusion

If Meg's identity is inherently impossible to pin down, then what do we gain from this reading of *A Wrinkle in Time*? Primarily, we expand the scope of queer discourse to identify a new sort of queer narrative. We begin to see non-heteronormativity in children's literature, a sphere which has been sorely lacking in such discourse, in part because of

issues of censorship by social conservatives but also because it's difficult, and often inaccurate, to talk about children in terms of solidified adult labels such as gay or transgender. It is not necessarily revolutionary to recognize the unique, transgressive humanity of a child who sees herself as "different," but it certainly doesn't hurt.

A Wrinkle in Time, like Meg herself, defies strict categorization. Its queerness is indirect; unlike a coming out novel it does not offer any message concerning the acceptance of the gay or transgender self. It does, however, demonstrate a positiveness that can result from a child's acceptance of their strange perverse identity. By largely relying the post-structuralist view of language, it represents an interesting journey of self-construction, in which language is both arbitrary and socially significant. Meg's journey ends in her acceptance that she does not construct herself within certain binaries, chiefly the male/female binary. At the same time, a traditionalist presentation of the good/evil binary results in a character that is both queerish and inherently good. Ideologically it often contradicts itself, but this contradiction is made as a sacrifice for a particular happy ending that likely would not be found in an adult protagonist.

Meg is not, as Stockton's subjects are, retrospectively queer. She does not grow into a gay woman; she is forever a child, unlike the man who sees his past self hanging in the garden. Instead she embraces her own sideways growing identity, one that skews homogenous linguistic norms. *A Wrinkle in Time* embraces the arbitrariness of language as secondary to a larger good within Meg, celebrating her both as a subject of language and something, perhaps, beyond that.

Chapter 1

Introduction

We turn now to a world much bleaker than most of the places Meg explores. Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, like *A Wrinkle in Time* over thirty years earlier, was awarded the Newbery Medal and continues to capture diverse audiences decades after its publication. Many its themes are familiar ones in children's science fiction and fantasy. This story, too, stresses individuality. Its protagonist, Jonas, discovers in himself traits that set him apart from his peers. These differences lead to revolution that is both personal and — unlike Meg Murray's — political. Jonas lives in a particular environment that could be best described as a dystopia (albeit one masquerading as a utopia). His differences from those around them, conceived by his society as unproductive, causes him to develop an individuality in conflict with his community's norms. Like Meg, he uses these perceived flaws to gain self-confidence and save someone he loves; and like Meg's, his narrative blurs the line between constructionist (identity as performance) and essentialist (identity as a "core self") ideas of identity.

Jonas' strange growth also centers largely around Gabe, an infant that his family unit fosters in an effort to help him grow properly. Gabe, however, refuses to grow the way Jonas' community wants him to. He is too small and too fussy, seen as disruptive to the larger community, which is focused on cohesiveness and productivity. The entrance of Gabe into Jonas' life coincides with his studies under The Giver, an old man who instills in him all the

knowledge forbidden to the larger community. In a novel focusing on a society that reeks of Foucauldian power structures, a largely post-structuralist appreciation of language leads Jonas to become more and more strange to his community. He embraces a hidden knowledge, a queer archive of sorts, through the memories transferred to him by his mentor. Gabe, a representation of freedom from the trappings of society (he has not grown enough to develop any sort of identity), feeds into Jonas' new understanding of language as an agent of power and change. Both contribute to Jonas' growth, which continually subverts his community's standards and understanding. These two very different influences — an infant who is not yet shaped by societal expectations and a new, revolutionary understanding of knowledge and language — contribute to a rebirth in Jonas. In him, the novel constructs an identity that is unusual both by Jonas' community's standards and by our own.

Language and Control: Resisting a Dystopia

The Giver follows — or perhaps even started — the tradition in modern children's dystopian novels of critiquing “models of community and human behavior, focusing on children as catalysts for social change and/or reform” (Bradford 10). Jonas lives in a community built on order. It is, quite literally, in black and white — there is no room for ambiguity. Jobs are assigned; families are assigned; children do not even have their own birthdays. It is sexless and artless, but apparently physically safe. There is no war and very little strife; pain is almost unknown. It is a seeming utopia, a term that politically refers “to unrealistic imaginings of improved world orders which when tested against the realpolitik of pragmatism collapse into

ineffectuality” (Bradford 1). Indeed, Jonas’ story largely revolves around events that reveal his community as both ineffective and dangerous. Like other children’s dystopian novels, *The Giver* shows children being “subjected to social engineering and manipulation as members of cults or fundamentalist communities” (Bradford 10).

In his piece “Discipline and Its Discontent: A Foucauldian Reading of *The Giver*,” Don Latham reads Lowry’s novel through a post-structuralist lens. Latham asserts that, unlike other famous dystopian novels like *1984* and *Brave New World*, the society in *The Giver* represents, on the surface, an “extended, idealized childhood” (Latham 136). Its citizens’ lives are safe and secure; at young adulthood, one is assigned a job that easily fits one’s skills and interests; there is so little discomfort that Jonas has never felt any sustained pain worse than a scraped knee. Latham analyzes this society through Foucault’s theories, which saw underlying oppressive power structures in even the most well-ordered societies: “According to Foucault, in order for the individual to be transformed into a viable economic force, s/he must be regulated, disciplined, and subjected” (Latham 136). Bodies are regulated in various ways: First, in the spatial distribution of citizens “according to their stage of life” and skill set (children go to school while adults go to individual jobs, each of which is contained in a different area than the others); “the control of activities for the purpose of encouraging those activities that are useful to society and discouraging those that are considered counterproductive” (Latham 137) (behaviors such as speaking out of turn and wandering outside of one’s prescribed area are publicly punished, and all activities in a child’s life are chosen for them and regulated); the division of training into stages (learning is highly organized in Lowry’s dystopia, with each developmental stage prescribed a different set of skills to be learned); and the subjection of the individual in

favor of the community (it is considered impolite to talk about or pay attention to oneself, to the point that mirrors are seldom seen).

Perhaps the most immediately interesting of these strategies is the second — the control of “unnecessary” activities and behaviors — because it necessarily involves sexuality. In *The Giver*’s community, sexual desire is considered distracting. When Jonas begins to feel desire for a female classmate, his attractions (called “stirrings”) are swiftly halted by a pill that, according to his parents, every adult takes. Procreation is regulated to those assigned to be Birthmothers, who are impregnated via artificial insemination before giving birth to three infants over three years each. Meanwhile, families are assigned based on temperament, always with the same formation: a mother, a father, and two children — one boy and one girl. In this way, the society in *The Giver* is most obviously an exaggeration of our own, the society about which Foucault wrote, because it enforces heteronormativity while stamping down the messier complications present even in heterosexuality. A child’s sexuality is treated in much the same way; a girl (or a child defined as a girl) is expected to want to be with a boy (or a child defined as a boy) — to imagine her wedding, to have benign “crushes” — but it is considered perverse to recognize that she might have sexual attractions as well.

Latham observes that these aspects of Jonas’ community bear a striking resemblance to Foucault’s Panopticon, a theoretical “building designed...to allow for the relatively easy observances of inmates, whether they be prisoners, patients, or pupils” (Latham 138). The sight of the tower in the center of the Panopticon creates a sense of self-consciousness in the inmates, causing them to self-monitor even when no one is actually watching from the tower. Thus powers can operate automatically and indirectly, without any obvious show of force. Jonas’ community operates in much the same way. Shortly before the story begins he steals an apple

from school, and that evening there is an announcement over the universal speakers: “SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED” (Lowry 23). Jonas is not directly punished, but he is reminded of the community’s ever-present watchfulness, and this is enough to induce shame and curb him from stealing again. Latham also recalls a most telling line in Jonas’ narration: “Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be easy to break” (Lowry 27). The constant presence of surveillance causes him to self-monitor the way the Panopticon’s inmates do, demonstrating the community’s indirect but powerful control over and regulation of his body and identity. The Panopticon’s tower is, like the speakers in Jonas’ community, a physical representation of a collection of oppressive powers. Significantly, the story opens on perhaps the most closely regulated time in a community citizen’s life, the months before the Assignment, in which each twelve year old is given a job based on her personality and strength: “During the past year he [Jonas] had been aware of the increasing level of observation” (Lowry 20).

Foucauldian ideas also heavily emphasize the control of language and therefore knowledge. Jonas’ community exists in the future, but it hides the experiences of the past from its citizens. Jonas is chosen as the Receiver to “hold” all the memories and ideas denied his peers. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge — or the lack thereof — to Jonas and his community. It is this knowledge that frees Jonas from the community’s restrictions, both physically and emotionally. He feels more deeply than his peers, develops a more distinct, perhaps even perverse identity, and is allowed to subvert the community’s physical restrictions by spending the night away from his family unit and walking along the river during work hours. As Foucault might predict, knowledge is what allows for Jonas’ powerful new identity within his own Panopticon.

Lowry's story's relationship with knowledge becomes more complicated with the introduction of the memories, which form a core part of the narrative. The narrative implies that this knowledge and language somehow exist, at least in part, independently from current society. The Giver tells Jonas that if he does not perform his duties by absorbing this hidden information, this knowledge will be somehow "released" into the community, which will then presumably see color and relive all the horrors of the distant past. The community members would have to "bear the burden" of these memories. Further, the Giver does not simply teach Jonas about these hidden memories; he transfers them directly into the boy's mind. This is a departure from Foucauldian sentiment because it separates knowledge from language, turning the former into something that can exist without the latter. This disconnect occurs every time The Giver transfers a new memory to Jonas, which he accomplishes by laying his hands on the boy's bare back.

Still, Jonas ultimately connects words to the objects and concepts he sees in his memories; in his first, he looks at a sled and snow and connects them with their respective English signifiers: "No voice made an explanation. The experience explained itself to him" (Lowry 103). The Giver says these words aloud before transferring the memory to Jonas, but he quickly makes a point to test Jonas' ability to "perceive" a word without help. Jonas does so, naming "sunshine" without The Giver having to help him. This practice is further complicated by the fact that Jonas refers to his memory-self as a "new consciousness," as if his mind is suddenly separate from his old consciousness, the one defined by his community. Indeed, in these memories Jonas reacts as if he has already encountered the things he sees. In addition to perceiving the words for "sled" and "snow" and "hill," he instinctively knows that he can use the sled's rope to steer — all this in spite of his never having seen or heard of a sled before.

At first this seems very simply anti-post-structuralist, but over the course of the narrative this “consciousness” becomes less straightforward. The Giver tells him that the memories he gives Jonas belong to a past society, one that the community rejected in favor of Sameness: “We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others” (Lowry 120). Jonas’ “perception” of new words, then, is actually brought about by his magically entering the consciousness (or multiple consciousnesses) of the society that created those words. He calls this his “new consciousness,” something disconnected from his body: “[H]e was still lying there...Yet another, separate part of his being was upright now, in a sitting position” (Lowry 102). It is unclear exactly what this magical process entails, but it is implied that the memories once belonged to individuals; for instance, The Giver says that he possesses many memories about sleds, not just the one he gives Jonas (Lowry 105). This means that when Jonas inhabits these memories, he is inhabiting the minds of the individuals who created them — regardless of gender. Beyond his hands, he never sees his own body in these memories, much less any other gendered traits. This means that within the memories, which become increasingly more important to him as the narrative progresses, Jonas is functionally genderless. The only memory in which he is arguably a particular gender is the one that introduces him to war, which positions him in the familiar role of a young boy drafted into battle. In all other memories, including the ever-important sled memories, the subject whom Jonas takes on is unknown. Admittedly, the narrative uses male pronouns for memory-Jonas just as it does for present-Jonas, but this is presumably for the sake of simplicity — it also uses his name, when it is clear that he is not himself (or at least not the self designated by the name Jonas) in the memories, but rather inhabiting something that happened to someone else in the past. By entering the memories, Jonas not only becomes

genderless (or multiple genders), he also queers language, using it in odd ways by borrowing from the experiences of a culture his community has worked to suppress.

Jonas' subversion of his culture through "perverse" language and knowledge grows stronger and more defined throughout the story. He is, like his peers, undergoing "training" for the job he will supposedly have for the rest of his life, but this training leads him to express himself in ways his fellow community members wouldn't think to. He becomes aware of the possibilities his new knowledge provides. He dreams repeatedly of the sled from his first transmitted memory:

"Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a something — he could not grasp what — that lay beyond the place where the thickness of the snow brought the sled to a stop" (Lowry 112). This "something," the place beyond the sled, is probably Jonas' nebulous conception of Elsewhere and, by extension, his own identity. Elsewhere is the one concept in the community that isn't rigidly defined; instead it remains purposefully ambiguous. It makes sense, then, that as Jonas learns more about the power of language, he becomes more drawn to the undefined Elsewhere; it matches his own changing identity.

Outside of Latham's points, Foucault also discusses this restriction of queer knowledge and identities in children. In one interview, he argues for a child's right to access sexual feelings and sculpt their identity. As previously explained, child queerness — a queerish child's growth — is strange, and Foucault argues that "children's sexuality is a specific sexuality, with its own forms, its own periods of maturation, its own highpoints, its specific drives, and its own latency periods, too. This sexuality of the child is a territory with its own geography that the adult must not enter" ("The Danger of Childhood Sexuality"). In other words, childhood sexuality is both specific to childhood and ambiguous; it is wrong for adults to apply adult terms to this experience — and the idea that there is a universal, definable and already-defined "child sexuality" is, while well-

meaning, erroneous. (See the previous chapter's discussion of gay adults' retrospective labeling of their child selves.) Queerish children grow in such strange, counter-cultural ways that it might be misleading even to apply to them such directional terms as "highpoints," which indicate a linear rather than a more complex growth. Within a Panopticon-like dystopia, this growth can be exaggeratedly strange, relying on and subverting tightly regulated language.

Jonas' engagement with knowledge, nebulous as it is, has a name: it is an archive. This archive manifests itself in his interaction not only with the memories but with The Giver's study in which he receives them. The most striking feature of The Giver's quarters — the only one that is described or even mentioned multiple times, aside from the bed on which Jonas receives memories and the recording devices that The Giver can turn off — is his collection of literature, which is unparalleled in the community. Jonas notices his bookshelves, a "most conspicuous difference" between this and other dwellings (Lowry 94), immediately upon entering the quarters and is almost comically astonished. Having only known dictionaries and the community's official rulebook, he asks himself, "Could there be rules beyond the rules that governed the community? Could there be more descriptions of offices and factories and committees?" (Lowry 94) We never learn what, exactly, these books contain (although it's safe to assume that they are not, as Jonas suspects, thousands of rulebooks), but their symbolism is striking. They represent a wealth of knowledge allowed nowhere else in the community, knowledge beyond dictionaries and rules.

The Giver's books are indicative with the narrative's continuous conscious relationship with language and knowledge. "Precision of language" is constantly emphasized in Jonas' society; specific definitions of words are enforced, resulting in a stifled and generally mild dialect that retires words like "love" because they're too strong or "generalized." At the beginning of the

story Jonas views language in through this simplistic lens: Each word has an exact meaning, and it is morally wrong to go beyond that meaning or to twist the objective “truth.” This relationship is disrupted as soon as he becomes the Receiver, when he receives, like the other Twelves, a folder containing instructions pertaining to his new position. Several of these instructions contradict his society’s obsession with precise language and honesty. “[Y]ou are prohibited from dream-telling” (Lowry 86), for instance, dismisses a family unit exercise that attempts to rationalize each citizen’s irrational, unconscious thoughts. The last item in particular shocks Jonas: “You may lie” (Lowry 87). This list is an upheaval of his previous, seemingly straightforward and uncomplicated relationship with language, and it leads up to the world of language opened up to him when he sees the books in The Giver’s quarters.

The Giver’s books are an archive of a past society, of all the things the community gave up when it converted to Sameness. This archive, however, does not exist solely in the written word. It exists in The Giver himself as the memories that he transfers piece by piece to Jonas. *The Giver*’s rather vague, strangely powerful representation of the archive is strikingly similar to the concept of the queer archive, that of a hidden history. For queer histories, the archive warps normative temporality, creating “a diverse domain of the usable past that, despite the sincere if not conceited espousals of disinterested custodians by its representatives, nevertheless functions ideologically and politically, and often insidiously” (Morris 147). Queer archives represent hidden, underlying political and historical narratives often opposed to the dominant cultural narrative. They are The Giver’s books and memories that exist both in addition to and in conflict with the community’s rulebooks and dictionaries. They are casualties of censorship and a lopsided “burden of proof,” erased because they don’t conform to the normative rationality forced upon them. They are “archives of trauma and lust” (Morris 147), as Jonas comes to realize

— in the memories he learns the concepts of pain and murder and love. The queer archive is connected to a “queer movement” that involves “the traversal of time and space, mobilization and circulation of meanings that trouble sexual normalcy and its discrimination” (Morris 147-48), and this is apparent in Jonas’ work as the Receiver. In the memories, he visits times, places, and even cultures that are not his own — and rather than *simply* visiting them, he embodies them. His lessons disrupt his understanding of the family unit and of love and lust; he is even compelled to stop taking his pills and let his “stirrings” return.

Therefore Jonas is not simply queer in the sense that he is gay or transgender; he is immersed in a *queer movement*. The phrase is apt; *movement* can refer both to his and The Giver’s cause, their subversion of the community, and to his sideways growth, a metaphorical movement of its own. His engagement with knowledge is distinctly queer and even revolutionary within his community. When viewed as a queer archive, The Giver’s books and memories make Jonas’ lessons strange, even perverse, because they uncover those things hidden by homogenous society, complicate their community’s dominant narrative.

Jonas’ Attractions: Asher, Fiona, and Stirrings

Jonas subverts his community in other, unconscious ways as well — and in ways that his community’s Council cannot fully supervise, although they attempt to, because they occur in his mind. He is attracted (perhaps even in a sexual sense) to people and ideas that skew the community’s rules. The first of these instances occurs when Jonas takes an apple home from the recreation area, against the community’s rules. He breaks this rule as a direct result of his

discovering something unusual underlying one of his community-approved daily activities. While tossing the apple with his best friend, Asher, he witnesses something that he cannot “sort out and put words to” (Lowry 29): While the apple is in the air, it changes in a way that Jonas does not have the vocabulary to describe. Because he cannot describe the change, he “let it pass” (Lowry 29), but not before defying community expectations by taking the apple home to examine. A “reminder” over the speakers about the ban on hoarding food is “sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse” in Jonas (Lowry 29), but it continues to tug at his mind, laying the groundwork for his future, more explicit subversion of community’s power structures.

Two things are significant about this first, regretted defiance of community rules. The first, eventually revealed by *The Giver*, is that the “change” Jonas had witnessed was the apple’s color. His and other communities forsook color for Sameness, but despite this, Jonas has a natural ability to sometimes perceive the color red. In modern Western society, red is the color of lust and passion, both ideas rejected by a community in which strong feelings are discouraged in favor of efficiency, as evidenced by the punishment of a young Jonas when he exaggeratedly says he is “starving” (Lowry 89). Further, the apple itself is a Western symbol of lust or the fall from innocence, linked to the story in Genesis of The Garden of Eden, in which Eve causes the sinful nature of man by eating a fruit (commonly portrayed as an apple) from the tree of knowledge. Immediately, then, Jonas’ experiences are positioned as perverse in a community that rejects passion.

The second important aspect of this experience is Asher. It is no coincidence that he is the boy with whom Jonas is playing catch when the apple “changes.” Asher continually breaks minor community rules through sheer inability to follow them. This is one reason Jonas is playing catch with him in the first place; it is “a required activity for Asher because it would

improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards” (Lowry 30). Coordination is not the only thing about Asher that is “not up to standards” — he is too energetic, often speaking too fast and mixing up his words, earning punishment for saying “smack” instead of “snack” (Lowry 69). Asher isn’t a radical, revolutionary child, but he is a difficult one, and difficulty is something that stands out in a community that values Sameness. Jonas worries about his friend prior to the Ceremony of Twelves that will decide their jobs; “Asher’s such fun. But he doesn’t really have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything” (Lowry 21). Because Asher is “fun” and not productive or efficient, Jonas thinks that he might not fit into the community. The association between Asher and the red apple makes sense; Jonas subconsciously sees Asher as someone perverse, in opposition to many of the community’s values.

Jonas’ attraction to Asher is, by its very definition, also perverse. For one thing, his seeing color occurs right before his “stirrings” begin. “Stirrings” is the term the community uses to designate a child’s first sexual thoughts — puberty, in other words. This, too, connects Jonas’ Seeing Beyond and his eventual separation from his community with sexuality. Further, Jonas’ parents exhibit something like disapproval when Jonas exhibits his dedication to his friend, telling him that such closeness isn’t right for adulthood: “Asher and I will always be friends,” he says, to which his father replies, “There will be changes [after the Assignment]” (Lowry 22). His parents gently nudge him away from his devotion to Asher by implying that their relationship is only suited to childhood, to play, a perversity reserved only for the immature and underdeveloped. This mirrors common perceptions of close male friendship, which is seen as acceptable only for children — in adulthood it becomes queerish. The narrative even hints that Asher fails at fitting gender roles; when talking about his inability to swim, he says, “My swimming instructor says I don’t have the right boyishness or something” (Lowry 61). He means

“buoyancy,” but his mistake (and the added “or something”) both demonstrates his difficulties with all-important “precise language” and reveals that he is not the “right kind of boy” in the eyes of his community.

Asher is not the only person for whom Jonas has odd, subversive attractions. His stirrings make themselves apparent in a dream about a female classmate, Fiona. It is a strange, somewhat unnerving dream, in which Jonas helps Fiona wash the naked elderly in the House of Old — a recreation of an event from his day. In the dream, however, Jonas tries to convince Fiona to take her clothes off so he can wash her, skewing the notion of the House of Old (and, indeed, the community itself) as an inherently non-sexual location. Perverting expectations of age and (literal) cleanliness, Jonas tries to coax “gentle” Fiona into letting him wash her, but “she kept laughing and saying no” (Lowry 45). Like Asher and the apple, this is connected to the story of Eden; in the real House of Old, nudity is not forbidden or uncomfortable — the rule against nakedness “didn’t apply to newchildren or the Old” (Lowry 39). This mirrors Eden, in which Adam and Eve are completely unperturbed by nudity until they eat of the fruit of knowledge. Further, unlike Asher, Fiona does not disrupt community expectations; she is sweet and caring, and it is clear to everyone what her Assignment will be (she is assigned to the House of Old, where her gentleness is put to good use). In the dream, then, part of Jonas’ attraction to her may be the idea that he would be corrupting someone so in tune with the community standards. Later, though, Jonas catches a glimpse of red in her hair, revealing that Fiona is, unknowingly, a trouble to her society: “We’ve never completely mastered Sameness,” says the Giver. “I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona’s must drive them crazy” (Lowry 120). Thus Fiona, like Asher and the apple, is connected to Jonas’

subversion of the community. Despite representing gentleness and compliance, she reveals the flaws in Sameness.

It makes sense, then, that Jonas is attracted to his two friends — they are connected to his stirrings, his Seeing Beyond, his nebulous and rapidly changing identity. They represent the beginning of Jonas' subversion of his community's language. It is through them that he first realizes the larger possibilities of language and perception. They mark the beginning of his new identity — his new "consciousness."

Jonas' Individuality: Gabe, Family, and Revolution

How, then, does Jonas' identity grow? In order to determine the answer — or the possibility of many answers — to this question, we must first attempt to determine where his identity begins. Jonas does not suddenly become strange; he is strange because he is something of a blank slate, with no real idea of how he'll eventually be productive in his society. Its language doesn't seem to describe him; while at the Ceremony of Twelve, he listens to the Chief Elder describe the distinctions of selected Elevens, and hears "nothing that he recognized as himself, Jonas" (Lowry 66). He certainly fits in better than his friend Asher does, not drawing overt attention to himself, but there is a question of his productivity, his practicality. The Assignment is the one time in which the community "[h]onors your differences" (Lowry 65). There are no labels for the ways in which Jonas is different; he is obedient but he is vague, not fitting into the language of the community — Engineer, Nurturer, Instructor; none of the words used to categorize adults apply to him.

When Jonas does receive his Assignment, he is immediately thrust into a very different growth process than that of his peers. In fact, he disrupts his community's carefully regulated aging rituals even a few minutes before he finds out he's the Receiver. In the Ceremony of Twelve, each former Eleven receives her assignment, going by order of birth number (Jonas is Nineteen, as he was the nineteenth one born in his year; the community does not celebrate birthdays, as that would be a frivolous celebration of individuality). Instead, the Chief Elder skips over his name. This throws Jonas, and indeed the entire community, into a state of extreme unease: "There was a sudden hush in the crowd, and he [Jonas] knew that the entire community realized that the Chief Elder had moved from Eighteen to Twenty, leaving a gap" (Lowry 72). Jonas is left out of the growth that he and the rest of his community considers the default, instead confined to a "gap" — a netherworld, an undefined space. When she finally calls him to the stage at the end of the event, the Chief Elder grants him separation from many of the community's power structures: "The Receiver-in-training cannot be observed, cannot be modified...He is to be alone, apart" (Lowry 77). Jonas is given a new life, one in which his identity will no longer be so directly shaped by the Council and its rules.

This is the moment of Jonas' reversion to newchild, the journey in which he will eventually receive his "new consciousness." Tellingly, it is juxtaposed with a peculiar ceremony, one of the community's only acknowledgments of death. Earlier in the ceremony, a couple receives a new infant to replace their son, who drowned in the river bordering the community. Jonas recalls the Loss of this child; for several days, the community chanted his name, Caleb, until he gradually faded from their consciousnesses. This process is repeated in reverse when the couple receives a newchild, a new Caleb: the community chants the name until it is "as if the old Caleb were returning" (Lowry 57). A similar ritual is performed when Jonas is made the new Receiver. The

community chants his name, “accepting him and his new role, giving him life, the way they had given it to the newchild Caleb” while Jonas wonders what is to “become of him” (Lowry 81).

This ritual gives Jonas a new beginning and indicates that his growth from there on will be strange, as they recognize this Twelve as they would a newchild.

Jonas’ similarities to a newchild remain a theme throughout the book. Jonas’ apprenticeship with The Giver, his new knowledge of language and identity, coincide with the entrance of Gabriel into his life. If The Giver’s room serves as an education in queering language, Gabe is the place where Jonas acts out that education most powerfully. Gabe is a newchild whom Jonas’ father, a Nurturer, takes in temporarily. Gabe is troublesome; he is not growing the way he should. Father tells his family, “[H]e isn’t growing as fast as he should, and he doesn’t sleep soundly” (Lowry 9). This strange growth leaves him undefined; he is not fit to be placed with a family, so he isn’t present for the Naming ceremony where his peers receive names and families. Like Jonas’ when he becomes the new Receiver, his growth is interrupted, in limbo. Father takes him in — he asks the committee permission for “an unusual and special reprieve” so that he can have “an additional year of nurturing [training as an acceptable citizen] before his Naming and Placement” (Lowry 54). Without an official name or a family, the only label that the community is able to give Gabe is the paradoxical “Uncertain” (Lowry 54). Father does this to keep Gabe from being “released” to Elsewhere, suspending him in a state of uncertainty in an effort to redirect his unproductive growth — although it’s worth noting that Father does this less out of compassion than for his own reputation, as he “had not to release a single newchild this year, so Gabriel would have represented a real failure and sadness” (Lowry 55).

From the moment he enters the story, this strangely growing newchild is inextricably linked to Jonas. In fact, he immediately makes Jonas feel different, separated from community

expectations, when his younger sister Lily points out that “he has funny eyes like yours, Jonas!” (Lowry 23) She is referring to Gabe’s eyes, which are, like Jonas’ and The Giver’s, pale rather than dark like most community members’. Jonas identifies with Gabe because they are both different in a way the community does not endorse, an experience that makes him uncomfortable because it reminds him that he does not quite fit into his community, that there are hidden things in him that he and his peers don’t understand: “[H]e was reminded that light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look — what was it? Depth, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn’t been discovered yet. He felt self-conscious, realizing that he, too, had that look” (Lowry 26). This first, vaguely unsettling reminder grows throughout the story into a powerful relationship between two strangely growing children with brand new identities. This is emphasized by the fact that Gabriel, like the apple, has biblical connotations. His name (which has not yet been officially assigned to him, but which Father finds while peeking at the records) recalls the angel that God, in the Bible, sends as a messenger to certain people; he is “sent to speak unto thee and to tell you this good news” (Luke 1:19, KJV). As revealed throughout the narrative, Gabe is indeed something of a messenger to Jonas, providing revelations of his own new depths, albeit unknowingly.

Apart from his original uncomfortable recognition of himself in Gabe, Jonas is not at first interested in the newchild. He does not “hover over the little one the way Lily and his Father” do (Lowry 55), and is generally unaffected by the strangeness of Gabe and his place in Jonas’ family unit. It is not until Jonas receives the “burdens” of being the Receiver — the memories — that he begins to identify more strongly with the pale-eyed infant. Like Gabe, he is shaping a brand new life for himself, full of new words and concepts that affect his perception of

everything around him. Unlike Gabe, though, he is self-conscious and still consciously affected by community standards, and his “new life” is less literal; Gabe has presumably not yet entered Lacan’s mirror stage, so he does not quite have an identity of his own. Still, he is quite literally growing strangely, and Jonas is drawn to this baby who unknowingly troubles community power structures.

The turning point in their relationship is the moment Jonas decides to aid Gabe’s sideways growth by merging it with his own; namely, he shares his burden as the Receiver. Several months after the Ceremony, Gabe is growing, passing “maturity tests,” but still troubling the Nurturers with his restlessness at night. This is enough of a problem for him to remain ineligible for Placement, placing him in danger of release. Jonas suggests Father let the newchild sleep in his room, so that his parents might get some rest instead of waking to care for the newchild. While trying to calm Gabe that night, he accidentally transfers to him a memory of a sailboat, losing the memory himself. Gabe falls asleep, and Jonas realizes that by sharing a memory, he has now diverted even from the strange path chosen from him, the path of the Receiver: “He was not yet qualified to be a Giver himself; nor had Gabriel been selected to be a Receiver” (Lowry 148).

By continuing to transfer memories to Gabe at night, Jonas further queers both of their growths, transgressing community expectations and even the specific rules for the Receiver — he is required to undertake his journey and its burdens alone. Paradoxically, this actually helps Gabe become less conspicuously strange, if only for a time. Since Gabe sleeps soundly in Jonas’ room, Father and Mother pronounce “the experiment a success and Jonas a hero” (Lowry 118), and Father thinks that the newchild will be able to be Named and Placed that upcoming December. Jonas’ intervention creates the illusion that Gabe is now growing correctly, sleeping

soundly like the other newchildren — they do not know that Jonas has been using illicit means to lull him to sleep, that Gabe is sleeping not through normal means but with the help of Jonas' forbidden memories. It is clear that Jonas shares these memories not to relieve his burden (he never, for instance, shares memories of pain or war with Gabe) but to protect the newchild, even before he knows what release entails. He transfers memories so that Gabe can be perceived as “normal,” not deserving of release, and to solidify a bond between two sideways growing children.

This in itself is queerish, especially within the context of his community. Along with sexual attraction, the community forbids love (presumably curbed in part by the same medicine used to halt stirrings) because it is too ambiguous, too undefinable; therefore, love is not present even in family units, and Jonas is not truly aware of it until he becomes the Receiver. The concept of family becomes increasingly important to him in the same way Gabe does. They are quickly connected, as early in his training, Jonas accidentally calls Gabe his little brother: “No, that’s inaccurate. He’s not my brother, not really,” he says to the Giver, while expressing frustration that Gabe, who is “right at the age where he’s learning so much,” is not allowed to make any choices (Lowry 124). Even before Gabe, Jonas’ relationship with his predetermined family is, already, somewhat strange, as Latham points out in his piece. According to Latham, Western dystopian novels largely rely on the idea of Western society as patriarchal; the societies in novels like *Brave New World* are dominated by male figures like Henry Ford, for example. He assumes that *The Giver* follows in this tradition and then points out that within this framework, Jonas’ parents are transgressive: Jonas’ mother “has the traditionally patriarchal position of judge” while his father “has the traditionally matriarchal position of nurturer” (Latham 145). Latham

argues that these characters “demonstrate resistance to the rigid patriarchal values that permeate their community” (Latham 145).

Latham’s analysis is flawed in this respect because *The Giver* does not, in fact, seem to follow the dystopian tradition of a literally patriarchal (“man as leader”) society. Never does the novel state that it is rare for a woman to be a judge or a man to be a nurturer; in fact, the Chief Elder herself is female. There are, certainly, gender expectations, as with Asher’s flawed “boyishness,” the practice of Tens cutting their hair into a “more manly short style” (Lowry 59), and the undervaluing of the physically “strong,” “lazy” girls who are Assigned as birthmothers (Lowry 27, 67) — but there is no indication that there is any systemic prejudice against women as leaders or men as caretakers. Instead, married couples are carefully selected based on how each participant interacts with the other: “All of the factors — disposition, energy level, intelligence, and interests — had to interact perfectly...They [Jonas’ parents] balanced each other” (Lowry 62). Again, efficiency and harmony are valued over love. This leads to instead to a different sort of prejudice, one that values a certain kind of growth — and in this, Father in particular *does* appear to be transgressive.

As we’ve seen, childhood stages are closely regulated in the community, but after age twelve “age isn’t important” (Lowry 22). Each age group experiences certain aspects of childhood, something that Father says he did not have much interest in as a child. He “always participated” in the activities (Lowry 19), but he was consistently more interested in newchildren than in the childhood experiences the community arranged for him. He was as defined as an adult would be when he was still a child, already aware of his future job years and years before his Assignment. Rather than gender stereotypes, he defied age stereotypes, which are just as important in the community. It might be that Father was a strangely growing child, not breaking any rules but still

skirting community standards. As a child he was easily categorized, but he fell into the wrong category, one he had grown into too quickly; he rejected the childhood categories provided for him. This might help explain, then, why Jonas seems to be somewhat “naturally” queer, already somewhat disposed to strangeness — he is raised by a parent who is at least slightly transgressive or queerish, one who tells his son about his rather strange childhood. It is when Jonas goes beyond his father in queerishness, using and warping language far beyond Father’s subversion of age categories, that his growth becomes more alarming. It is at this point that he begins to consider love and build a much different kind of family with Gabe, a family that accepts and is defined by queer growth.

Father’s limitations as a role model are made clear when Jonas, disrupting the structure and routine of his family unit, speaks of his emotions to his parents after the designated “sharing of feelings” ritual at dinner. “Do you love me?” he asks, and his parents merely laugh, scorning him for his precision of language (“You of all people!” they tease), telling him that he has “used a generalized word, so meaningless that it’s almost become obsolete” (Lowry 159-60). Love is “meaningless” to the community because it is so difficult to define, unlike “enjoyment” and “pride in your accomplishments,” both of which Jonas’ parents insist they feel for him. This is where Jonas moves beyond his Father’s questionable (at least childhood) subversion; the care and compassion he learned from his Nurturer father is no longer enough, because The Giver has introduced him to a new kind of family, one that he applies to Gabe.

In this most important lesson, The Giver gives Jonas his favorite memory:

He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night, and snowing. There were colored lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. On a table, lighted candles stood in a polished golden holder and cast a soft,

flickering glow. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter. A golden-haired dog lay sleeping on the floor.

On the floor there were packages...a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were obviously parents, and to an older, quiet couple, man and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch.

...They hugged one another...The small child went and sat on the lap of the old woman, and she rocked him and rubbed her cheek against his. (Lowry 154)

The scene clearly depicts Christmas, but there is never any overt emphasis on religion; instead, the allure of the memory lies in the idea of family. Initially, The Giver uses this memory to introduce Jonas to the concept of ancestry, which is unknown in his and Jonas' community. Jonas asks why there were old people, when the "Old of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of Old, where they were so well cared for and respected" (Lowry 155). The Giver explains that they are Grandparents, "parents-of-the-parents," leaving Jonas puzzled, as he has never met the people who raised his own parents. The Giver tells him that this memory represents "love," the first time the word is used in the book. At first The Giver's lesson comes off as an endorsement of a traditional notion of ancestry and therefore of the heterosexual, patriarchal family structure of the past, but if that is what he intends, Jonas quickly subverts it. What The Giver describes as "a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror looking at yourself looking in a mirror" (Lowry 155) — speaking literally of the physical, biological similarities between biological ancestors and their progeny — Jonas complicates by seeing himself in two unrelated people, the first of which is The Giver himself: "I was thinking, I mean feeling, actually...I wish we could be that way, and that you could be my grandparent" (Lowry 158). Jonas rejects The Giver's emphasis on biological family by loving a totally unrelated individual (his mentor himself), which he does again that night, telling Gabe as the newchild sleeps in his room, "There could be love" (Lowry 162).

Jonas' love for The Giver and Gabe, their association with the memory of warmth and family, is indicative of a trope that often appears in modern queer literature, that of the "found family." The term refers to a collective of people who cannot or choose not to reproduce, or who have been abandoned by their (usually homophobic or transphobic) biological families. Real-life queer parenting often takes place in what Angela Jones calls "queer kinship collectives": "a couple raising kids with their sperm donor, family friends turning into parents, and *chosen family* acting as involved aunts and uncles" (Jones 257, emphasis mine). The ability to choose accepting and like-minded families provides both safety and stability for queer people, especially young queer people, and undermines traditional heterosexist notions of the nuclear family. These communities resist, often consciously, compulsory heterosexuality. They encourage "do-it-yourself approaches to insemination, birth, and documentation" (Jones 259), creating new family members with the help of chosen, unrelated family, expanding a transgressive community through further untraditional means. The creation of these found families is often directly opposed to laws that favor the heterosexual nuclear family, particularly with regards to adoption, with many family members maintaining "nonlegal" as well as "nonbio" bonds (or in some cases nonlegal and bio, or nonbio and legal bonds) with adopted children — that is, unrecognized by the state as guardians (Jones 262). This found family or "kinship collective" family setup is distinctly queer because it warps traditional notions of two-parent families, introducing the one element most often forsaken by legal and conservative family ideals: choice.

This is the kind of family that appeals to Jonas with regards to The Giver and Gabe. Emotionally ejected by his own family when his parents do not understand his notions of love, Jonas instead turns to those in whom he most sees himself. His parents were never connected to him biologically, as direct ancestry is not valued in the community, but the family unit does

maintain conservative ideals in its legal recognition. Legally, community family units are neat, predictable, and reflective of the heterosexist ideals of the American 1950's: one male parent, one female parent, one male child, one female child (all white, as *The Giver* reveals; race was eliminated in *Sameness*, leaving only a shade of pink [Lowry 119]). The community enforces such notions of family because they are efficient and easy to categorize and control. Jonas' love for *The Giver* and most especially for Gabe, on the other hand, is powerful because he chooses to make them his family. This family cannot be regulated because it is so nebulous, defined by neither law nor biology. With the introduction of love, then, Gabe's role in the narrative becomes even more powerful; his bond with Jonas now has a name — it is a name that is, as Jonas' parents point out, heard to pin down and “nearly obsolete,” but it is all the more striking for that.

What Jonas' subversive love, particularly his love for Gabe, ultimately leads to is — perhaps — revolution. His symbolic rebirth and subsequent expanded consciousness through language leads to one distinct, striking moment involving, fittingly, Father. The man who is so adept at soothing both newchildren and Jonas, who as a child was too easily categorized too early, whose strange childhood (although not, of course, nearly as strange as Jonas') provided comfort to his son, is revealed to be horrifically complacent in the community's hidden, state-sponsored violence. Jonas' society participates in eugenics — something at which *The Giver* may have been hinting when he mentioned the elimination of race and the scientists' struggle with Fiona's hair — and most strikingly in infanticide. When Father must release the smaller of two identical twins (the community does not approve of two people looking exactly the same — they would too hard to distinguish from one another and therefore to categorize), Jonas is permitted to see the tape of the ceremony. At *The Giver's* urging, he requests the tapes so he might get a glimpse of *Elsewhere*, the concept that haunts Jonas because it is so mysterious, only to find that it does

not exist as a location. What Jonas sees instead is Father injecting something into the smaller newchild's forehead, all the while using the same sing-song voice he does with Gabe: "All done," he says after the baby has died. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" (Lowry 187)

This instance of social Darwinism is infamous amongst those with a stake in children's literature. The explicit description of infanticide often rouses shock and anger in parents of the children required to read *The Giver* in elementary and middle schools, as does the revelation that directly follows it. The Giver tells Jonas that he once had a daughter, Rosemary, who had been the Receiver ten years before; she found the memories too much and applied for release, committing suicide by requesting to inject herself (Lowry 189). These sudden, shocking reveals concerning release and Elsewhere send Jonas reeling. He realizes that the things he found so painful and horrific in the memories were not, in fact, eliminated with Sameness — they were only concealed. He relates the newly dead infant to a dead boy he saw in a memory of a battlefield: "Jonas recognized the gestures and posture and expression...Once again he saw the face of the light-haired, bloodied soldier as life left his eyes" (Lowry 187-88). Earlier in the story he scolds his friends for playing "war" because the game makes light of violence, something that Sameness supposedly eliminated, but Jonas finds that violence against the innocent still exists — and that it is institutionalized.

Elsewhere is a euphemism for death, and it is perhaps the most disturbing exercise of the community's control of language — by replacing the word "death" or "murder" with a vague, often idealized concept, the community can continue its eugenic practices without raising the fear or suspicion of its citizens, even the ones (like Father and, Jonas realizes, Fiona, whose new job requires her to "release" the Old) who directly participate in it. The Giver reiterates this while Jonas cries: "Listen to me, Jonas. *They can't help it.* They know nothing...It's the life that

was created for them” (Lowry 191, emphasis in original). Without the language needed to comprehend murder and injustice — the language that is granted to only The Giver and Jonas — citizens like Father and Fiona participate in such shocking acts without realizing their harm.

The horror of the release tape and its demonstration of their peers’ complacency prompt Jonas and The Giver to devise a plan — a revolution. The Giver, finally in the company of someone who understands the horror of community-enforced release the way he does, helps Jonas determine a way to “return” the memories to the community; once the Receiver leaves the community (or, in Rosemary’s case, dies), the memories are released to the rest of the citizens. The plan is rather elaborate, involving Jonas hiding in a fruit truck during the Ceremony that December — The Giver will then explain to the community, already gathered in the auditorium, how to understand the memories that Jonas left behind, which far outnumber the ones Rosemary left and will be a much greater burden. This plan hits a snag, though; and predictably, that snag is Gabriel.

Of course, Jonas immediately ties the shocking image of “release” to Gabriel, whose growth places him in danger of extermination; he realizes that his chosen family may be in not just symbolic but mortal danger. Gabe’s strange growth threatens the community’s norms, so he is in danger of physical annihilation. This, indeed, is what the Council decides for him; when spending the night in the nursery instead of in Jonas’ room, he cries through the night instead of sleeping soundly, sealing his fate. Father tells Jonas that Gabe will be released the next day. Jonas abandons his plan and, without even stopping to say goodbye to The Giver, flees with the newchild that very night. Instead of a planned, orderly revolution, the release of the memories to the community is a consequence of Jonas’ effort to save a member of his found family — in turn complicating the narrative’s concept of revolution.

Again we return to Foucault, and in particular his view of revolution. While Jonas' society clearly represents Foucauldian power structures, it is harder to determine whether the climax of his strange growth — his flight from the community — falls along the lines Foucault would imagine for it. Foucault “finds the very idea of revolution to be erroneous insofar as it entails a large-scale social transformation radiating from a central point (the state or mode of production), rather than a detotalized proliferation of local struggles against a relational power that no one owns.” (Best 56) He sees revolution as undefinable and perhaps even impossible, as the overthrow one power system will most likely only lead to another — he dismisses the possibility of complete freedom and argues instead for “revolutionary subjectivity.” Resistance is a constant possible result of power for Foucault, but a resistance that relies on “ready-made ideas and metaphors” and undefined “struggles” (Foucault 123) is ineffective. A “Foucauldian revolution” is not an ending but a continuation of a cycle of power structures, and it does not rely on dramatics or heroics.

The result of Jonas' growth, particularly his self-realization as an individual independent of his community, seems simultaneously to meet and miss Foucault's vision revolution. Kenneth B. Kidd touches on this point in his essay “‘A’ is for Auschwitz,” pointing out that *The Giver* “echoes the classic story of the chosen child, nearly always a boy, who becomes a savior figure by sacrificing himself for the greater good,” also noting “the exceptionality of Jonas and the newchild Gabe” (Kidd 143). This is certainly true, in many ways; Jonas is chosen out of his entire community in part because of an immutable quality (“Seeing Beyond” — the ability to see colors), which also seems to be connected to a biological, physical trait (his pale eyes). This falls in line with many “chosen one” narratives in fantasy, and much of the narrative — for example, Jonas' immediate connection with the pale-eyed infant Gabe — relies on it.

As Kidd goes on to explain, however, the revolution in *The Giver* is not so simple; it is “ideologically ambivalent,” particularly within “contemporary trauma literature” (Kidd 143). It asks, like Foucault does, “whether revolution is desirable” (Foucault 122), as Jonas constantly weighs the oppression of Sameness against that of the hatred and war it eliminated. The narrative also criticizes “the privatization of trauma,” of pedagogical relationships, and of knowledge. The memories Jonas, the chosen one, receives in The Giver’s quarters — the archive — are of no real use when confined to his mind alone; his final act of heroism is to give those things that make him special — the colors he sees, the memories he obtains — to the people, to eliminate Sameness and the secret killing of innocents. When, still angry over the tape of the release, he tells The Giver that the two of them “don’t have to care about the rest of them [the community],” he immediately afterward realizes, “Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything” (Lowry 196). Therefore Jonas’ flight from the community, while reminiscent of many other fantasy narratives focusing on a chosen hero, is also a sacrifice of those heroic ideals — instead of using what could be considered his special powers, he donates them to the community in order to make the cultural memories communal again, to create a “literature of atrocity” (Kidd 144). Jonas doesn’t just use his skills to save a community; he makes those skills a community asset. He also forsakes his and The Giver’s planned, organized, dramatic plan in favor of a more haphazard one that saves Gabe.

The events of the climax themselves are similarly complex. Perhaps most significantly, the revolution Jonas incites is never clearly revealed in the narrative. Instead, Jonas’ escape is surprisingly quiet and introspective. He slips past authority without any trouble and then travels alone with Gabe, sleeping during the day to avoid the airplanes he knows are searching for him. Once the airplanes stop passing overhead, all signs of civilization vanish. What was originally a

story of dystopia turns into one of natural survival, of two children fighting the elements. The language shifts to exaltation of the natural world, Jonas has never seen before, juxtaposed with descriptions of its cruelty: “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” (Lowry 216) closely precedes Jonas’ inability to catch food and his consequent hunger, a “gnawing, painful emptiness” (Lowry 217). He has no indication of what is happening in the community behind him, only the sense that his memories are fading; he assumes that this means that they have “fallen behind him now, escaping from his protection to return to the people of his community” (Lowry 221). He senses that his former community is changing, but he never truly witnesses its fate, and the word “return” implies that the memories always truly belonged to his society rather than to himself alone; they are their story as much as they were his, again complicating his role as a solitary, revolutionary hero. Separated from that community and their memories, his journey is deeply personal and individual, focusing on his struggle to survive and to protect Gabe.

Thus Jonas’ rebirth, his and Gabe’s strange growth, culminates in perhaps the most extreme demonstration of individuality: physical survival. Jonas continues to use his special abilities, his memories, but they become less and less useful as he and Gabe go on; when it begins to snow, he can only scrounge up faint memories of warmth to transfer to Gabe. The memories, the very traits that make Jonas the “chosen one,” disappear, leaving behind only his desperation to save the newchild. In the end, *The Giver* is, as Kidd argues, “a novel of the education of the senses,” and “the privatization of pain/wisdom [the senses] does not a legitimate culture make” (Kidd 143-44). So Lowry ends Jonas’ private, institutional lessons with his mentor, instead returning wisdom to the community and thrusting Jonas into the most genuine sensual setting imaginable:

the wilderness. The representation of Jonas' sideways growth, his queerishness, shifts from heroic (merely stepping stones in his path to being the chosen one, the savior of his society) to something more physical and immediately necessary. The story is no longer magical; the memories shift from forays into the fantastical to merely symbolic representations of Jonas' growth and his love for his found family — a love which he acts out by sacrificing himself not for his community but for Gabe alone (“He no longer cared about himself” [Lowry 218]).

This new representation of the memories, their vagueness and intangibility, leads to symbolism not allowed by their strange magic earlier in the story. In fact, they come to act much like actual memories, and like language itself: Jonas becomes less and less aware of them, but their connections and influence on his character remain. As he draws closer to Elsewhere — his own, still undefined concept of Elsewhere, not the community-defined term that is only a euphemism for death — the snow grows heavier. Unable to continue riding his bike, he leaves it behind, shedding the last tangible symbol of his community to enter a new world that is dangerous and harsh and terribly real. It is no coincidence that it is snow he faces last, the very substance he encounters in the first memory The Giver gave him. This, however, is more like his second memory of snow, the one in which he learns about pain and suffering by crashing his sled; while there is no sudden crash, no shattering of his bones, he and Gabe must endure a horrible, numbing cold that tempts Jonas into lying down and simply giving up. Jonas comes across a hill and, after giving his last, “agonizingly brief” memory of warmth to Gabe (Lowry 222), begins to climb. Without the memories The Giver has given him, he uses his own: He remembers Asher and Fiona, the two objects of his early attractions, whom he loves even if they cannot love him back; he remembers The Giver, the man who gave him his rebirth, his new consciousness, and his strange growth — a growth that is not up but across time and space,

through memories and senses. In the end, it is his own memories of his odd, unique childhood, not the magical ones he left to the community, that give him the will to get the top of the hill. Here he finds a red sled, just like the one from The Giver's memories. This one, though, along with the hill on which it sits, is tangible, "not a grasping of a thin and burdensome recollection...This was something that he could keep. It was a memory of his own" (Lowry 224). He rides the sled down the hill with Gabe, "[d]ownward, downward, faster and faster," and at the bottom of the hill he sees lights and hears singing. The last two lines are famously ambiguous: "Behind him, across vast distances, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo" (Lowry 225). The narrative does not show Jonas and Gabe's rescue by the people celebrating Christmas in the village; indeed, the reader is left unsure if they are rescued at all.

In this last scene and the ones that lead up to it, Lowry connects a traditional notion of revolution — a sudden change, a repressed people finally singing — to a strange boy's quiet journey. Jonas chooses uncertainty, and he also chooses to embrace himself and his found family. He uses the skills that The Giver and his memories taught him, but he uses them outside of The Giver's quarters and even outside of the community, uses them in his own way and for his own purposes. The community no longer needs him, so his final goal is to save himself and Gabe. Even without the memories and the Seeing beyond, his strange growth and queerishness are apparent; he fights to forge his own memories, he thinks of his forbidden love for strength, he even uses "a special knowledge that was deep inside him" (Lowry 224), a vague knowledge that is never named or addressed in The Giver's lessons, to find the sled. Like Meg Murray, he realizes that his untraditional growth and attractions, the things that make him stand out, have a special power — specifically, his perverse love has a strength both revolutionary and personal,

the power both to disrupt a community's corrupt power structures and to save himself. Perhaps, as Foucault would suggest, he is leaving one set of power structures only to encounter another — but he has spent time in the netherworld, defined himself outside of both his old community and the new one he might encounter. In this way he disrupts both normative structures and Foucauldian expectations.

Conclusion

As with *A Wrinkle in Time*, there is something to be gained in reading Jonas as undefinable. *The Giver* expands our understanding of child queerishness and growth to include the revolutionary. Jonas does not simply accept his differences — if anything, he is more comfortable with himself before his experience as the Receiver. Jonas' eventual embrace of his own strange individuality involves a great deal of discomfort, in fact, so much so that even today the novel is often challenged in the classrooms, particularly for its portrayal of infanticide. It is Jonas' complicated engagement with these difficult, messy topics — as well as with his feelings of love and attraction to his male and female peers — that make his story so engaging.

There are no easy answers in *The Giver*, least of all in terms of Jonas, and this is perhaps why the narrative is so powerful. Unlike L'Engle's book, this story is not one of self-acceptance. It is a story of change, of embracing ambiguity, of engaging with and bringing to light hidden histories. It introduces a new layer to the ambiguity of childhood sexual and gender ambiguity — that of resistance, even conscious resistance. Lowry's dystopia is an exaggerated, warped version of reality, enforcing normative power structures while veiling the violence it uses to uphold those

structures, at the emotional and physical expense of those who do not fit its ideals. Jonas' self-acceptance is not only powerful because it represents positive possibilities for strange, queerish children — it is powerful because it allows its young protagonist to tackle political questions, because it recognizes how dangerous and difficult childhood individuality can be. It allows Jonas to be part of a movement, one that uses knowledge to publicly subvert restrictive, often violent norms.

This queer(ish) reading of *The Giver* opens up possibilities for new, biting revolution in children's literature, and in children themselves. Jonas' future, like Meg's, is ambiguous and entirely up to the reader's imagination. It is because of that that his effect and legacy are so strange, undefinable, and powerful.

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