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FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA  
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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**THE FAMILY IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE**

Diplomová práce

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

Olomouc 2017

### **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma „The Family in Young Adult Dystopian Literature“ vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne 4. 5. 2017

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## **Poděkování**

Mnohokrát děkuji svému vedoucímu práce Prof. PhDr. Marcelu Arbeitovi, Dr. za jeho nesmírnou vstřícnost, nezměrnou trpělivost a všechny cenné rady a připomínky.

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# Introduction

In this thesis, I focus on the theme of family in young adult dystopian literature to explore and highlight some of the challenges and contradictions of the genre, as well as its overall creative potential. Young adult literature, which is part of children's literature, is very compatible with dystopia in some ways, but it is also governed by certain enduring unwritten rules and conventions which make their synthesis rather difficult. The resulting genre is highly compelling in its conflicted, thought-provoking, but also very entertaining nature, which makes it attractive for young and adult audiences alike, but also very rewarding from the standpoint of literary analysis and criticism.

I have chosen to focus on the theme of family, as it forms a very convenient "bridge" between the genres of young adult literature and dystopia and illustrates their commonalities as well as their differences very clearly. Furthermore, it also reveals the promise as well as the problems of children's literature in literary criticism. However, doing an analysis that is both thematic and genre-focused has made my work very challenging. The thesis has three main components: the theme of family, the genre of young adult literature, and the genre of dystopian literature; therefore, my analysis can be considered as somewhat "*double-genre-thematic*." That would be precarious in its own right, but each one of these components is also significantly more complex than it seems. Dystopian literature is very difficult to define; finding a common denominator for all dystopian works, whether pertaining to form or content, is quite a task, which is why many hesitate to even call it a genre. Young adult literature has the same problem, as many point out that a genre cannot really be defined by readership only; furthermore, children's literature is overall extraordinarily "complex, and the study of [it] infinitely varied,"<sup>1</sup> as it is not only literary, but inevitably also cultural and even political, which can be just as inspiring as it is daunting. Besides that, although young adult literature shares its main conventions and ideologies with children's literature, it also has certain specifics which need to be addressed. Finally, the subject of family has important historical, sociological and ideological aspects, which are reflected in both children's

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hunt, introduction to *Understanding Children's Literature (Second Edition)*, edited by Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2. Hereafter abbreviated as Hunt.

literature and dystopia; the last one is especially relevant for children's literature, which has been perpetuating the myth of the ideal nuclear family for centuries.

Combining and connecting all these three components poses a considerable methodological challenge, as studies that are both genre and thematic are very rarely done for children's literature, let alone young adult literature. It is because works for young audiences are extremely marginalized in the academic sphere, a topic that I focus on in chapter 1. While there are many interesting essays on various topics in young adult dystopian fiction in recent collections such as *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* edited by Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz (2013) or a slightly more dated *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (2003), more comprehensive and extensive theoretical studies that would establish a solid common ground for research are still to be conducted, and therefore there are very few secondary sources to take inspiration from. It is largely because despite the extreme and still growing popularity of young adult fiction in the twenty-first century, in academic circles it is still mostly perceived as a low genre not worth any serious analysis (even more so than fiction for younger children).

By attempting to make this study as inclusive as possible, while also taking into account the wider context of classic "adult" literature, I want to prove that the opposite is true, which is another of my crucial objectives for this thesis. However, the scope of this study might not allow me to explore each of the components of the subject in its entire complexity, which is a downside of my intentionally all-encompassing approach. Therefore, this thesis is by no means meant to be exhaustive, and should be rather considered as a starting point for further, more elaborate analysis of the young adult dystopian genre; one of its goals is helping to establish a common ground for further investigation of children's literature in general, especially genre literature, and presenting a possible template for future study.

In chapter 1, I outline some of the basic concepts of children's and young adult literature, commenting on some of the chief problems of their literary criticism and factors that need to be considered for their analysis. Chapter 2 takes a closer look at dystopian literature, putting it into the wider literary context of utopian fiction; moreover, it explores the connection between children's literature and utopia and young adult literature and

dystopia, as well as some of the issues and contradictions the young adult dystopian genre faces. In chapter 3, I focus on the complex subject of family, mainly the concept of the nuclear family, its history, and especially its ideology, which has been promoted in children's literature for centuries. I also comment on the depiction of family in the major dystopian novels of the twentieth century; as dystopia is also ideological, the depictions of family in children's fiction and dystopian fiction have more in common than expected.

In chapters 4 and 5 respectively, I explore in great detail the depiction of family in two popular and thought-provoking young adult dystopian series by contemporary American authors, using the methods of close reading as well as ideological deconstruction. The first of them is *The Giver Quartet* (1993-2012) by Lois Lowry; the second one is Neal Shusterman's *Unwind Dystology* (2007-2014). Although very different in form, content, tone and style, both series are predominantly concerned with the theme of family, and both also use YA dystopia to its full potential, demonstrating the fascinating, contradictory, intriguing nature of the genre which is certainly well-worth analyzing.

# 1. Selected Issues of Literature for Children and Young Adults

In this chapter, I want to provide a brief insight into selected issues of children's and young adult literature and their criticism, as well as introduce some of the basic concepts relevant for this thesis. Children's literature is widely ignored in the academic sphere, commonly thought of as completely separate from the entire literary body, as if it was not even "real" literature, and young adult fiction specifically is often scorned as commercial "garbage." As a lifelong children's literature<sup>2</sup> enthusiast and defender, I would like to challenge these views, which are, in my opinion, uninformed and condescending; my appreciation for children's literature was one of the main reasons why I have chosen the present theme.

Adult literature is often implied to be inherently more intellectually and aesthetically valuable than children's literature; it is generally expected that every reader will eventually "grow away from"<sup>3</sup> children's books, just like they grow away from childhood itself, and move to "real," adult literature. However, my own experience has been different. In my teenage years, I never really crossed any line from children's books to adult ones, simultaneously reading Jacqueline Wilson and Jane Austen at middle school, and enjoying both immensely. As an adult, I easily returned to young adult (or YA, as the term is commonly abbreviated) books after many years of reading adult literature almost exclusively, and again thoroughly enjoyed their heart-breaking and nerve-racking intensity, relatability and straightforward style. Although I always regarded children's books primarily as an entertainment, this has not prevented me from frequently noticing some unexpectedly profound elements hiding beneath their deceptively simple style, and I appreciated these as well.

Somehow, though, either as a child or an adult, I have never felt the need to *compare* the quality of adult and children's books; after all, I read them for different reasons and expected them to give me a different experience. It is not hard to imagine why comparing children's and adult literature would often create "unnecessary

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<sup>2</sup> As young adult literature belongs to children's literature, whenever I will refer to "children's literature" or "children's fiction" in this thesis, this automatically includes young adult literature as well, unless directly specified.

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, 2.

problems”<sup>4</sup> for children’s literature analysis; children’s literature is intentionally written in a simpler way than adult literature, and so it is obviously “bound *by definition* to emerge as *lesser*.”<sup>5</sup> A much more constructive approach to children’s books is to recognize them as innately different from adult ones, exploring different stories in different ways and fulfilling different needs. They are written in a distinct style for a distinct readership, and therefore need to be judged by their own criteria and compared within their category. Comparing the skills of children’s authors with adult ones is also rather meaningless, as these two essentially have very different jobs. First and foremost, children’s authors need to take into consideration that they write for an audience with different life and literary experiences than they themselves have, and they need to be careful not to miss the mark either by being too simplistic and banal or too obscure and irrelevant; they need to take their imagined reader seriously, but also need to be able to empathize with the fact that the reader is at a different life stage.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it could be said they face one *more* crucial challenge if they want to do their job well, not less.

The fact that children’s literature is different from adult literature, however, does not mean it is not real literature. Peter Hunt suggests that even if children’s books were only “a matter of private delight,” it would already indicate “that they are real literature – if ‘literature’ consists of texts which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers”<sup>7</sup>; but whenever these books get a chance to be properly analyzed, they often prove to be much more than that even from the standpoint of literary theory. Children’s fiction’s inherent difference from adult literature does not mean that it cannot be analyzed by the same or similar means. Of course, some of children’s works have much lower aesthetic quality than others, but that can be said about adult books as well; and children’s classics, as well as many of the “trendy,” popular novels such as dystopias, very often hold their ground when subjected to close reading or archetypal, psychoanalytical, or feminist criticism. As Charles Sarland suggests, “[p]opular texts too are... open to more than one reading,”<sup>8</sup> and those readings are often “contradictory.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hunt, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See Otakar Chaloupka and Vladimír Nezkusil, *Vybrané kapitoly z teorie dětské literatury I* (Albatros, Praha, 1973), 48-49. Hereafter abbreviated as Chaloupka and Nezkusil.

<sup>7</sup> Hunt, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Sarland, “Critical tradition and ideological positioning,” in *Understanding Children’s Literature (Second Edition)*, edited by Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 44-45. Hereafter abbreviated as Sarland.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 43.

However, even if one insisted that children's literature is aesthetically insignificant and it is meaningless to study simple entertainment for readers who would not appreciate any transcending value even if it was present, Hunt points out other crucial factors to consider, related to the fact that children's literature has always been extremely widely read by generations of readers at an impressionable age:

... we can reflect on the direct or indirect influence that children's books have, and have had, socially, culturally, and historically. They are overtly important educationally and commercially – with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority of those in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development.<sup>10</sup>

Ideology is one of the main factors that needs to be taken into consideration when studying children's literature, as children's literature is without a doubt intrinsically ideological, and the often inconspicuous, but all-pervasive ideologies can impact young readers very deeply and permanently shape their view of the world. Here, ideology will mean, as proposed by Charles Sarland, as "all espousal, assumption, consideration and discussion of social and cultural values, whether overt or covert"<sup>11</sup>; and "[a]t the heart of any consideration of ideology will be a consideration of moral purpose and didacticism."<sup>12</sup> Its inherent didacticism is also the main reason why children's literature is still considered a domain of educators; however, it is a rather dubious argument as other didactic kinds of literature, such as dystopias, are not banished to educational departments.

This firm connection between children's literature and ideology is based in history: "Just as children's books are part of the ideological structures of the cultures of the world, so their history is constructed ideologically."<sup>13</sup> History also explains why children's literature is traditionally dismissed as primarily didactic and low-quality.

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<sup>10</sup> Hunt, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Sarland, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hunt, 4.

Literature meant specifically for children has first emerged during the Pre-romantic and Romantic movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with the development of the concept of childhood itself. In the Pre-romantic and Romantic eras, a child first began to be considered as different from the adult, an innocent being with special needs who also deserved a special kind of education/entertainment; consequently, literature intentionally written for children soon started to be published. Its character was democratic, as it was meant to be read by all children, even those who had not had access to literature before, which was related to the emergence of the middle-class; originally, only children from higher classes had access to reading.<sup>14</sup> This literature was not, however, particularly artistic; it was rather a “derivate”<sup>15</sup> of adult’s literature, plagued by insufficient understanding of children’s psyche; the philosophers and authors of that time assumed that “a child is a smaller, and therefore a simpler person, who consequently needs also artistically ‘smaller’ and simpler literature.”<sup>16</sup> That resulted in simplified, uninspired, preaching style, primitive thematic structures, one-dimensional characters, etc. The main purpose of children’s literature was pragmatic and didactic rather than artistic.<sup>17</sup> One of its main functions was the promotion of middle-class ideology, especially “concerning the family and the child’s status within it,”<sup>18</sup> as will be elaborated upon in chapter 3. Basically, at least in the Western culture, children’s literature was a tool of the state ideology to help raising good, loyal, obedient, middle-class Christian citizens; although works of indisputable aesthetic quality, such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), did not take long to emerge.<sup>19</sup>

As Sarland writes, “[i]n eighteenth- and nineteenth-century didacticism the promotion of values... had often taken the overt form of direct preaching, and the values to be promoted were an issue.”<sup>20</sup> This is no longer such a problem, although children’s literature still promotes ideals and values that are considered worth to be passed onto new generations. Sarland compiles some of the values as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> See Chaloupka and Nezkusil, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children’s Literature*, vol. 53, *Children’s Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15. Hereafter abbreviated as Alston.

<sup>19</sup> See Chaloupka and Nezkusil, 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Sarland, 33.

F. R. Leavis (1955) talks of ‘intelligence’, ‘vitality’, ‘sensibility’, ‘depth, range and subtlety in the presentment of human experience’, ‘achieved creation’, ‘representative significance’. Inglis (1981) talks of ‘sincerity’, ‘dignity’, ‘integrity’, ‘honesty’, ‘authenticity’, ‘fulfilment’, ‘freedom’, ‘innocence’, ‘nation’, ‘intelligence’, ‘home’, ‘heroism’, ‘friendship’, ‘history’. And Hunt tells us that the virtues of Arthur Ransome are ‘family, honour, skill, good sense, responsibility and mutual respect’, and ‘the idea of place’ (Hunt 1992a: 86).<sup>21</sup>

According to Sarland, “[a]ll of these terms and formulations are offered... as if they are essentially unproblematic, and they are thus rendered as common sense, naturalised and hidden in the discourse, and not raised for examination.”<sup>22</sup> That is arguable in a few cases; in this thesis, I use Ann Alston’s theory presented in *The Family in English Children’s Literature* (2008) to show that the traditional depictions of home and family, some of the most enduring, unquestioned and crucial values of children’s literature, might be seen as increasingly problematic in the twenty and twenty-first centuries when the nuclear family in particular has continued to undergo many radical changes.

However, even if most of the abovementioned values are indeed uncontroversial, it does not mean that the discussion of ideology has stopped:

By the 1970s the focus of the debate in Britain and the United States had changed to questions of character representation and character role, and analysis consisted in showing how children’s fiction represented some groups at the expense of others, or how some groups were negatively represented in stereotypical terms. The argument was that, by representing certain groups in certain ways, children’s books were promoting certain values – essentially white, male and middle-class – and that the books were thus class-biased, racist and sexist.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sarland, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33.

This debate about representation of class, race and gender is still going strong, and is very much connected to reader response. While there are many opponents, especially among laymen, who will be adamant that exploring politics in children's fiction is meaningless, as children surely " '... won't see that in it' ,"<sup>24</sup> these are the same people who will likely agree that childhood is a crucial phase for the development of an individual and that children are "vulnerable, susceptible, and must be protected from manipulation,"<sup>25</sup> which makes their dismissive view rather paradoxical. A contrary view is important as well: there is evidence that many children read books much more critically than most adults assume and often do not accept their underlying ideologies blindly; instead, they are able to judge them from the point of view of their own experience, and find discrepancies between what they read and what they live. Alternatively, they reject the dominant interpretation and create their own meaning which serves them better.<sup>26</sup> This presents many young readers as much more intellectually capable than is generally believed, which also disproves the view that analysis of children's literature is useless; in fact, the deconstructive approach to the texts will be useful for the vulnerable and the critical reader alike. This sociologically-political debate is certainly not trivial and has tangible outcomes, such as the gradual increase and changes in the representation of female protagonists in YA genre fiction.

After all, one of the proofs that the debate about representation is not meaningless is the very existence of YA literature. Until the late 1960s, teenagers were highly "underrepresent[ed]"<sup>27</sup> in children's books, and therefore had no desire to even read them. As the youth started to become a powerful economic force, especially in the United States, the publishers began to recognize the potential of catering to their needs, and novels about them quickly gained popularity; this was also related to the spread of big commercial bookstores.<sup>28</sup> However, this is also why YA literature as a whole tends to be dismissed as "consumer goods," which is unfair.

So, what constitutes a work as "young adult"? As Patty Campbell sums up, a prototypical YA novel is a coming-of-age narrative about the transition between

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<sup>24</sup> Hunt, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Sarland, 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>28</sup> See Antero Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*, vol. 4, Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), 6-7. Hereafter abbreviated as Garcia.

childhood and adulthood. It must be narrated from the young protagonist's perspective, "with all the limitations of understanding this implies,"<sup>29</sup> not retrospectively from an adult's point of view, which is often the decisive difference between a YA novel and an adult coming-of-age novel; also, in the YA novel, "the narration moves swiftly to a point where the protagonist has an epiphany that matures him or her in some vital way and, as a manifestation of that inner change, solves a problem that has been central to the plot,"<sup>30</sup> which is indeed the case for most of the dystopian novels I analyze in chapters 4 and 5, where the characters' new maturity tends to be tied to acts that change the flawed societies they live in.

As for the thematic content, YA fiction is concerned with problems that are relevant for contemporary adolescents, such as finding one's place in the world and creating one's identity, dealing with family, romance, friends and enemies, school, authority figures, etc.<sup>31</sup> As part of children's literature, YA fiction is liable to its main ideologies and conventions, such as the "rule" of a happy ending, or at the very least a hopeful conclusion.<sup>32</sup> While YA fiction tends to have a more complicated narrative, thematic and stylistic structure than literature for younger children, it is usually simpler than adult literature. In comparison to literature for preteen children, which is referred to as "middle-grade," YA often deals with "darker" subjects like sex and violence, but usually in a somewhat less graphic manner than adult fiction. According to Campbell, "[w]ithin these parameters a freedom to experiment has led to an enormous range of tone and style."<sup>33</sup> Although its predecessor in terms of the year of publication, Campbell names Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) as a "prototype"<sup>34</sup> of YA fiction, which reveals another facet of children's fiction in general: it has "the double reader: adult/child,"<sup>35</sup> and the meanings each of them will find in the work will be changeable and dependent on their life experience as well as the phase of their psychological development.

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<sup>29</sup> Patty Campbell, *Campbell's Scoop: Reflections on Young Adult Literature*, no. 38, Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), 75. Hereafter abbreviated as Campbell.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Patty Campbell proposes that "[t]here is no requirement for hope, or even cheerfulness, in the YA novel" (75), I strongly disagree with this statement; I have personally never encountered a YA novel that would be utterly bleak and hopeless, which suggests it is highly atypical at least for contemporary fiction.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell, 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Hamida Bosmajian, "Reading the unconscious: Psychoanalytical criticism," in *Understanding Children's Literature (Second Edition)*, edited by Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 103.

As the prototypicality of *The Catcher in the Rye* indicates, teenage fiction has been traditionally associated with realism, especially in the United States.<sup>36</sup> However, in the recent decades, there has been a huge boom of YA speculative fiction. Speculative fiction is “a broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural, fantastical, or futuristic elements,”<sup>37</sup> such as fantasy, sci-fi, horror, dystopia, etc., and YA novels very often combine these with other genres like romance and adventure. The first craze was caused by the Harry Potter series (1997-2007), a fantasy (which has made the YA genre mainstream in general, even though it is rarely even labelled as YA), which was followed by the paranormal romance of the *Twilight* series (2005-2008) and the dystopia of *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010). Unfortunately, even though its association with speculative fiction has made the YA genre incredibly popular, it has also likely strengthened its view as inferior. Although popular forms are not as marginalized in the academic sphere as they used to be, they are often still regarded as “superficial entertainment”<sup>38</sup> by many critics; when this is coupled with other prejudices against YA literature, it is easy to imagine why YA genre fiction, such as dystopian fiction, tends to be perceived as “the low-person on the literary totem pole”<sup>39</sup>; in other words, as literary “trash.” While it is true that both YA and speculative fiction tend to be formulaic, which can be very noticeable when they are coupled, there is still a lot room for creativity and experimentation even within the established boundaries, which is why the genre should not be dismissed in a blanket manner.

P. L. Thomas admits that “[t]exts can often struggle under the some times contradictory weights of popularity and artistic merit,” but he also argues that YA fiction “speak[s] to the greater human condition, and not just to the specific teen experience,”<sup>40</sup> as evident by the fact that it has “increasingly been embraced by adult readers, adult movie goers, educators, and literary critics.”<sup>41</sup> Antero Garcia again directly connects this

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<sup>36</sup> See Campbell, 11-19.

<sup>37</sup> “Speculative fiction,” Dictionary.com, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/speculative-fiction>.

<sup>38</sup> Sean P. Connors, “I Try to Remember Who I Am and Who I Am Not: The Subjugation of Nature and Women in *The Hunger Games*,” in *The Politics of Panem: Challenging Genres*, edited by Sean P. Connors, vol. 6, Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 138. Hereafter abbreviated as Connors.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>40</sup> P. L. Thomas, “Preface: Young Adult Literature Comes of Age: The Blurring of Genre in Popular Entertainment,” in Antero Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*, vol. 4, Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), xi. Hereafter abbreviated as Thomas.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xi.

to the Harry Potter series, suggesting “it was largely the transitional nature of the prose and content in J.K. Rowling’s books that helped turn young adult literature into something that even adults openly embrace.”<sup>42</sup> Many adults that picked the series up out of curiosity found out that they enjoyed it a lot more than they would have expected from a “kid’s book,” and those who started reading it as children finished it as adults and often have continued seeking this genre afterwards. This has very real consequences on the YA reader demographics: statistics show that almost three quarters of the US readership nowadays consists of adults,<sup>43</sup> which Garcia rightly calls “staggering.”<sup>44</sup>

That is another reason why children’s literature, including YA, should be far from being perceived solely as an interest of educators. It is necessary to find the answers as to why it has such an appeal to the adult audience; popular books are popular for good reasons, and their popularity could say something about society in general. I propose it is connected to the literature’s escapism. Children’s literature does, and should have, a high entertainment and escapist value. A child is relatively vulnerable and powerless and often comes into conflict with the adult world, and reading fiction is a form of escape from all the anxieties of living in the world that the child has only just began learning to navigate. The child/adolescent protagonists of the books often begin as helpless, but end up as heroes; during a cathartic journey, they moves from a bad situation to a hopeful one, coming to a better understanding of the world and people around them in the process.<sup>45</sup> At this day and age, it is certainly not only children who find the real world of endless possibilities and complexities confusing and are soothed by taking a break in fictional worlds where the “right” values are promoted and the protagonists usually end up wiser than they started, having accomplished something meaningful by their courageous efforts. Children’s literature also has more reliable, stable and clearer patterns and schemas than adult literature, and their repetitiveness and relative simplicity, along with a frequent use of the monomythical archetype, can prove rather comforting for the adult reader. As such, the increasing popularity of literature for children and young adults could be even perceived as a sort of revolt against the uncertainties and anxieties of postmodernity.

As Garcia suggests, though, the adult readership in turn influences the reading, which might be causing the YA literature to become progressively darker and more

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<sup>42</sup> Garcia, 16.

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See Chaloupka and Nezkusil, 43.

graphic and be directly connected to the popularity of the bleak dystopian settings, which are likely also reflecting the unsettling nature of contemporary society, “point[ing] to a radically different and violent future.”<sup>46</sup> The line between YA and adult literature is probably going to become increasingly fuzzy and there will be a need for new definitions and new subjects of study.

Most of the issues that I have mentioned will be further examined in connection to the genre of dystopia and the theme of family, as well as the concrete works I have chosen for my analysis.

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<sup>46</sup> Garcia, 3.

## 2. Dystopian Literature

In this chapter, I will look closely on the general features of dystopian literature, placing it in the wider context of utopian writing. I will briefly examine the history of this highly intriguing branch of speculative fiction, as well as its defining characteristic(s), before moving on to the specifics of YA dystopian writing. In the first section, my chief source of theory is Fátima Vieira's comprehensive essay "The concept of utopia" in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010); in the second, it is mainly Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's introduction of their jointly edited essay collection *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003).

### 2.1 Characteristics of Dystopian Writing

Before discussing specific topics in dystopian literature, such as family, it is necessary to establish what it means for a work to be called "dystopian." Nowadays, dystopia is very commonly referred to as a "genre," and I will also occasionally do so for simplification, but as this chapter will reveal, this label is for many reasons inaccurate. It is important to realize this, as critics of YA dystopian fiction may point out that it oftentimes does not fulfill the genre conventions, rather placing emphasis on adventure, romance or coming of age elements, while using the dystopian setting only as an exciting backdrop, frequently also employing elements of fantasy. To understand fully what the term dystopia actually signifies and why it is acceptable to call a whole large body of writing dystopian, it will be very helpful to first define its place in the long and complex tradition of utopian writing – i.e., a writing that is primarily concerned with critical depiction of societies, presenting an ideal system which is placed in opposition to a non-ideal one, exploring new possibilities of societal improvement by means of fiction.

The word "utopia" was coined by Thomas More in 1516. It was the title of his fictional travel narrative about an isolated island (called Utopia) inhabited by a perfect society. More first introduced the narrative form which became associated with the utopian writing as well as the new name for this kind of literature, a wordplay on ancient Greek-based neologisms *utopia* (non-place) and *eutopia* (good place), pronounced the same, forming tension between the dual concept of a place which is both ideal and non-

existent.<sup>47</sup> However, More certainly did not begin the literary tradition which we now call “utopian”; his *Utopia* was just another contribution to an ancient “tradition of thought that is founded on the consideration, by means of fantasy, of alternative solutions to reality,”<sup>48</sup> dating as far back as to Plato’s *The Republic* (around 380 BCE).

Numerous criteria suggest themselves to identify a work as utopian. Fátima Vieira presents four historically considered features: content, form, function, and more atypically, a basic desire or energy. As for the content, the reader would be expected to find the imagined, utopian place to be a positive example of society; this criterion turns out to be questionable, as the notion of what is good or not shifts according to the “prevailing ideology”<sup>49</sup> or even the subjective view of the reader – after all, one person’s dream might be another’s nightmare. To further complicate things, Hintz and Ostry point out to the fact that “perspectives can change within a single work, as seemingly ideal societies are exposed as dystopian, or characters disagree about the ideality of their society.”<sup>50</sup> (As section 4.1.1 and 4.2.1 will reveal, this certainly happens in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry.) Therefore, content does not necessarily define a work as utopian. As for the function, a possible defining feature would be “the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action.”<sup>51</sup> However, as this is only relevant to political utopias, pushing a political agenda is not crucial for works to be called utopian either. Similarly, if one wanted to establish a work as utopian based on the “literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized,”<sup>52</sup> the default form would then be More’s travel narrative, which is too limiting a view: in words of Hintz and Ostry, “It is impossible to rely on genre... since the form of utopian works varies.”<sup>53</sup> It could be said that a work which is “utopian” in the narrower sense of the term, i.e., depicting a positive society, tends to be overall devoid of conflict, and therefore rather static and descriptive in form, while a “dystopian” work, focusing on a negative example to fight against, is associated with the form of a novel, and is highly compatible e.g., with science fiction.

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<sup>47</sup> See Fátima Vieira, “The concept of utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5. Hereafter abbreviated as Vieira.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>50</sup> Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., introduction to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 29, *Children’s Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3. Hereafter abbreviated as Hintz and Ostry.

<sup>51</sup> Vieira, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 3.

Having dismissed all the aforementioned criteria, Vieira finally chooses “the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in”<sup>54</sup> as the decisive characteristic of utopian writing. This is the most inclusive feature, identifying as utopian a great number of works driven by “the principle energy of utopia: hope.”<sup>55</sup> Rather than a literary tradition defined by form, content, or reader response, Vieira thus concludes that utopia is at core “a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, focusing only on dystopian literature, M. Keith Booker discards its notion of a distinctive genre but rather describes it as “a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit”<sup>57</sup>; he places it in a large tradition of literature concerned with social and political criticism, but specifies it by two features: “dialogue with utopian idealism”<sup>58</sup> and the method of so-called “defamiliarization”: “[B]y focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable.”<sup>59</sup> This practice of “making the familiar unfamiliar”<sup>60</sup> is of course typical for most kinds of fiction, but it is especially prominent and important in dystopia; after all, allegory and criticism have always been allies.

Dystopia was born out of two eighteenth-century literary sub-genres of utopia: satirical utopia and anti-utopia. The age of Enlightenment was marked by overwhelming belief in human predisposition; many, however, distrusted this, fearing that such an overconfident attitude “would inevitably lead to his [man’s] fall,”<sup>61</sup> and presented in their satirical writings the uglier side of human nature (e.g., Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels*, 1726).<sup>62</sup> The form of anti-utopia uses the same narrative techniques as utopia, but “points... in a completely opposite direction,” embracing skepticism towards utopian idealism: “If utopia is about hope, and satirical utopia is about distrust, anti-utopia is

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<sup>54</sup> Vieira, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>57</sup> M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3. Hereafter abbreviated as *Dystopian Literature*.

<sup>58</sup> *Dystopian Literature*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Garcia, 70-71.

<sup>61</sup> Vieira, 15.

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, 15-16.

clearly about total disbelief.”<sup>63</sup> The first person to use the neologism “dystopia” (*dys* meaning “bad, abnormal, diseased”<sup>64</sup>) was John Stuart Mill in his parliamentary speech in 1868, but it became widely employed only in the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup> The term has been used in reference “to the idea of utopia gone wrong,”<sup>66</sup> although other names such as “negative utopia, regressive utopia, inverse utopia or nasty utopia”<sup>67</sup> have been proposed as well. Dystopian authors use the conventions of euechronia, subtype of utopia from the last decades of the nineteenth century, whose authors were “imagining what the same place – the place where the utopist lives – will be like in another time – the future,”<sup>68</sup> but dystopian authors of the twentieth century have leaned toward the pessimistic view “that things will turn out badly.”<sup>69</sup>

Such attitude became prevalent in the twentieth century, marked by “man’s disappointment – and even incredulity – at the perception of his own nature,”<sup>70</sup> after people were confronted with the horrors brought by the technological and scientific progress they had put so much hopes into. Its pitfalls were first fully demonstrated by the massacre of World War One, and even more so by the disclosure of all the atrocities of World War Two, as well as the odious realities of totalitarian regimes that had promised safety and happiness. Consequently, the two main topics of dystopian literature have become both totalitarianism and the rise of science and technology, which can be abused to help the oppressive regimes gain control over populations.<sup>71</sup>

These themes were first explored in three defining dystopian texts, all of which have since become classics, establishing a new literary tradition followed by dozens of authors. The first one is *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, which cautions against the dehumanizing impact of the misuse of science, rationality and technology, and potential negative effects of the socialist ideology of the Bolshevik Revolution. The second is Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), at the same time supporting and subverting the theories presented in Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), by

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<sup>63</sup> Vieira, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory Claeys, “The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 107. Hereafter abbreviated as Claeys.

<sup>66</sup> Vieira, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

depicting a consumerist society entirely focused on pleasure provided by drugs, shallow entertainment and casual sex; science and technology controls lives and minds of the population by genetic engineering and psychological conditioning, employed to free people from any deep emotions and keep them in a constant numbing state of “happiness.” The third crucial dystopia is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, describing a totalitarian state ruled by the power-hungry, oppressive Party that controls people’s lives by constant surveillance, manipulation of history and language, and re-directing or distorting their natural impulses to serve its ends.

As demonstrated by these canonical texts, while utopia presents a dream to attain, dystopia shows a nightmare to avoid; it is “a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or... a satire of utopian aspirations which attempts to show up their fallacies.”<sup>72</sup> In the face of the twentieth century developments, utopian visions suddenly seemed like foolish or even dangerous delusions that needed to be exposed. The rise of the totalitarian regimes also brought forth the idea that “the utopian impulse was itself inherently dystopian”<sup>73</sup>: because human behavior is inherently imperfect, the endeavor to create a perfect society implicates that most people will have to be forced and dominated to behave differently from the norm, and that “inexorably results in some form of police state”<sup>74</sup> – dystopia then works as a “rhetorical reduction ad absurdum of utopian philosophy.”<sup>75</sup>

Although this obviously results in rather bleak visions, dystopias’ chief objective is not to evoke feelings of hopelessness in the reader (in contrast with post-apocalyptic fiction); in fact, the “dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission.”<sup>76</sup> Although reader response by itself does not define works as utopian or dystopian, dystopian literature is still highly “didactic and moralistic: images of the future are put forward as real possibilities, because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, dystopian authors expect

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<sup>72</sup> Claeys, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz, eds., *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9. Hereafter abbreviated as Basu, Broad and Hintz.

<sup>76</sup> Vieira, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

that the readers will be scared into action when confronted with their future predictions of doom that are entirely possible, but not yet inevitable. It is, therefore, crucial to show that despite all its flaws, there is still hope for humanity. If the authors only left the readers with despair, the readers would end up feeling resigned to their inevitable fate, deciding that nothing could be done. However, the authors of dystopias need to convince their readers that although the threat is imminent and serious, the future is still in their hands and the terrifying development can be avoided if they take action. The readers must realize that while a heaven-like society is most likely beyond their reach, they still need to be “committed to the construction of a better one”<sup>78</sup> to avoid descent into hell. That is why utopias and dystopias are definitely not opposites, as they might appear at first sight; although choosing different strategies to achieve it, they both share the same “desire for a better life”<sup>79</sup> at their core. As Jack Zipes puts it, “[u]topian and dystopian literature form a great discourse about hope.”<sup>80</sup> As will soon become clear, this connects them with children’s literature in a major way.

For further discussion about the role of family in dystopia, it is also important to familiarize oneself with the related concept of heterotopia. Vieira offers this definition:

Heterotopian spaces are spaces that present an order which is completely different – even opposite – to that of real spaces. Within the context of dystopian literature, heterotopias represent a kind of a haven for the protagonists, and are very often to be found in their memories, in their dreams, or in places which, for some reason, are out of the reach of the invigilation system which normally prevails in those societies.<sup>81</sup>

Such memories or dreams are frequently related to the lost or distant concept of a happy family – the “ideal space” that the protagonists of dystopias are longing for and striving to create is markedly often a space where a family can live safely and peacefully. As

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<sup>78</sup> Vieira, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>80</sup> Jack Zipes, “Foreword: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Quest for Hope,” in Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 29, *Children’s Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xi.

<sup>81</sup> Vieira, 18.

illustrated in the next chapter, that is common for classic dystopias, and virtually omnipresent in YA dystopias, as will be elaborated upon in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

## 2.2 Dystopia in Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature and dystopia are highly compatible in some aspects; inevitably clashing in others. The agreements as well as the contradictions will become apparent throughout this thesis and manifest on the theme of family to a high degree.

One of the primary features that connects dystopian fiction with literature for children and young adults is their inherent didacticism and ideological core. Dystopia, with its “critique of existing social conditions or political systems” and “warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism,”<sup>82</sup> is innately moralistic and didactic, and always reflecting the prevailing ideology in one way or another. Similarly, “all children’s literature is inescapably didactic,”<sup>83</sup> as “ideology is an inevitable, untameable and largely uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children”<sup>84</sup> – children’s literature is always, whether the authors are fully aware of it or not, promoting certain values that are considered positive in contemporary society. It is therefore easily understandable why “[c]ombined with children’s and young adult literature, it [dystopia] can be a powerful teaching tool.”<sup>85</sup>

Dystopian literature can be an entertaining and stimulating thought-exercise for young readers, inspiring them to reflect on various practices in the world around them and topics such as what humanity means and how it can be influenced and distorted by various forms of conditioning; the possible implications of genetic modification or various advances in technology; social stratification and class system as tools of power; the impact of environmental destruction, etc. By reading classic utopias, children and adolescents can also reflect on the changes in perception of what has been regarded as

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<sup>82</sup> *Dystopian Literature*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Margaret Meek, introduction to *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1996), 11.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Hollindale, “Ideology and the Children’s Book,” in *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by Peter Hunt (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004), accessed April 23, 2017, Library Genesis, <http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=702BB24F12830BFD873535AB65CCEA46>, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 7.

desirable in different historical stages, or consider how quickly can a utopia turn into a dystopia. To sum up, dystopian and utopian literature can produce a highly fruitful discussion in class as well as outside of it.

However, escapism as just as important a function of children's literature as didacticism, and dystopian literature can amply fulfill both of those needs at the same time: "Fantasy can also mirror and criticize reality, forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it."<sup>86</sup> YA dystopia can be considered a rather "soft" version of the genre, never veering towards an excessively (or openly) essayistic style, which is often the case with adult dystopias.<sup>87</sup> While classic dystopias are also highly captivating narratives with a strong conflict between the powerless individual and the all-powerful society, the authors of YA dystopias are even more focused on engaging and exciting the reader. They achieve this goal by combining dystopia with popular forms all young readers know and love, such as the *Bildungsroman*, adventure, or romance,<sup>88</sup> which all offer "a degree of wish-fulfillment,"<sup>89</sup> and therefore are very pleasurable to read. Such a "soft" variant of classic dystopia might be considered an ideal introduction to the genre for young readers who are just beginning to grapple with the complex moral topics dystopias explore, but it also causes many issues which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

As Hintz and Ostry note, there is a clear division when it comes to utopianism in children's literature: utopias are prevalent in literature for younger children, while dystopias are much more frequent in young adult literature.<sup>90</sup> Significantly, a huge number of children's books have a utopian spark in one way or another: it likely stems from the Romantic image of childhood as inherently utopian, "a space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility."<sup>91</sup> The nineteenth century idea of children as "innocent and pure... emblems of hope and the future, capable of converting adults to a better way of life" is to this day, very remarkably, "one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the Western world."<sup>92</sup> Hintz and Ostry point out that real children are

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<sup>86</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 6.

<sup>87</sup> A prime example would be "*the book*" in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; while essential for the story, it effectively stops the narrative for about thirty pages, revealing the true, primarily essayistic nature of the novel.

<sup>88</sup> See Basu, Broad and Hintz, 6-8.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 9.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

significantly more complicated and troubled beings than their default literary image would suggest, and that “[n]o child knows utopia” – but in utopian literature for children (such as Eleanor H. Porter’s *Pollyanna*, 1913), it is as if the pure, uncorrupted child himself or herself was the very spark of hope that has the ability to transform the problem-ridden society, people and spaces around him or her just by being who he or she is; by showing the adults who they originally were and who they can again become.

The portrayal and function of teenagers in dystopia is also partially influenced by the Romantic ideology: just like children in utopias, teenagers also “often save the world from destruction”, and in the process they “reverse[] the hierarchy in which real children and young adults are at the bottom.”<sup>93</sup> They become “[a]gents of hope,” empowered to “embrace their ability to lead.”<sup>94</sup> Hintz and Ostry point out that what both children’s and young adult literature and utopian and dystopian literature have in common is being subversive: children’s literature often exposes the failings of the adult world and utopian literature uncovers the imperfections of society and its practices in general,<sup>95</sup> which makes these kinds of literature highly symbiotic in their potential for social criticism. Unlike children, though, teenagers are seen as dark, truly subversive and rebellious force, “outsiders in a world gone mad, sick, or in some terrible way disabled... Throughout the various YA dystopian novels one major trope that appears is a contested grasp of power between youth and established adult authority.”<sup>96</sup> Scott Westerfeld, the author of a popular YA dystopian *Uglies* series (2005-2007), regards this as a metaphor of the perceived everyday reality of young people: “Teenagers’ lives are defined by rules, and in response they construct their identities through confrontations with authority, large and small. All this leaves teens highly interested in issues of control.”<sup>97</sup>

Related to this is a crucial element that sets YA dystopian novels apart from children’s utopias, namely the fact that dystopia generally “mingles well with the coming-of-age novel, which features a loss of innocence.”<sup>98</sup> While not all adult dystopian novels fall into the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, a substantial number of them does; just like the teenager, the adult in a dystopian novel also discloses “the lie, the secret and unsavory

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<sup>93</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>96</sup> Garcia, 71.

<sup>97</sup> Scott Westerfeld, “Teens and Dystopias,” Scott Westerfeld, September 13, 2012, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://scottwesterfeld.com/blog/2012/09/teens-and-dystopias/>.

<sup>98</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 9.

workings of the society,” which brings about “traumatic social and personal awakening,” a process that is commonly associated with adolescence, for which “dystopia can act as a powerful metaphor.”<sup>99</sup> All young adult novels are coming-of-age novels, so the genres are highly compatible in this respect. In adult dystopian novels, such coming of age is mostly psychological and spiritual, but it is often somewhat hindered and frequently comes to a tragic end. In YA dystopias, the transition from childhood to maturity can be both figurative and literal, and while just as painful and payed dearly for, it is usually more successful.

This brings us to a major incompatibility of YA and dystopian literatures: when it comes to literature for children, one of the chief conventions is giving the story a happy ending, or at the very least a strongly hopeful one. Because of this necessity to “maintain[] a sharp focus on hope (often regarded as essential for the young),” authors of YA dystopian literature are faced with what Kay Sambell calls “a significant creative dilemma.”<sup>100</sup> The authors of children’s literature are “perceived responsib[le] to point young readers actively toward a better world,”<sup>101</sup> but when it comes to dystopias, they are often hesitant to present the unambiguously dire consequences of what will happen without the necessary change. In YA dystopia, a young hero will always save the day, or at least find himself or herself in a considerable more promising situation than the initial one by the end of the story, thanks to the endeavors he or she has undertaken. While this follows the unwritten rule that young readers need happy endings, it is detrimental in other ways: “By presenting child protagonists as agents of moral transformation within the text, or at least by hesitating to depict the extinction of such hope in the narrative resolution to their stories, children’s authors risk fracturing or undermining the imaginative and ideological coherence of their admonitory fictional worlds.”<sup>102</sup>

There is a good reason why “[t]he narrative closure of the protagonist’s final defeat and failure is absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia.”<sup>103</sup> Adult dystopian novels tend to be written first and foremost “to ‘prove’ a

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<sup>99</sup> Hintz and Ostry, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Kay Sambell, “Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative Dilemma of Dystopian Writing for Children,” in Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 29, Children’s Literature and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2003), 164. Hereafter abbreviated as Sambell.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

hypothesis”<sup>104</sup>; this is what makes them “predictable narratives” whose objective is to “draw out the consequences of human actions to their logical conclusions.”<sup>105</sup> Their inevitably tragic outcomes are supposed to underscore the seriousness of the danger that is already looming over humanity, showing that no amount of heroic action will be able to save us once the catastrophe strikes; and such fate will definitely befall us all if we do not change our ways to more ethical ones *right now*.<sup>106</sup> While there is a spark of hope in adult dystopias as well, it is presented rather hypothetically and not fulfilled in the narrative itself, and it is rarely manifested by the protagonist’s victory (if so, the dystopia is atypical, such as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, 1953). While YA dystopias might be more cathartic and easier to identify with for young readers, thanks to the fact they essentially follow a typical hero’s journey as described by Joseph Campbell, their didactic impact is also considerably smaller. Sambell points out that the creative dilemma of YA dystopian authors is often solved by giving the narrative an ending of various amount of ambiguity or ambivalence; often an open ending or one that allows for numerous interpretations.<sup>107</sup> That indeed seems to be the case for the majority of the best representatives of the genre (or at least their first installments before the authors decide to write sequels), as will become apparent throughout the chapters 4 and 5, and is overall an interesting topic for future study.

Some of the related issues can be illustrated by *The Giver Quartet* by Lois Lowry. Although her novels draw inspiration from both *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they draw heavily on Christian morality and mythology and have an easily identifiable “hero” or “savior.” The latter is a convention compliant with pretty much every adventure/fantasy book for children and young adults, stemming from the fact that their structure is basically mythological, with a protagonist who is a special person chosen to fight evil and defeat it forever. Such a hero is definitely not an “everyman,” and therefore his conflict is less universally applicable, cannot be seen as the conflict of the

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<sup>104</sup> Kathleen Woodward, “On Aggression: William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*,” in *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, edited by Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenburg, Joseph D. Olander (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 204.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future* (London and Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), quoted in Kay Sambell, “Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative Dilemma of Dystopian Writing for Children,” in Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 29, *Children's Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 165.

<sup>106</sup> Sambell, 166.

<sup>107</sup> See Sambell, 164.

whole humanity. Although the following statement refers to *The Giver Quartet*, it could be made about most YA dystopian novels:

In their emphasis on gifted individuals these texts downplay the significance of collective action and imply on the one hand that the transformation of dystopian communities depends upon individuals who possess qualities which set them apart from their fellow-citizens; and on the other, that such people are largely immune from any effects of power.<sup>108</sup>

This is in sharp contradiction with adult dystopian novels, where the characters are always “types,” meant to illustrate what would happen to a typical person in the hypothetical extreme situations depicted by the author; pretty much everyone should be able to see themselves in the characters, and therefore see how badly things would probably turn out for them. However, in children’s literature, a young reader wants to identify himself or herself with a strong protagonist, and feel empowered through him or her. Again, this can be solved by employing ambivalence, but it is certainly no easy task.

Neal Shusterman takes a very interesting approach to this dilemma, introducing protagonists that are (mostly) common types in the specific layers of his imagined society, but each one of them has certain character traits that eventually marks them as harbingers of change when they get the chance to develop them and put them to use. However, Shusterman makes great effort in using rather experimental narrative means to highlight that a major societal change is possible if, and only if, a huge number of “typical people,” no matter how individually unimportant, decide to take a stand and join the effort of the “special ones.”

Returning to *The Giver Quartet*, the novels also contain a hearty dose of fantasy elements in general, and from *Messenger* on (retroactively influencing the reading of *The Giver* as well) the nature of evil is transferred from the realm of the human and natural to the realm of the inhuman, supernatural; from the inside of human soul and society to something outside of it. In fact, in the series finale, the enemy that poisons the society is

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<sup>108</sup> Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum, eds., *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, Critical Approaches to Children's Literature (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 110. Hereafter abbreviated as Bradford et al.

heavily implied to be – quite banally – Satan himself, and he is defeated forever. Albeit allegorical, in traditional dystopia, such a conclusion would be utterly unacceptable, sabotaging the basic purpose of the genre. *The Giver Quartet* is still a very interesting representative of YA dystopia, but is also a great example of the genre’s possible contradictions.

Just as problematic is, for instance, Lauren Oliver’s bestselling trilogy *Delirium* (2011-2013), about a future world where love is considered a mortal disease, causing all that is wrong with the world, and “cured” by a lobotomy-like procedure. These novels are labelled as “dystopian romance,” and the romance element is evidently vastly more important to the author than the dystopian one, at the expense of any credible or logical world-building. The very foundation of the novel’s dystopian reality is so artificial it could hardly achieve making any profound statement about society; however, the author rather seems to strive to say something powerful about human relationships and the meaning of love, in which she is relatively successful. Other YA dystopian authors are more concerned with writing page-turning thrillers or action-packed adventures (a shining example would be an extremely popular *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth, published in years 2011-2013, whose worldbuilding does not make any sense whatsoever, but the first installment is so enticingly fast-paced and gory that most readers did not notice). Besides that, while utopia/dystopia is a rather formulaic genre by itself, it becomes even more so when combined with still more formulaic genres full of tropes such as romance or the YA “genre” itself. This led to producing a large number of series after *The Hunger Games*’ boom that were highly derivative and aesthetically uninteresting, often labelled “dystopian” only for commercial purposes, but containing next to no social criticism.

In general, the majority of YA dystopian novels are more concerned with stories of individual heroism and themes like coming of age, personal growth and finding one’s place in the world, or interpersonal relationships – with heavy emphasis on familial ones – than any serious critical examinations of society. The best of them, however, such as Shusterman’s *Unwind Dystology*, can do both at the same time, revealing the true potential of YA dystopian literature.

### 3. The Family

As the title suggest, the present chapter is concerned with the seemingly simple, but at a closer look, extraordinarily complex subject of family. Family has been crucial for the existence of humankind since the dawn of time, and therefore has always played a critical role in literature as well; including children’s literature, typically showing an idealized version of the nuclear family, and dystopian literature, which often presents somewhat “deviant” family structures or complete lack thereof. In this chapter, I will first focus on the concept of family and its brief history (especially the emergence of the nuclear family); secondly, on the all-pervasive ideology of family in children’s literature; and finally, on three different approaches to family in classic dystopian literature. The latter two points foreshadow the handling of its subject in YA dystopian literature.

#### 3.1 The Concepts and Brief History of Family

If we look for a definition of family, we will find a great number of them; it is, after all, one of the chief subjects of social sciences, which is hardly surprising for the basic unit of social organization, the elementary building block of any human society and culture and people’s primary social group. However, as this concept is also fairly fluid across societies, cultures, times and locations, one clear definition covering all possible forms of family does not seem to be attainable, and family is usually defined by its prototypical example. One of such frequently quoted sociological definitions is Burgess and Locke’s, according to whom family is “a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, and creating and maintaining a common culture.”<sup>109</sup>

Evidently, this definition from 1945 focuses heavily on the blood and legal ties between the prototypical family members, which is a view that is rather outdated by now;

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<sup>109</sup> Ernest Watson Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, *The Family from Institution to Companionship* (New York: American Book Company, 1945), accessed March 3, 2017, Google Books, [https://books.google.cz/books/about/The\\_family\\_from\\_institution\\_to\\_companion.html?id=6r-5AAAAIAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.cz/books/about/The_family_from_institution_to_companion.html?id=6r-5AAAAIAAJ&redir_esc=y), 7-8.

it is also highly arguable if family needs to live together. The definitions of family usually still first and foremost focus on the obvious biological ties and legal structure whose primary purpose is raising the young, but some also mention more inclusive factors such as economic co-operation,<sup>110</sup> or emphasize emotional bonds, such as Dizard and Gadlin in their description of “familialism”:

By “familialism” we mean a reciprocal sense of commitment, sharing, cooperation, an intimacy that is taken as defining the bonds between family members. These bonds represent the more or less unconstrained acknowledgement of both material and emotional dependency and obligation. They... put forth a set of “loving obligations” that entitles members of the family to expect warmth and support from fellow family members... [T]hese bonds are assumed to be deeper and more lasting than those that exist in other, nonfamilial relationships. Familialism embraces solicitude, unconditional love, personal loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice for others.<sup>111</sup>

It is obvious that not all families by far are defined by such affectionate relationships, but such a definition can be regarded as something that we ideologically expect from a family to provide, and as will be elaborated upon in this chapter, what we promote as an ideal example in literature, especially literature for children.

Even though family is a variable cultural construct, creating a family and the need to be a part of it is an evolutionary instinct, something that we are “genetically programmed” to do, since “[t]he grouping of humans for safety and survival is a basic Darwinian concept”<sup>112</sup>; after all, humans are social animals and it is natural for them to live in groups and protect their genes. This is the reason that despite all the societal changes throughout centuries and the growing emphasis on individuality and independence, the “concept of family remains central to human ideology,” and is

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<sup>110</sup> See George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), accessed April 20, 2017, Archive.org, <https://archive.org/stream/socialstructure00murd/page/8/mode/2up/search/economic>, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Jan E. Dizard and Howard Gadlin, *The Minimal Family* (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), accessed March 15, 2017, Google Books, <https://books.google.cz/books?id=9qxD5LU6YFUC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs#v=onepage&q&f=false>, 6-7.

<sup>112</sup> Alston, 9.

something that “affects all humans,”<sup>113</sup> since “each one of us comes from some sort of family environment”<sup>114</sup> and a great number will eventually start one of our own.

Family, especially the cultural construct of the nuclear family, prototypically including two parents and one or more children, generally tends to be seen as a positive concept; as a place of nurturing, protection, co-operation and affection. In Freudian view, such love is exceptionally powerful and intense, whether it is “genital love”<sup>115</sup> between the man and the woman that leads them to produce children or “aim-inhibited love”<sup>116</sup> between parents and their offspring or between the siblings, which is closer to friendship in its non-restrictedness; both have the power to be subversive to society, as a person is more likely to protect interests of their own family than interests of the wider community, which in turns attempts to control it by various laws and rules.<sup>117</sup> This makes love “a natural, instinctive (and therefore antisocial) drive.”<sup>118</sup> As will become obvious in the section 3.3, most classic dystopias adopt Freud’s ideology; and that is doubly true for YA dystopias.

Just as important, though, is Foucauldian view; as Booker indicates, both Freud and Foucault “agree that sexuality and the family are important spheres for the workings of power in society.”<sup>119</sup> In his works like *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault describes human society as a large system of power. Ann Alston develops this view, pointing out that “the family can also be read as a site of discipline... of surveillance”<sup>120</sup>; as it is the basic societal unit, family can also be regarded as the primary site where such power is implemented. Parents watch their children’s every move; educate, lead and supervise them; have authority over them. It is a place “where the child is first immersed in ideology,” as the parents are the first to teach them values.<sup>121</sup> In other words, the family is not only a place of protection, cooperation, and support, but also control. Parents who are raising children are basically also programming them, both

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<sup>113</sup> Alston, 8.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>115</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated by Joan Riviere (Dover: Dover Thrift Editions, 2016), accessed March 18, 2017, Google Books, [https://books.google.cz/books?id=O2niCwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=O2niCwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false), 31. Hereafter abbreviated as Freud.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>117</sup> See *ibid.*, 29-32.

<sup>118</sup> M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 76. Hereafter abbreviated as *Dystopian Impulse*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Alston, 10.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

psychologically and culturally. Some of the most prominent values of the society that the children will internalize are social hierarchy (often still based on age and gender) and the need to respect authority, and so the family is instilling in the children “a degree of compliance to systems of power.”<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the way parents raise their children must not conflict with the laws of the state, and the values should more or less agree with the generally accepted ideas of what is “right” and “wrong” according to the contemporary discourse of the given culture. Such ideology is widely promoted throughout society, from politics to children’s literature, where, as we will see, the myth of the nuclear family reigns; children absorb these values and ideals from an early age and continue to carry them into adulthood, when they rarely confront them, subsequently basically controlling themselves even in privacy of their own homes.<sup>123</sup>

In contemporary society, the nuclear family is regarded as natural, and every person has a basic idea how it should ideally function. However, Alston argues that “[f]amily is biologically useful, and yet the nuclear family, no matter how much it becomes naturalised by myth, is always a social and cultural construct” with “important political implications.”<sup>124</sup> For better understanding, it is useful to examine how this “central locus of power and control”<sup>125</sup> came into existence.

Historically, the modern notion of nuclear family began to appear in the eighteenth century. Up until the sixteenth century, the common type of family was what Lawrence Stone calls an “Open Lineage Family,” characterized by its “permeability by outside influences, and its members’ sense of loyalty to ancestors and to living kin”; the kin was the primary unit.<sup>126</sup> The wellbeing of the community was placed above all else, and “neither individual autonomy nor privacy” were valued.<sup>127</sup> The emotional ties within the nuclear family were likely not as strong due to high infant mortality and lower life expectancy, “not much closer than those with neighbours, with relatives, or with ‘friends’ - that group of influential advisors who usually included most of the senior members of the kin.”<sup>128</sup> Although marriage was a largely economic and pragmatic affair, it might not

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<sup>122</sup> Alston, 11.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 4. Hereafter abbreviated as Stone.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

have mattered to the bride and groom, as “for them the association in marriage was only one of many social relationships.”<sup>129</sup> This view of pre-modern family has received criticism supported by many examples of affectionate families, which however cannot be generalized, making the results inconclusive.<sup>130</sup>

The old system, at least a thousand years in place,<sup>131</sup> started changing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and the new family structure became solidified in the nineteenth century as one of the chief Victorian moral ideals and values. Alston places the development of modern family between 1780 and 1840, and finds an obvious connection to the emergence of the Pre-Romantic and Romantic movement and its “increasing emphasis on the innocence of the child that is evident in the works of Romantic writers such as Rousseau and Wordsworth.”<sup>132</sup> Before that, the child was regarded as “a smaller version of the adult,”<sup>133</sup> but the Victorians started to perceive him/her as different from the adult, and as the main distinction was placed on the adult’s sexuality versus the child’s asexuality, the child started to be perceived both spiritually and physically as innocent, virginal and “in need of protection.”<sup>134</sup> The new ideology of the child as someone that needs to be taken care of and cherished made these tasks some of the family’s chief goals, as opposed to the past when children helped with the family’s economy and were therefore more of partners to the adults. Also, the fact that the child was “given a more central role”<sup>135</sup> in the family meant that it became more separated and distanced from the adults, again both physically (for the first time, children were assigned their own space in the Victorian home) and spiritually (they were regarded to have distinct and special needs, which also led to the development of children’s literature).<sup>136</sup>

Along with the Romantic movement, the development of family was very tightly connected to the Victorian development of the middle class and the related “myth of the domestic ideal.”<sup>137</sup> In the time of turbulent transformations, the new society needed new icons and models for everyone to replicate. The modern nuclear family “was...

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<sup>129</sup> Stone, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Alston, 13.

<sup>131</sup> Stone, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Alston, 14.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Elizabeth Thiel, *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children’s Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal*, Vol. 51, *Children’s Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2. Hereafter abbreviated as Thiel.

ideologically representative of the Divine Family, with father the God-given head and mother the angelic administrator,”<sup>138</sup> and that became related to the Royal Family as a public institution, “perhaps at the peak of its popularity when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert metaphorically established themselves as mother and father of the nation, thus linking family and state.”<sup>139</sup> Marriage started to be regarded as the perfect state of being (as opposed to being celibate), a union of husband and wife bound by love “analogue for the love of God.”<sup>140</sup> Family has become a “smaller, more inward-looking group,”<sup>141</sup> tight-knit, hierarchical and bound by various rituals such as common family meals. This group was “generally founded on an ideal of romantic love,” making the child a product of that divine love, likened to “the Son.”<sup>142</sup> As the Victorians held themselves to extraordinarily high standards, everyone was striving for this ideal: “According to Victorian ideology, the idyllic home was eminently achievable for all and the family within its hallowed walls could, and should, be suitably perfect.”<sup>143</sup>

Similarly, the myth about family as the “nucleus of the entire society” and “the veritable building block for future societal relationships”<sup>144</sup> has been just as powerful in the American culture, going back as far as to colonial America. In the seventeenth century though, just like in England, larger community was still considered equally important: “[T]he family and the wider community [were] joined in a relation of profound reciprocity; one might almost say they [were] continuous with one another” (Demos 1986).<sup>145</sup> Children were taught morals and values in their family and further consolidated them in their community. As the community ties weakened over the next centuries, the responsibility for instigating values and providing an environment where “cooperation, caring, and morality could continue to flourish”<sup>146</sup> was also mostly moved over to the nuclear family, making its influence and role all the more crucial in the view of society.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Thiel, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Alston, 9.

<sup>140</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), quoted in Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, Vol. 53, *Children's Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

<sup>141</sup> Alston, 13.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Thiel, 3.

<sup>144</sup> Nancy Lee Cecil and Patricia L. Roberts, *Families in Children's Literature: A Resource Guide, Grades 4-8* (Englewood: Teacher Ideas Press, 1998), 16. Hereafter abbreviated as Cecil and Roberts.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> However, the notion of community as an extension of the family and reinforcer of values is still rather noticeable in present-day America, especially in more conservative areas where communities are tied by

However, from the twentieth century onwards, the institution of family has been going through many crucial transformations again, which have been even described as “revolution.”<sup>148</sup> Due to the developments in science and technology and the flood of societal changes after the world wars (e.g., the rise of feminism), we are moving further and further away from the Victorian ideal. It is usual for both father and mother to work; divorce rates are higher and higher, and therefore single-parent families are a common thing, as well as blended families and other atypical arrangements, i.e., children “being raised by their grandparents or other relatives”<sup>149</sup>; thanks to contraception, people can control how many children they have, which generally leads to smaller nuclear families; both natality and infant mortality are much lower; marriage and parenting is becoming easier for homosexual couples worldwide, etc. All that challenges the traditional view of family as consisting of “two parents, a father who works outside the home and a homemaker mother who raises her two or three biological children.”<sup>150</sup>

Alston argues, though, that well into the twentieth century, “the ideal of the nuclear family... remained, in both reality and literature (and perhaps in some circles still remains) part of cultural ideology.”<sup>151</sup> As Elizabeth Thiel points out, “Today’s middle class remains, in many ways, the direct descendant of the Victorian bourgeoisie, and political discourse, specifically among more right-wing politicians, has utilized this inheritance, often to great effect.”<sup>152</sup> That is why there is, and probably for a long time will be, much talk about family in danger, or a family crisis. Mothers are still reproached for resuming their jobs early or not entirely devoting “all their time and emotion”<sup>153</sup> to their children and husbands; women are still widely criticized if they decide entirely against having children, as if motherhood was their unquestionable, sacred duty; having divorced parents is seen as psychologically damaging, which is why many spouses decide to remain for the sake of the children in dysfunctional marriages which might be in reality just as harmful, if not more; and there are innumerable opponents of same-sex marriage and parenthood. Although such stances prevail especially in religious or otherwise conservative circles, nostalgia and longing for the traditional type of family is still alive

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Christian values. Arguably, the fact that most young adult dystopias where community and its control always plays a crucial part is related to this situation; this subject has great potential for future study.

<sup>148</sup> Alston, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Cecil and Roberts, 14.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Alston, 23.

<sup>152</sup> Thiel, 1.

<sup>153</sup> Alston, 23.

across the social spectrum, which indicates that the notion of how a proper family should look and function is very deeply ingrained in our culture and psyche: “The myth of the loving nuclear family is a powerful one, and as a myth it has inevitably become naturalized.”<sup>154</sup>

In our times of many turbulent changes, transformations, sources of stress and insecurities, we are trying to re-create something that appears so safe and stable in nostalgic memory, on pictures and, of course, in literature. However, it is important to realize that what we are *trying* to re-create is something that the Victorians themselves were *trying* to create, in a situation not quite unlike ours. Thiel suggests that just like us, the Victorians were also in searching mode:

... the Victorians too were seeking a perfect paradigm which, in time, evolved into the myth of the domestic ideal and was ultimately transmitted to future generations. The inclusive, supportive family had been in existence for centuries, but it was the Victorians who sought to elevate its status to that of an icon and, in so doing, to create a sense of permanence and stability in a country beset by social anxieties. (...) In the wake of revolution overseas and in the midst of industrialization and modernization at home, it was scarcely surprising that the Victorians were preoccupied with order and classification, and their conceptualization of the family as the lynchpin of society from which all else emanated was a palliative; it promised the recreation of a mythical age in which all was secure.<sup>155</sup>

In other words, the perfect family was just as much of a myth for the Victorians as it is for us now; while a loving family has always existed, the ideal, iconic family most likely never has, being more of a beautiful illusion than something that was ever truly real, and so we are nostalgically looking back at and mourning the loss of something that we remember quite wrong (as is usually the case with nostalgia), trying to hold onto something that we never had in the first place. However, the myth of “the family that,

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<sup>154</sup> Alston, 9.

<sup>155</sup> Thiel, 2-3.

ideally, should exist,”<sup>156</sup> has been perpetuated throughout at least two centuries, and one of the most powerful media to promote it is children’s writing.

### 3.2 Family Ideology in Children’s Literature

According to Alston, family is central to children’s literature.<sup>157</sup> Across time periods, genres, or age groups, it is always “the ideal, the epic end-point of the Odyssean journey of the fiction, at which home and family are recovered.”<sup>158</sup> Partially, the focus on family is very understandable. After all, children’s literature needs to be concerned with topics that are relevant for children, and as M. O. Grenby notes, “given the place that children have occupied in society,” it is only logical that “probably the majority of children’s fiction has been set within the family.”<sup>159</sup> Children tend to be highly dependent on their nuclear families, and their personal identities tend to be tightly bound with those of their families. The younger they are, the more time they spend at home, and a great portion of their lives revolves around family in one way or another. The lives of family members are intertwined and they influence one another in a major way. Therefore, it is no wonder that a strong subgenre of children’s literature is “family story,” which is “deliberately designed to depict family life and... focus[ing] on family relationships,”<sup>160</sup> represented by a wide range of novels from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-9) to pretty much anything by Jacqueline Wilson; but Grenby rightly points out that “[e]ven fantasy has frequently been familial,”<sup>161</sup> and at a closer look it becomes clear that fantasy as well as other genre literature for children actually has been familial *usually*, from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (1950) or Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) to *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline l’Engle (1963). In fact, it is much harder to pick out a book where exploration of the “meaning of family”<sup>162</sup> is not one of the strongest themes than one where it is.

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<sup>156</sup> Alston, 12.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Alston, 1.

<sup>159</sup> M. O. Grenby, *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh Critical Guides to Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 117. Hereafter abbreviated as Grenby.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

However, Alston takes this view a step further, suggesting that children's literature has been used as one of the main (and most inconspicuous) means of promotion of the "basic values" of the "imaginary ideological family"<sup>163</sup> since its very nineteenth century beginnings – i.e., the depiction of the family and the "meaning of family" have since then remained virtually unchanged. Children's literature is the perfect tool for promotion of any ideology for obvious reasons: it is used as a teaching tool, giving good and bad examples of how people should behave, and therefore reflects unwritten and universal societal ideals quite well. Furthermore, the message tends to be hidden in an entertaining story, and therefore becomes largely subliminal and easy to internalize in such a pleasurable form. By being presented a family ideal worth aspiring for, children accept it as something to desire and possibly mimic, and when they become adults, they further perpetuate this model that they read about and dreamed of as children, no matter how unrealistic and unattainable it actually might be for most: "[T]here seems to be little chance that adults will present their children with anything that contradicts this illusion," as they themselves "cling to the notion of the perfect family promulgated by society."<sup>164</sup>

This becomes all the more significant in the twenty-first century when the family is undergoing constant changes and what children experience and witness in real life might not really correspond with what is constantly promoted by the society and the state as the right way to live, and so the children's literature might become the most effective vehicle "to indoctrinate them with role models and to promulgate the family values which allow society to function in a specific way."<sup>165</sup> While children's authors have a choice to represent the modern family as it is, in its high variability, and some of them of course strive to do that, they usually still choose to portray it as they are used to, i.e., as it should be. Although children's literature has "potential to be revolutionary" (precisely because of its ability to make a deep impression on its readers and influence their patterns of thought), it remains "chronically conventional,"<sup>166</sup> and the ideal family is one of the most permanent conventions it adheres to - even after decades of the so-called family revolution.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Alston, 11.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Alston points out that “a similar rhetoric of family appears at the heart of the text: true happiness it seems is impossible without the love and support of a dedicated family.”<sup>168</sup> A united family is not always the starting point, but it is rarely not the goal. Alston presents “firmly established patterns and ideals” related to this subject, such as:

... the devotion to family; the need on the part of the child character to satisfy and gratify parental figures; the venture out into the world and the idealised return to the bosom of family; the sibling ‘pecking order’ so redolent of Foucauldian theories of discipline; and the constant promotion of a specific ideological and idealised family unit.<sup>169</sup>

The family unit from a “lost golden age of nuclear family” consists of two heterosexual parents, a father and a mother, and children.<sup>170</sup> Their life, interactions and behavior follow traditional conventions: they all spend time together, playing and “sharing food and space in an aesthetically acceptable home.”<sup>171</sup> As “children’s literature emerged from and was initially intended for the middle-classes,”<sup>172</sup> the fictional family still holds middle-class values, even if the protagonists come from the working-class.<sup>173</sup>

The mythical mother is a nurturing, loving homemaker who lives and sacrifices herself for her children and family. Mother and home are inseparably intertwined: “[W]hen the mother is absent from the home, the family suffers.”<sup>174</sup> In the Victorian tradition, the father figure (the father can be replaced by an uncle or a grandfather) was traditionally a “strong [and] dependable”<sup>175</sup> leader, taking care of both material and emotional needs of his family, but also “rather confused... the father was both the head of the family who invested time and love in his children, and the authoritarian figure who stood distanced from the emotional needs of family.”<sup>176</sup> Gradually, his position has weakened, and the father figure has been allowed to have an even more ambiguous role

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<sup>168</sup> Alston, 1.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

and “human flaws,”<sup>177</sup> but still be a positive presence who the children want to make happy.<sup>178</sup>

According to Alston, “[f]amily is inherent in and central to”<sup>179</sup> the majority of children’s fiction. That does not necessarily mean that family is the main theme of the novel, or even an obviously important one; however, “[e]ven if the family is largely absent or parents are pushed to the margins, it lurks in the text, its ideology informing the attitudes of the characters and the development of the plot.”<sup>180</sup> Only rarely does the protagonist not have an influential bond with a relative that moves the plot forward in some way, or has an underlying significance; also, “these family members can be good or bad role models,”<sup>181</sup> and the division between a good and bad role model can be the depth of loyalty and affection to one’s family; the degree of its prioritization; making decisions that have a positive or a negative impact on the family; or even being or not being surrounded by typical cultural “domestic signifiers that indicate the good family,”<sup>182</sup> such as cozy, tidy home and home-made meals eaten “round the dinner table at set times.”<sup>183</sup> The depiction of the ideal home tends to be overall somewhat nostalgic, with old-fashioned elements such as the fireplace or many quaint decorations, and the house is divided into specific spaces, which serve as their owners’ domains as well as confinement: bedrooms to the children, kitchen to the mother, a study room to the father, etc.<sup>184</sup>

It is important to note that the unanimously good example of the family is relatively rarely present in the text; it is the juxtaposition of the usually depicted non-ideal family, perceived as somewhat flawed or “deviant,”<sup>185</sup> with the implied image of how different and better it ideally could or should be, what only highlights “the ideal of the respectful loving family” that always, if only by implication, “remains at the forefront of the text.”<sup>186</sup> Alston calls the juxtaposition of the good and bad examples of family life a “well-established trope,”<sup>187</sup> while Thiel actually points out that the “transnormative

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<sup>177</sup> Alston, 40.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>184</sup> See *ibid.*, 89-104.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

family,” a term that she uses for “family units headed by single parents, step-parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings or the state that exists in opposition to the ‘natural’ and ‘complete’ family of husband, wife and children,”<sup>188</sup> has been far more common in children’s literature ever since its Victorian beginnings, exactly to be juxtaposed with the imaginary, mythical “right” family.

The protagonist’s family is very often “fractured,”<sup>189</sup> but this fact is used to “drive plots,”<sup>190</sup> i.e., it tends to be thematic and the plot is always oriented towards a reunion, reconciliation or “reb[irth]” of the “traditional family,”<sup>191</sup> or the formation of “a surrogate family.”<sup>192</sup> Even if just covertly, it is always clear what the characters should desire and strive for. But as Alston points out, the crucial issue is that theme of the broken family or even its complete absence is typically “not used to question the received ideals of family or to establish different social models in which children could be socialised and protected,” and “the relevance, function and significance of family are never brought under scrutiny.”<sup>193</sup> While family is always present in texts aimed at children and young adult readers, whether it plays a major or only an underlying role in the plot, “children’s literature rarely asks the fundamental question of what constitutes family, and what, if anything is ideal.”<sup>194</sup> It seldom addresses the fact that family can be an environment that is both psychologically formative and potentially damaging, that a family member might not always feel like he or she belongs (and that might never change), or that returning back from whence one came might not always be the healthiest option for one’s growth, and not necessarily the sign that one has outgrown their rebellious adolescence and finally became a proper adult. Following the Foucauldian line of thinking, the fact that people are encouraged from their childhood to embrace their roots, love their families unconditionally and create their own families based on an unwritten ideal, in other words, conform to the prevalent ideology, might be related to the fact that they also need to conform to the ideologies of the higher power structure, the state itself. This creates an interesting paradox in the YA dystopian literature, whose dystopian element is meant to be subversive, but its familial element undermines the efforts by its conventionality.

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<sup>188</sup> Thiel, 8.

<sup>189</sup> Alston, 2.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

It is safe to assume that as it is one of its cornerstones, there will always be an element of didacticism in children's literature, but that does not necessarily have to be a negative thing; it can be used in a more productive and original way than the norm. As for family, it obviously comes in many shapes and forms, and neither of them (except for the culturally constructed one) is automatically associated with happiness or lack thereof. Unhealthy domestic environment does not equal an untidy house with a processed food, and a healthy one certainly does not entail only a two-parent family with children and a stay-at-home mother. By portraying various domestic situations in a more realistic, complex and nuanced way, children could learn to recognize toxic settings in their own homes and learn how to deal with them; or they could be offered strategies and options as to where to turn for help and safety even outside of their immediate family, which is of course not the only environment where the child can socialize and form lasting bonds. Or, on the other hand, they could become more accepting of their own families, even if they are far removed from the nostalgic ideal. To challenge the dominant myth of the nuclear family, however, the children's authors would be required to be slightly more creative and bold than the norm; to not hesitate to turn away from the established patterns and risk being somewhat controversial; and perhaps, as in the dystopian genre, employ more ambivalence. That could be a highly compelling creative challenge, and yield very interesting results, as demonstrated by some of the novels analyzed later in this thesis, especially the *Unwind Dystology*.

### **3.3 The Family in Classic Dystopia**

In the previous subchapter, we could see that the ideology of family is indeed one of the most prevalent in children's and YA literature. However, that is certainly not the only factor potentially influencing the depiction of family, its influence and implications in YA dystopia – the genre of dystopia itself is highly ideological in its core, and family usually plays a vital role here, being depicted with surprising consistency.

As the family unit has been considered the foundation of the state throughout centuries, it makes sense that descriptions of ideal family structures played significant role even in the first utopian writings such as Plato's *The Republic* (around 380 BC) or More's *Utopia*, where the families are highly state-controlled. This was regarded as

positive, as the more rigorously organized and regulated a family (or any other societal structure) was, the more functional and secure it theoretically appeared. The notion of the state taking control over the family found its way into later dystopias as well, but with a negative spin, and as demonstrated by this section, the ideas of a “natural” loving family and motherly love have been unanimously depicted as either potentially or outright subversive. In this way, the authors of the classic dystopias are accepting the Freudian view that “[o]n the one hand, love opposes the interests of culture; on the other, culture menaces love with grievous restrictions”;<sup>195</sup> in other ways, however, they are exposing family as a potential power structure in a rather Foucauldian sense. It is also noteworthy that similarly to children’s literature, many representations of “good” and “bad” examples of families can be found in dystopia, used by the authors to illustrate their points and highlight the pitfalls of the societal organizations they describe.

### **3.3.1 *Brave New World***

In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the family as we know it does not exist; it is entirely supplied by the state. People are genetically engineered in Hatcheries and raised in State Conditioning Centres. Both their genetic makeup and education based on systematic psychological conditioning are specifically designed to “mak[e] people like their unescapable social destiny.”<sup>196</sup> The very notion of parents, father and mother, is a taboo that makes people blush; the idea of natural-born and raised children is extremely vulgar, an “unpleasant” historical fact.<sup>197</sup> People cannot imagine what the terms family or home mean, and home is described as a very bleak place by Mustapha Mond, the State Controller:

“Home, home – a few small rooms, stiflingly over-inhabited by a man, by a periodically teeming woman, by a rabble of boys and girls of all ages. No air, no space; an understerilized prison; darkness, disease, and smells. (...) And home was as squalid psychically as physically. Psychically, it was a rabbit hole, a

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<sup>195</sup> Freud, 32.

<sup>196</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 16. Hereafter abbreviated as Huxley.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

midden, hot with the frictions of tightly packed life, reeking with emotion. What suffocating intimacies, what dangerous, insane, obscene relationships between the members of the family group! Maniacally, the mother brooded over her children... (...) "My baby, and oh, oh, at my breast, the little hands, the hunger, and that unspeakable agonizing pleasure! Till at last my baby sleeps, my baby sleeps with a bubble of white milk at the corner of his mouth..."<sup>198</sup>

Depicted in such gruesome terms, the image of home makes more sensitive science students turn pale, feel nausea, and "shudder."<sup>199</sup> Of course, such a description of home is highly ironic and grotesque, but can be also read as subversive, especially so in 1932 when it was still not long ago perceived as a sacred place of heavenly love by the Victorians. In any case, it shows that what we perceive as good or bad in any given historical period is first and foremost a matter of cultural perspective. We are not conditioned to perceive home and family as positive any less than the citizens of the World State are conditioned to see it negatively.

Being a product of genetic planning and state social conditioning might seem artificial, uniform, emotionless, cold, even inhumane to us; but we are subject to the psychological conditioning of our mothers and fathers, who might be in the eyes of the World State absolutely unfit to do so (as opposed to experts),<sup>200</sup> in environment that might seem terribly inconvenient, and produce children who are not even sure to be physically healthy. The obvious argument might be that we are at least free in our choices of individual destiny, but the ideas of social predestination and our unconscious subordination to the prevalent ideologies (such as the one stating that a woman is "miss[ing] something by not being a mother"<sup>201</sup>) make this questionable. Huxley's *Brave New London* is of course a deterrent example of what could happen with society if it gets rid of some of its main values in favor of mind-numbing pleasures, but on the other hand, the system really seems to prevent all of its people from pain and suffering and does not

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<sup>198</sup> Huxley, 37-38.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>200</sup> Huxley expresses this in words of Linda, the mother of John the Savage, explaining to Bernard and Lenina how she attempted to condition her son a bit: "[Y]ou've no idea how difficult that is. There's so much one doesn't know; it wasn't my business to know. I mean, when a child asks you how a helicopter works or who made the world – well, what are you to answer if you're a Beta and have always worked in the Fertilizing Room? What are you to answer?" (122).

<sup>201</sup> Huxley, 112.

even punish misfits for rebelling, and so it does not seem as obviously undesirable as most other dystopian systems; the perspectives of it will certainly continue changing as our own society transforms and comes closer and closer to what Huxley describes.

Still, Huxley's readers will probably most easily identify with John the Savage, who was born naturally to a woman who got lost in a Native reservation, and raised by her in a way that is closer to what we know (although the Native reservation's culture might seem just as foreign to us as that of the World State in certain aspects). Apart from the Christian ideology and morals he has watched in the reservation, John has absorbed his values mostly from a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, full of passion, deep thoughts and emotions; that is his idea of humanity. But it would be misleading to perceive it as the "right" idea of humanity; although the genetic factor does not play a role, John is influenced and molded by his culture just as everyone else in *Brave New World* is; just as we all are. As Helmholtz remarks after listening to *Romeo and Juliet*, even Shakespeare himself can be seen as a master of "emotional engineering" who "makes [the] best propaganda technicians look absolutely silly."<sup>202</sup>

The main reason the family was eradicated in the World State is none other than the teachings of Freud, who is revered very much like a god, "Ford"; precisely, it was those that identified the sexual impulses between people as the core of all insanity and distress, for the first time bringing "the appalling dangers of family life"<sup>203</sup> into focus: "The world was full of fathers – was therefore full of misery; full of mothers – therefore of every kind of perversion from sadism to chastity; full of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts – full of madness and suicide."<sup>204</sup> The relationships between family members, as well as "monogamy and romance"<sup>205</sup> and overall "exclusiveness, a narrow channeling of impulse and energy,"<sup>206</sup> which creates deep and intense bonds between people, were deemed by the creators of the World State too strong for people to handle, as is eventually manifested by John's own tragic demise.

Obviously, Freud's teachings are grotesquely distorted and abused by the State Controllers; in fact, the whole novel can be considered as a sort of a both playful and disturbing dialogue with Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (his revolutionary work

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<sup>202</sup> Huxley, 122.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

that had been published only two years earlier). Huxley is, one by one, representing all Freud's hypotheses about the foundations of civilization and genuine and false sources of human happiness, extending them all ad absurdum, ironically elevating all the simple but unhealthy ways of achieving pleasure that Freud admonishes, such as religion or intoxication, and eradicating those in which Freud sees real potential, such as beauty or love. However, Huxley does not offer any simple solutions, as his vision of the World State, though grotesque in many ways, is overall far from dysfunctional, and the pieces of our culture represented by John can be also viewed as absurd and dangerous; it is all just a matter of perspective.

Both the "new world's" and the "old world's" ideologies are equally debatable, but Huxley also represents a "natural" family bond, largely devoid of any cultural influences, the one that Freud considers as such a powerful source of happiness: the one between John and his mother Linda. Initially, Linda is absolutely repulsed by the idea of having a baby, and twenty years in the reservation has changed nothing about that sentiment. Furthermore, she is unable to adjust to the morals of the reservation (such as respecting the exclusiveness of marriage), and never stops pining the comfort and joys of the World State. However, she also admits that her son was "a great comfort to her"<sup>207</sup> in times of distress ("I don't know what I should have done without him."<sup>208</sup>). They had sweet moments cuddling in bed, singing; she might have even instinctively tried to protect his innocence by not wanting to her sex in front of him, although she also just might have been using him as an excuse; she was bonding with him over little stories about the pleasures of the World State, recounted with her simple child-like excitement; in a passionate and heartfelt moment, one second she was violently beating him and cursing at him, professing she would not be his mother, accusing him of destroying her life, another second her emotions quite changed:

'Little beast!' She pulled down his arm; his face was uncovered.

'Don't, Linda.' He shut his eyes, expecting the blow.

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<sup>207</sup> Huxley, 122.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

But she didn't hit him. After a little time, he opened his eyes again and saw that she was looking at him. He tried to smile at her. Suddenly she put her arms round him and kissed him again and again.<sup>209</sup>

While John's mother has never been taught how to love a child or be maternal, and she raises her son in a very haphazard and immature way, there are many signs that she instinctively develops strong feelings towards him, and there is an undeniable (while still slightly grotesque) poignancy in the way they are portrayed. This can be compared with the later parodic scene of a "family reunion" where John dramatically falls on his knees, amidst a hysterically laughing crowd, in front of his horrified father who stares at him in "agony of bewildered humiliation"<sup>210</sup> and runs away. John's natural bond with his mother is the realest and most heartfelt relationships in the novel, suggesting that Huxley does see it as something to cherish; even its grotesqueness is endearing.

Linda's maternal love does not effectively undermine the World State in any way, which is why it is up to discussion to what degree it is truly subversive. In her character, though, all the basic forms of conditioning clash and conflict: the modified genetic conditioning of the World State, which makes her rather simple-minded and emotionally shallow; the natural genetic "conditioning" of the human race, which ignites in her the maternal instinct; the social conditioning of the World State, which makes her think of maternity as gross and obscene and long for the return home, to normality; and the motherly love that somewhat overrides the former and makes her care for her son deeply.

Furthermore, John holds dear every moment, good or bad, spent with his mother; the citizens of the World State do not have that much to nostalgically remember, as their life is designed to be rather uneventful, from formative years to death; their memories are never associated with strong emotions. However, for John, just like for us, the time spent with our families is a source of many unique and intimate memories; sometimes hurtful, sometimes beautiful, always valuable.

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<sup>209</sup> Huxley, 127.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

### 3.3.2 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

George Orwell also “recogni[zes] ... the potential importance of the family structure,”<sup>211</sup> but the Party that controls the dystopian Oceania of his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes a very different approach than the Controllers of the World State, and Orwell, while still inspired by Freud, certainly anticipates Foucault’s line of thought. While Huxley’s novel is basically a thesis on what could possibly keep people in perpetual, while infantile happiness, and happiness is (arguably) what the government really wants for them, by the Party’s prominent leader O’Brien’s admission, the Party’s only objective is raw power. The removal of family in *Brave New World* is effectively a removal of the most intense possible interpersonal bonds that can potentially make people the happiest, but also the most desperate. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the family is not forbidden, but instead used by the Party “as a tool for furthering of its own power,”<sup>212</sup> as it is basically “an extension of the Thought Police”<sup>213</sup>: the secret police (inspired by state organs in Stalinist Russia<sup>214</sup>) which pervasively surveys and controls the citizens, punishing them for any transgression against the state including “thoughtcrime.”

In Oceania, the Party’s members need to get a special committee’s permit to get married, and they never get it “if the couple... g[ives] the impression of being physically attracted to one another,” since the only objective of marriage is “to beget children for the service of the Party.”<sup>215</sup> A sexual act is supposed to be entirely utilitarian and devoid of eroticism, since the Party’s objective is to harness the repressed sexual energy of its people for its service and the worship of Big Brother (a strategy much like the earlier Catholic Church’s<sup>216</sup>). That is why the protagonist Winston theorizes that due to its rather undisciplined, self-absorbed and highly motivating nature, eroticism is more of an “enemy” than “love.”<sup>217</sup> Of course, love is also a target; after all, one of the chief objectives of the Party is to “prevent[] men and women from forming loyalties which it might not be able to control.”<sup>218</sup> However, it seems to be somewhat easier to condition

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<sup>211</sup> *Dystopian Impulse*, 75.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin Student Editions, edited by Ronald Carter and Valerie Durov (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 122. Hereafter abbreviated as Orwell.

<sup>214</sup> *Dystopian Impulse*, 75.

<sup>215</sup> Orwell, 61.

<sup>216</sup> See *Dystopian Impulse*, 76.

<sup>217</sup> Orwell, 61.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

and manipulate people out of their emotional attachments if the sexual factor is not involved. The Party turns love into resentment by simple and effective means: “Family members are actively turned against one another, with children being encouraged to inform on their parents and spouses encouraged to spy on one another.”<sup>219</sup>

As the relationships between husbands and wives are exclusively pragmatic, and the children are born into the world where they are taught from the very start to be more loyal to the Party than their parents and motivated to do this by various pleasurable activities, the compliance to the Party’s rule seems inevitable. A mother must, in Winston’s eyes, “lead a life of terror,”<sup>220</sup> as she has no authority over her children; the only authority belongs to the Party, which systematically encourages the children to disrespect their parents and be their most effective tool of surveillance; and although contemporary parents will still remember some glimpses of the pre-war family life before Oceania, and therefore might have some qualms about what they are doing, the next generation of children will already be born to those absolutely compliant to the Party, so this system of conditioning will over time seem more and more natural, harder to question or overturn, and the family and the state will really become one. Remarkably, Orwell’s concept somewhat subverts the “natural” hierarchy of the authoritative parents and compliant children, making children the most impressionable tool of the state, answerable only to the highest authority, which is the Party itself.

According to Booker, this “vision of the family as an extension of the Thought Police contrasts sharply with Freud’s conception of the family as a natural human unit that potentially threatens the larger social structure.”<sup>221</sup> Orwell is more focused on “a potential complicity between the family and official structures of power”<sup>222</sup>; this idea was later also proposed “by Foucault, who sees sexuality as a principal means by which modern society administers and controls the behavior of its citizens, while seeing family as a focal point for the ‘production’ of sexuality.”<sup>223</sup> However, this view is rather simplified, ignoring the fact that Orwell actually presents *two* versions of family, the “organized” one and the “natural” one; much in the line of children’s literature presenting a good and bad example of the family in order to strengthen the underlying ideology.

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<sup>219</sup> *Dystopian Impulse*, 75.

<sup>220</sup> Orwell, 25.

<sup>221</sup> *Dystopian Impulse*, 75.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Dystopian Impulse*, 75.

The positive example of family is the family of the past, the one Winston vaguely remembers from childhood; the one whose members “stood by one another without needing to know the reason,” the one existing in the times of “privacy, love, and friendship,”<sup>224</sup> which Orwell clearly presents as synonymous with the concept of family. Winston’s memories of his mother and little sister are firmly associated with notions of unconditional love, loyalty and sacrifice, while the new concept of family is only connected with “fear, hatred, and pain.”<sup>225</sup> The old family was also the bearer of tragedy, when a loved one is lost, like Winston’s mother; but such tragedy is perceived as a generally positive notion by Winston, superior to Oceanian times when there is “no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows.”<sup>226</sup> It is evident that the most noble emotion possible, the one that has been the most criminally damaged and compromised by the Party, is in Winston’s eyes motherly love. That is in obvious conflict in Huxley’s perhaps more faceted and ironic view, where this kind of family (including motherly love) was abolished precisely because it was seen as the root of all tragedy, and the concept of life without complex emotions was envisioned as utopian (however arguable that might be); but in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, such family was destroyed because it was seen as a positive power, a power that could potentially defy the state, which is a more conservative view, adopted by many YA dystopias.

The very fact that the Party targets the natural family as the primary concept to eradicate, and does so brutally and systematically, only underlines the fact that it is well-aware of its still-existing potential for subversion. One could argue that the rather perverted new family structure proves that making the family a tool of state power is easier than it seems; however, Orwell somewhat “helps” that by conveniently choosing to have the parents of the contemporary generation pretty much all murdered (in Winston’s memories, his family just kind of disappeared without explanation) and their influence all at once transferred to the state, and also by making people like Winston who have real potential to turn against the Party have no desire to be parents, seeing more danger than hope in having children. Still, Winston gets moved by catching occasional glimpses of loving families, symbolized by protective and self-sacrificing mothers, in war

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<sup>224</sup> Orwell, 30.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

documentaries from foreign lands (and is most likely not the only one); and what is crucial, he comes to realize that the greatest enemy of the Party are “the proles.”

The proles are the ordinary, poor mass of people who are not the members of the Party. They are simple, uneducated and appear inferior and irrelevant, but right before Winston and his lover Julia get arrested by the Party, Winston makes a striking observation that constitutes *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s dystopian “spark of hope.” He realizes that unlike the Party members, “[T]he proles are human beings”<sup>227</sup>; they still “h[old] on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to re-learn by conscious effort”<sup>228</sup>: unlike him or Julia, “[t]hey [are] not loyal to a party or a country or an idea, they [are] loyal to one another.”<sup>229</sup> Their minds have not been twisted, they still know feelings like love, compassion or grief, emotions that, in Winston's eyes, constitute what it means to be human. Furthermore, Winston has an epiphany as he watches a prole woman hanging diapers; she is the embodiment of motherhood, her body clearly marked by bearing many children, but “sturdy,” “[t]irelessly... march[ing] to and fro,” “roughened,” but still “singing,”<sup>230</sup> “valiant,”<sup>231</sup> with “no mind... only strong arms, a warm heart, and a fertile belly,”<sup>232</sup> and Winston suddenly realizes that “She's beautiful.”<sup>233</sup> She is like the embodiment of a primeval, “immortal”<sup>234</sup> principle of “vitality”<sup>235</sup> that is not easily quenched by any ideology. But as Winston and Julia get captured by the Party, even she stops singing – but she is only one of millions of fertile prole women. As Winston comes to believe, “[i]f there [is] hope, it [lies] in the proles”; “The future belong[s] to the proles.”<sup>236</sup> The future of mankind is in the endless reproduction, motherhood, family.

In conclusion, while moving towards Foucauldian ideas, Orwell does not really oppose Freud: while the families in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* really are highly controlled by the state, and moving towards self-control as the next generation loses individuality in favor of the Party, there are also families that are still natural, both vulnerable and

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<sup>227</sup> Orwell, 150.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 198.

powerful in their perceived mindlessness, strong in their sheer instinct and number, and the potential of subversion is principally in them, just unrealized. And it is certainly noteworthy that of all things, it is again none other than family that is presented as the greatest hope of eventually overturning the almighty state.

### **3.3.3 *Fahrenheit 451***

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) has been counted among the classic dystopias; its themes and motifs such as the burning of the books as a symbol and manifestation of repressive censorship have become notoriously known and often quoted whenever the subject of censorship is discussed. Other motifs such as the "television rooms" where people spend their lives instead of the real world are also famous. However, *Fahrenheit 451* differs from other classic dystopias in many crucial points. First and foremost, as Bradbury's approach is strongly humanist, he describes a society whose wounds are self-inflicted, but which is inherently good and its greatest hope for healing is the people's own humanity, helped by renewal of Christian values. Both the wounds and the hopes are again illustrated primarily by bad and good families.

The negative societal development anticipated by Bradbury is not the outcome of a repressive regime enforcing these changes from above to make people more complacent; the government rather complies to the wishes of the people themselves, who have discarded every cultural article of substance, everything that could make them upset or offended, or provoke any deep thoughts or emotions they might not have been able to handle. As Booker notes, "the problem is not really with the system, but with the people."<sup>237</sup> That does not mean that the government does not use repressive measures against those opposing it, but its actions are still compliant with the wishes of the society's majority.

The society that has discarded its high ideals and collective memory to forget deep troubles and pains somewhat loses its substance altogether; as a result, it becomes spiritually void and even more profoundly troubled. In the world without values where people are actively quenching their anxieties by simple and primitive pleasures, human

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<sup>237</sup> *Dystopian Literature*, 89.

relationships in general become dysfunctional and family has no value. This is illustrated on the cold, empty and childless marriage of the protagonist Montag and his suicidal wife Mildred who calls television characters her family and possibly loves them more than anyone else, although that love is hardly returned. One of Mildred's friends is proud of being "independent,"<sup>238</sup> going from marriage to marriage without any real attachments, thinking that children are utterly "ruinous";<sup>239</sup> another one had them out of sense of obligation, narcissistically remarking that they "look just like you, and that's nice,"<sup>240</sup> but she certainly would not go through any real pain or effort for them. These are the bad examples of families, the families born out of the spiritual hunger; both perpetrators and victims of the problem.

Although this problem is pervasive, the solution seems to be relatively easy compared to most dystopias: to change the wishes of the majority; to outdo the self-inflicted and government-encouraged brainwashing; to make people realize what they have lost and what they have been missing in their lives; to make them realize what the real values are and where to find them; essentially, to remind people who they are and help them out of their existential crisis.

It seems that people need some tools to make them remember what is important. One of the tools is literature, the immense storage of human experience. The other channel that can help passing on the right values is, unsurprisingly, the "good" family. The model of such family are the McClellans, the family of Clarisse, the girl who sparks Montag's transformation. Clarisse is poetic, inquisitive, warm, imaginative, and has a special way of seeing the world; and her family, especially her uncle, are very supportive of her individuality and teach her as much as they can about the world and its values. Clarisse's family is characterized by togetherness, communication, stimulation, spontaneous affection, and a sense of continuity, as if they lived just like in the old days that Montag no longer remembers, but their example ignites a sort of longing in him, a trigger for personal change:

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<sup>238</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 123. Hereafter abbreviated as Bradbury.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

Laughter blew across the moon-coloured lawn from the house of Clarisse and her father and mother and the uncle who smiled so quietly and so earnestly. Above all, their laughter was relaxed and hearty and not forced in any way, coming from the house that was so brightly lit this late at night while all the other houses were kept to themselves in darkness. Montag heard the voices talking, talking, talking, giving, talking, weaving, reweaving their hypnotic web. (...) He stood outside the talking house in the shadows, thinking he might even tap on their door and whisper, "Let me come in. I won't say anything. I just want to listen. What is it you're saying?"<sup>241</sup>

Naturally, such kind of family environment is regarded as highly subversive by the government, as Montag's boss, the fireman Beatty, explains to Montag when he asks why Clarisse was so "different":

'Here or there, that's bound to occur. (...) We've a record on her family. We've watched them carefully. Heredity and environment are funny things. You can't rid yourselves of all the odd ducks in just a few years. The home environment can undo a lot you try to do at school. That's why we've lowered the kindergarten age year after year until now we're almost snatching them from the cradle. (...) Uncle had a mixed record; anti-social. The girl? She was a time bomb. The family had been feeding her subconscious...'<sup>242</sup>

Similarly, later in the novel, Montag meets Granger, one of the members of the group of intellectuals who are attempting to save and pass on the knowledge stored in books, who was similarly inspired by his beloved grandfather. In conclusion, Bradbury seems to suggest that people have the capacity to think for themselves and consequently help themselves as long as they have healthy influences, and one of the most powerful ones is family, or its ideal; as long as a person comes from a "special" family, they also have a potential to become special. This is a motif that appears in many YA dystopias, from Ally

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<sup>241</sup> Bradbury, 46-47.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 90.

Condie's *Matched* trilogy (2010-2012, a thinly-veiled plagiarism of *Fahrenheit 451*) and Marie Lu's *Legend* trilogy (2011-2013) to, in some measure, Lois Lowry's *The Giver Quartet*.

Its powerful humanist spirit, as well as the underlying Christian ideology, values and motives make *Fahrenheit 451* significantly less political and cynical than other dystopias, but also somewhat less dystopian in the usual sense of the term; rather than an intellectual exercise it is a symbolical, poetic story of individuals who got lost in the confusing world. Unlike other, more skeptical dystopian authors, Bradbury sees more than a spark, but rather a whole world of hope for humanity; and this, along with its mythical structure that can be also interpreted based on Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, makes it in many ways an important predecessor of YA dystopias.

## **4. *The Giver Quartet***

Lois Lowry's *The Giver Quartet* consists of four novels: *The Giver* (1993), *Gathering Blue* (2000), *Messenger* (2004) and *Son* (2012). The first novel, *The Giver*, has become a modern classic since its publication. One of the first dystopias for young readers, it slightly verges between the middle-grade and the young adult in terms of style, but it is definitely young adult in its underlying gritty nature and its coming-of-age theme. Because it deals with unusually disturbing topics for children's literature, it soon provoked huge interest of a wide audience; it has been banned from school libraries from time to time, but on the other hand, it has been a very popular recommended reading in middle schools and high schools. The other novels in the series are progressively more obviously YA; the last one, *Son*, is close to adult literature due to its theme of motherhood.

Lois Lowry has written more than forty books for children and young adults, and she has never shied away from difficult topics such as untimely death of a sibling (*A Summer to Die*, 1977) or the Holocaust (*Number the Stars*, 1989). Her work is permeated by real love for children and sensibility for children's feelings and thoughts (Lowry herself is a mother of four). Family has always been one of her main subjects to explore, and dystopia, where family often struggles against society or is warped by it by numerous ways, is obviously an interesting platform to do this. While Lowry's work is known as controversial, it is basically very conservative from an ideological perspective; therefore, *The Giver Quartet* is one of the more typical examples of handling of family in children's literature. However, it does not lack subversive elements, and in any case, is well-worth thorough analysis.

### **4.1 Synopsis**

#### **4.1.1 *The Giver***

Eleven-year-old Jonas lives with his parents and little sister in a seemingly utopian community. The society is highly organized, efficient, uniform and rule-based, but it also places high value on togetherness, considerateness, and emotional as well as physical

well-being of its people. People are constantly observed to be either praised or chastised; sexual instinct is suppressed by special pills; marriages are arranged by committees, children are distributed, etc. If someone makes a serious transgression, they are “released” from the community to “Elsewhere”; this also goes for the Old and babies who are deemed “Inadequate.” Just before Jonas turns twelve, which is the age when children are assigned their future jobs, he realizes his perception is changing, and soon it becomes clear that he is the only one who can see color. Consequently, he is specially selected to start his training as the Receiver of Memory, the successor of the Giver.

The Giver, an old man living in isolation and the most important one of the Elders, is the only one who is allowed to own books etc., and the only one who knows the history of the community and the world; a literal vessel for these memories, he is able to transfer them onto others. They are memories of the world before the engineered “Sameness” – an ever-so-efficient state of being when the weather is controlled, the landscape is flat, all “dwellings,” clothes etc. look the same, and not only do people literally see the world in black and white, but they are also very emotionally shallow and flat, not being able to feel any kind of pain. The greatest pain is the pain of the memories; if everyone had access to the memories, they would all suffer. Although it would be “a little easier... if everybody took a part”<sup>243</sup> in bearing the pain, the people still “selected [the Receiver] to lift that burden from themselves.”<sup>244</sup> Along with the memories, the Giver shows Jonas a different world, a world full of anguish, horror, beauty, and love; a world that met its tragic end, but still might have been worth all the pain.

Meanwhile, Jonas’s father, who is a Nurturer for newchildren aka babies, brings home a petulant baby Gabriel to try and nurture him so that he does not have to be released. The family bonds with the baby, particularly Jonas. However, even after months of the baby’s stay (coinciding with Jonas’s training), it is not thriving enough and sleeps badly, and so its release becomes inevitable. Shortly before that, Jonas learns that “release” is a euphemism for being killed by a lethal injection; something that all adults know, but are instructed to lie about. Jonas sees it with his own eyes as he watches a video of his father killing a “redundant” newborn twin. He decides to leave the community, as the Giver tells him that if he crosses the river that encircles the place, all the memories he

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<sup>243</sup> Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (London: HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2008), 146. Hereafter abbreviated as *Giver*.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*.

has received will be released into the community and its people will have to deal with them and may be reformed. Jonas takes baby Gabriel with him, which makes his journey much more difficult. As they are on the run, pursued by planes, the landscape changes and becomes much colder and harsher than Jonas was prepared for. Eventually, the two starving, dying boys come near a beautiful snow-covered village, the “Elsewhere”; as they approach it, the reader is left wondering whether what is happening is real or it is just Jonas’s dying fantasy.

#### **4.1.2 *Gathering Blue***

Kira, the protagonist, a crippled girl of about thirteen years of age, loses her mother and becomes alone in the world; her father was killed before her birth by one of the beasts that roam the forests around the village, a chaotic, brutal place led by the almighty Council of Guardians. After the death of her mother, Kira faces danger of being cast out of her village or even killed, but she is saved by Jamison, a guardian who offers her a new home in the luxurious Council Edifice. Kira is assigned an all-important task of restoring and eventually completing the Singer’s robe, a ritual object highly valued by the community; she has special abilities – her embroideries seem to come alive under her hands and often predict the future. The Singer’s Ruin Song reminds the villagers at their annual Gathering about the history of their world, marked by cyclical destruction and reconstruction; the embroidery on the robe helps them imagine and understand the Song’s significance. Two more gifted, orphaned children live in the Edifice: Thomas, the Carver of the Singer’s staff, and little Jo, the future Singer herself. Besides them, Kira’s only friend is little Matt, a naughty rascal with a good heart. Kira is eventually supposed to finish the embroidery on the empty space of the robe; she learns the skill of fabric dying from old Annabella. Only one color is unattainable: blue, which is acquired from a plant that only grows in the mysterious “yonder.”<sup>245</sup> After hinting to Kira that the beasts do not exist, Annabella suddenly dies, causing Kira to grow increasingly suspicious of the guardians’ intentions. Meanwhile, Matt runs away from his abusive mother to “search for blue,”<sup>246</sup> and returns during the Gathering just as Kira finally uncovers the guardians’

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<sup>245</sup> Lois Lowry, *Gathering Blue* (New York: Walter Lorraine Books, 2000), 86. Hereafter abbreviated as *Blue*.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

secret: the revered Singer is, in fact, their lifelong prisoner, just like her and the children are. She is not left long to ponder it, though, because not only has Matt found blue, but he has also brought back a blind man who turns out to be Kira's father. He was not killed by beasts; it was Jamison who attempted to murder him, but people from a place called Village saved him and nursed him back to health. It is implied that it is the same paradisiacal place from the end of *The Giver*, and that Jonas and Gabriel both live there now. However, when Kira's father offers her to go back with him, Kira refuses for the time being; she feels responsible for her people and hopes to transform their own village for the better.

### 4.1.3 *Messenger*

*Messenger* takes place six years after *Gathering Blue*. Little Matt has matured into a fifteen-year-old Matty, who now lives in Village with Kira's father, Seer. Matty's role is that of a "messenger," carrying messages from Village to other places, through a thick forest that is becoming more and more dangerous. Just as he starts to discover his mysterious healing powers, the life in Village begins to change because of Trademaster, a man who fulfills people's every wish, but only in exchange for "their deepest self."<sup>247</sup> As a result, the mood in once utopian Village is shifting; people are no longer as kind and welcoming, and finally, they decide to no longer accept newcomers and build a wall so that no one else can enter. Before it happens, though, Seer asks Matty to go on his last, dangerous journey across the forest for Kira, who now lives alone in Annabella's old cottage; as the people's intentions and souls darken and become convoluted, the forest is also growing darker and thicker, and Village will soon be completely cut off. In the end of the perilous journey, Matty manages to bring Kira home to her father and Jonas, but only after he gives up his own life to heal his dying friend along with the whole poisoned forest and corrupted Village; through his sacrifice, he acquires his true name, Healer.

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<sup>247</sup> Lois Lowry, *Messenger* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2004), 69.

#### **4.1.4 *Son***

The final novel, *Son*, is divided into three parts. In the first part, the story of *The Giver* is re-told from a different point of view; that of Claire, Gabriel's Birthmother. When she is fourteen, Claire gives birth to him via a complicated c-section. No longer deemed fit for childbearing, she is assigned to a Fish Hatchery instead; but due to an administrative mistake, she no longer takes the pills suppressing her natural instincts. She starts longing for her baby, seeks him out and manages to bond with him, also getting to know Jonas's father in the process. The night when Jonas saves Gabriel from release, Claire escapes on a cargo ship; however, it is shipwrecked. In the second part, Claire finds herself in a secluded, coastal fisherman village. She has lost her memories, but regains them over the years and is determined to reunite with her son. With the help of Lame Einar, a shepherd, she gains enough skill and strength to climb up a huge cliff towering over the village, isolating it from the rest of the world. However, on the top of the cliff, she meets Trademaster, who reunites her with her son, but only in exchange for her youth. In the third part, we follow Gabriel, who is now a teenager and has a strong desire to find his mother. Claire, transformed into an old woman, watches him from afar. Eventually, the truth comes out, and as she is on the brink of death, Gabriel fights the final battle with Trademaster, the root of all evil, and defeats him. Claire regains her youth, the family is reunited, and the world is saved.

## **4.2 The Families in *The Giver Quartet***

As every novel in the series has their own protagonist who lives in a specific family and community (or several of them, in *Son's* case), I will analyze each of them separately.

### **4.2.1 *The Giver***

*The Giver's* community, its system and ideologies are obviously inspired by all the classics, Huxley, Orwell and Bradbury, while also directly drawing inspiration from

the socialist engineering of Soviet Russia; or “Cold War rhetorics,”<sup>248</sup> as proposed by Bradford et al., who list the novels as “striking instance of how contemporary children’s literature responds to global (and in these texts, US) politics in their constructions of community”<sup>249</sup> – after all, *The Giver* has come out shortly after the collapse of the USSR. However, even though the “repressive society”<sup>250</sup> of *The Giver* is partially inspired by Stalinist Russia and socialism in general, another “social experiment”<sup>251</sup> which influenced the novel and its sequel, *Gathering Blue*, is a communal, pacifist, celibate Christian sect of Shakers,<sup>252</sup> living in self-imposed uniform simplicity; these very diverse influences immediately suggest numerous possible interpretations of *The Giver*.

The greatest tension in the novel is between Jonas (and the reader’s) perception of his family and community at the beginning in comparison with the end; the opinions are gradually shifting as Jonas (and the reader) gets more information and everything is put into a wider context. At first, the reader focuses on positive aspects of the community that seems to have righted a lot of wrongs present in our world, which resulted in the creation of very functional and peaceful families among other things, but gradually, one is alerted to the disturbing lack of various basic concepts that was not immediately obvious, such as love, which leads the reader to consider their meaning and importance, and reevaluate the whole community. As he discovers the truth about his reality, Jonas moves from the safe, reliable, utopian world of his childhood to a volatile, ambiguous, dystopian world of adolescence; as he matures and gains experience and knowledge, his perspective of what he initially perceived as utopian changes and transforms into dystopian, posing questions about the nature of utopia and dystopia themselves, as well as questions about family and community.

The first few chapters describe a typical family evening in the community. The whole family sits together at dinner: the father, the mother, Jonas and his little sister Lily. After dinner, the family engages in an everyday ritual, “the evening telling of feelings,”<sup>253</sup> when everyone takes turns in telling the others what they felt during the day and the

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<sup>248</sup> Bradford et al., 108.

<sup>249</sup> Bradford et al., 107.

<sup>250</sup> Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, “Interview with Lois Lowry, Author of *The Giver*,” in Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 29, *Children’s Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 198. Hereafter abbreviated as Interview.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Giver*, 15.

family discusses their feelings at length. Everyone is very polite and considerate of each other; the parents seem mature, patient and wise, very invested in their children. Always supportive, they try to help and advise them to the best of their abilities; every issue that is brought forth is immediately solved in a calm, patient manner. The children are extraordinarily well-behaved, they trust their parents completely and share everything with them. Everyone is very eloquent and has high communication skills, even seven-year-old Lily, and the parents encourage the children to express themselves; they also do not look down on them at all and treat them as equals, not hesitating to share their own adult problems with them. When Jonas expresses his concern with the Ceremony where he will be assigned his lifelong job, his father reassures him by talking about his own relatable childhood experiences. Everyone is sympathetic of each other's struggles, comforting each other. The family has an air of simple, easygoing affection, but also structure and safe, routine stability that every child needs.

If we use Alston's ideology of the perfect nuclear family as a base for interpretation, we see a lot of traditional signs of domestic bliss: there are two heterosexual parents and two children, an older brother and a younger sister, spending their evening together at a peaceful family dinner and engaging in domestic rituals. The adults pass wisdom onto the children; occasionally, the younger sibling is a little naughty, but everything still ends in smiles. As we also later learn, there is a great emphasis on purity; nobody can see the others naked, and the parents are asexual. Even though the latter concept is inspired by the Shaker's ideology, it is reminiscent of the Victorian ideal as well.

However, in many ways, the family does not fulfill the traditional ideal. The food is not homemade; in the community, everyone gets pre-cooked meals from the Food Delivery, with nutrients counted exactly to suit the individual's needs. All the houses, impersonally called "dwellings," are strictly utilitarian and lack any decorations or coziness. Everyone has their own room, but there are no traditional gender-specific spaces such as the kitchen or the study room, which is related to the fact that the society is strictly equalitarian and gender roles are disregarded; in the case of Jonas's parents, reversed. The father works as a Nurturer, taking care of newborn babies or "newchildren," and overall has many feminine traits: he is a "shy and quiet man"<sup>254</sup> with a "gentle smile"<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *Giver*, 27.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

who “always loved the newchildren more than anything”<sup>256</sup>; he combs Lily’s hair and puts the children to bed. The mother, on the other hand, “h[old[s] a prominent position at the Department of Justice” and her “work never seem[s] to end, even when she [is] at home in the evening.”<sup>257</sup> She does not have much patience with small children; when the family takes in Gabriel, she does not fuss about him half as much as the others and gets easily annoyed with his bad sleeping habits. Also, as we later learn, all the adults wear similar uniforms and they have the same haircuts, keeping the differences between male and female to a minimum, and there is no real hierarchy between the parents.

Just like much of the societal system in the community, the family can be perceived ambivalently, but the first impression will likely be very positive. The relationship between the parents and children seems unusually close in all its openness and honesty; all the members of the family seem to trust each other completely, enjoy each other, and solve all their little conflicts calmly and peacefully; their personalities are highly compatible. The reversal and levelling of gender roles is interestingly subversive; particularly the father’s personality and behavior is very likable, pointing to the lack of caretaking and nurturing fathers in our own society. In short, when the readers are first introduced into the practices of the community and into the workings of the family unit, most of them will probably find it very functional, even poignant in its innocent simplicity, and may even wish their own family and community was a little bit more like this; after all, this is how all utopian ideals should work. However, as the perspective on the society becomes progressively negative as the narrative develops, some of the innovative and thought-provoking ideas such as gender reversal, “telling of feelings” and other more communal rituals etc., end up almost unnecessarily discredited.

A closer look at the family rituals reveals their ambivalence. In the evening, everyone tells their feelings; the morning ritual consists of talking about dreams. Just like feelings, everyone’s dream is examined in detail and any possible underlying issue is resolved. There is something very appealing about both rituals: they are bonding times, showing that the family can communicate with complete openness, and they also seem rather enjoyable, stimulating and educational, especially for the children. However, as we soon learn, “keeping [one’s] feelings hidden” is “against the rules,”<sup>258</sup> which reveals that

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<sup>256</sup> *Giver*, 28.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

these practices are just as much about control just as they are about interest and concern. For example, when Jonas tells his parents his semi-erotic dream, it reveals that he is not ashamed to confide in them about anything, which can be regarded as positive; but it also signals to the parents that it is time for him to start taking his anti-sexual pills – Jonas has essentially reported himself. In other words, the rituals are specifically designed to create trust and connection, but also to keep tabs on everybody; they are the perfect, consensual, pleasant surveillance, *The Giver's* Thought Police.

And indeed, the family (as well as school, the neighborhood, and the community in general) highly reflects the Foucauldian ideas of power structures whose primary goal is to mold everyone into dutiful, contributing members of the community; to make them fit in and comply with the societal order, not cause any problems, not subvert the system in any way. Everyone is extraordinarily preoccupied with keeping the rules and doing everything in the best interest of the community: the parents, just like all the adults in the book, rather evoke the image of enthusiastic, conscientious builders of socialism, while the children often come across a bit like little Komsomol members.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clearer and clearer just how highly structured, rule-based and institutional the “family unit” really is. Spouses are carefully chosen by a committee, which selects them by criteria that seem quite sensible; however, it becomes clear that there is no room for “love” whatsoever – the spouses are rather like colleagues than companions, let alone lovers. The main purpose of spouses is the raising of children, for whom they can apply, but they are carefully monitored for several years before they are deemed fit to be parents and “assigned” their first toddler. Since the adults are celibate and take pills that repress sexual instinct (and as we later learn, also inhibit emotions), giving birth to children is a special job assigned to Birthmothers. The job of a Birthmother is looked down on by many people, as it is habitually assigned to girls who are not too bright, but well-built; Jonas’s mother chastises Lily for wishing to get it, claiming “[t]here’s very little honour in that Assignment,”<sup>259</sup> which only emphasizes the woman’s lack of femininity. The rules for receiving children are “[t]wo children – one male, one female – to each family unit,”<sup>260</sup> with no exceptions. After the parents receive their children at the annual Ceremony, they raise them according to a manual they receive, sharing their disciplinary role with the educational system. The raising of the children is

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<sup>259</sup> *Giver*, 36.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

pedantically adjusted to their developmental needs at appropriate ages; they are raised to be very responsible and self-sufficient, so that they have no problems transitioning into the adult world from the age of twelve, when they get their Assignments. After finishing the training for their Assignment, they leave their houses for good. The parents move to accommodations for Childless Adults, which is the clearest sign that parenting is really only a job; the parents lose all contact with their children, and therefore think of themselves as truly “childless” from then on. Eventually, they move to Houses of Old, where they are well cared for until their release; their former children are not present at the release, nor do they even know or care that it is happening.

To sum up, the family unit works rather like a state-supported, strictly utilitarian foster system, unlike the traditional nuclear family based on legal and genetic bonds, as well as bonds of love and attachment. There is a high degree of ambivalence in this system, which is most clearly illustrated in *Son* by contrasting it with the completely “natural” fisherman village; although the relationship between parents and children is rather artificial in *The Giver* and there is a strong element of control, the spouses really strive to be the best parents they can; for example, no one would ever thought of harming their children in any way, as that would be a parenting “failure,” and any kind of failure is avoided at every cost.

The previous description of the community life shows that there is a clear template for it, from birth to death, with only tiny variations. Most of this is only touched upon in *The Giver*, but shown in practice in *Son*; the comparison is intriguing, because from Jonas’s child’s perspective, the system seems rather entertaining, almost playful, in its elaborate routine, but from the perspective of Claire, who is already part of the adult system, it seems rather mundane and depressing (albeit still interesting in its own way). It is noteworthy, though, that the human element is far from missing completely. The family members have genuine moments of affection and emotional connection: everyone has their own quirks, they laugh, they get annoyed, they do not even hide their feelings about the community whenever they are sad or frustrated with some its rules. Exceptionally, they even bend or break the rules; for example, the father did not have to take Gabriel home to nurture him, but he does everything to provide him one extra year, to give him a greater chance not to be released; and breaking the rules, he even secretly finds Gabriel’s name, so that he could privately call him by it to “enhance his

nurturing.”<sup>261</sup> Jonas is “awed”<sup>262</sup> by the fact that his father broke a rule for this higher purpose, and that even the mother, who is “responsible for adherence to the rules,”<sup>263</sup> is supportive of that. The adults know the meaning of release, and want to prevent it if possible, which suggests that human life has more worth to them than it later appears; even though the father’s effort to keep Gabriel alive can be also interpreted as a simple desire to do his job exceptionally well, there is evidence to the contrary and his character remains ambivalent. People also often overlook minor transgressions of children. There is room for a little benevolence, individuality and freedom; possibly just enough for the people to feel comfortable and have the illusion of not being oppressed, but it still makes the community seem much more livable than, e.g., Oceania.

Although Jonas has always felt a little different, more contemplative than others, he first starts to alienate from his family and community when he starts his training as the future Receiver, which also initiates his coming of age; his dissociation from family and beginning of adolescence are closely related. As nobody is supposed to know about the memories from the Giver or any feelings or dreams that could be related to them, Jonas can no longer participate in any family rituals, which separates him from his family immediately. Just as importantly, his job instructions, which no adult shares with others, allow him to understand the adult layer of his community a little better; he is now able to ask anyone about anything, no matter how rude, and he is permitted to lie. The latter is a truly shocking, “frightening”<sup>264</sup> concept to Jonas. Up until that moment, he has always been sure that no one in his family has ever lied, but suddenly he is forced to challenge his innocent perceptions in a powerful coming-of-age metaphor:

What if *others – adults* – had, upon becoming Twelves, received in *their* instructions the same terrifying sentence?

What if they had all been instructed: *You may lie?* (...)

Now... he *could*... ask someone, some adult, his father perhaps: ‘Do you lie?’

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<sup>261</sup> *Giver*, 24.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>263</sup> *Giver*, 25.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

But he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true.<sup>265</sup>

This new uncertainty about the true nature of his most trusted people causes the boy to start doubting them. Moreover, he becomes more and more disconnected from them because he comes to realize that “*They have never known pain,*”<sup>266</sup> which he now experiences in abundance and that makes him feel isolated. His family cannot help him or empathize with him, which can be read as an allegory of every teenager who feels special in his or her agony. Later, Jonas also stops taking his pills, which (along with the memories) causes new “depth”<sup>267</sup> of feelings; feelings that are “not at all the same as the feelings that every evening, in every dwelling, every citizen analysed with endless talk.”<sup>268</sup> Jonas now knows there is “no quick comfort” for real emotions; “the thought of discussing [them] calmly at the evening meal [is] unthinkable,”<sup>269</sup> as they “d[o] not need to be told. They [are] *felt.*”<sup>270</sup> Although it is understandable that Jonas can no longer relate to his family, it is oddly undidactic of Lowry to advocate keeping deep, soul-crushing feelings to oneself; but then, Jonas does share his feelings with the Giver, who thus becomes like a “real” family to him.

For most of the novel, though, it is not quite clear whether Jonas’s family is a good or a bad example, or why. There must be a basis for comparison, which is why Lowry reveals another kind of family, the family from the past, through the Giver’s favorite memory.

Entering the memory, Jonas finds himself “in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing in on a hearth. (...) He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter.”<sup>271</sup> Alston describes the nostalgic idea of a warm, cozy, aesthetically pleasing firelit room with homemade meal as the timeless picture of family happiness in children’s literature; this scene corresponds with it perfectly. Moreover, it becomes immediately obvious that the scene takes place during Christmas Eve; commemorating

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<sup>265</sup> *Giver*, 93.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

the birth of Jesus, Christmas is of course the holiday that is traditionally associated with celebrating family the most. Jonas is amazed by a tree standing in the middle of the room and by colorful lights and packages, something non-existent in the strictly utilitarian community which lacks color both literally and figuratively. In no time, the people in the room, including an old couple, unwrap their gifts and “reveal toys and clothing and books”<sup>272</sup>; all of these are extremely scarce in the community when no one really owns anything and books are forbidden (besides that, by Alston’s theory, it also reveals that these are likely middle-class Christmas). That is followed by “cries of delight” and everyone “hugg[ing] one another.”<sup>273</sup> Finally, Jonas watches a little child cuddling with an old woman.

The image of grandparents is what fascinates Jonas the most, as they do not exist in the community. Although he knows that the community’s system “works,”<sup>274</sup> he likes the idea of “parents-of-the-parents”<sup>275</sup> very much; he has already toyed with the idea of old people taking care of little children when they both leave for “Elsewhere,” even though he knows it would be inconvenient from a pragmatic standpoint. As the Giver explains to him now, having grandparents is “a little like looking at yourself in a mirror looking at yourself looking in a mirror,”<sup>276</sup> implying the importance of continuity. Jonas cannot find a word for “the feeling that was so strong in the room,” and the Giver informs him it was “[l]ove”<sup>277</sup>; it is “a word and concept new to [Jonas].”<sup>278</sup> When the boy is presented with the old idea of Christmas and the “real,” big family, he immediately feels that the past was better than what he knows; having been acquainted with “love” through this memory of a holiday family bliss and a positive example of family, he first begins to see some of the serious deficiencies around him clearly. In this sense, the image of the Christmas heterotopia is subversive for him.

However, this “comforting”<sup>279</sup> image of “[w]armth,”<sup>280</sup> “happiness”<sup>281</sup> and “family”<sup>282</sup> also reveals a problem: it is so universal and timeless that it could take place

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<sup>272</sup> *Giver*, 157.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-9.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

in the Victorian age as well as present, or rather in a Victorian picture postcard as well as a contemporary Coke advertisement; in other words, what Lowry presents as an alternative to the fantasy of the ideal family that the community tries to put in practice is just another fantasy. The other memories that the Giver transfers to Jonas reveal the true ambivalent nature of the “real” world, but the “real” family is so unambiguously positive that it somehow feels just as artificial and one-dimensional as the community’s ideal that we were initially presented with; one of the main themes of the novel is uncovering of hypocrisy, including the family’s, and one could find the Christmas evening just as hypocritically and obligatorily content and affectionate as the evening telling of feelings. It is no wonder that Jonas finds the idea of Christmas so miraculously delightful and suffused with love when the memory does not include any child screaming and stomping on its improperly colored iPhone 10 (or a Walkman, considering the year of publication). The memory likely touches him in the same way as the first poignant presentation of the community’s family does the reader, but the first impressions of the community turn out to be false.

Apart from being clichéd, and therefore lacking real substance, the scene also points out to the fact that some of the differences between the utopian/dystopian community and the “real” world may be almost too subtle: Has Jonas really not experienced anything like Christmas? There is no religion or holidays in the community, but there are family rituals; moreover, the whole community attends the Ceremony, which does celebrate family and has much appeal especially for the children, just like Christmas do. In *Son*, Lowry strives to make the Ceremony seem more official and boring, likely to highlight the distinctions between the community and other social structures in her novels, but in *The Giver*, the event is portrayed as rather fascinating. Also, Jonas regularly experiences joy, laughter, togetherness. Therefore, the only thing to focus on in the Christmas scene that is blatantly missing from his family are the grandparents, who thus become the focus of “love,” perhaps a bit arbitrarily. The only negative thing the boy can find in the room is open fire, a symbol of love and passion, which is potentially dangerous and risky; but then, Jonas immediately realizes it also brings light and warmth, which only adds another cliché to the mix. It is only in *Son*’s fisherman village where Lowry eventually presents an overall more authentic picture of “natural” family that can be compared with the community’s one more relevantly, but only at the expense of presenting the community’s families as much colder and institutional than in *The Giver*.

However, the Christmas scene is crucial in bringing forth the first real confrontation of Jonas and his parents, which is, by contrast, very unconventional, sealing the growing distance between the boy and his family in an interesting, highly subversive manner. During breakfast, Jonas casually asks his mother and father if they love him. To the boy's surprise and dismay, they are both "amuse[d]" by the question – because love is a "very generalised word, so meaningless that it's become almost obsolete."<sup>283</sup> Jonas is incredulous, as "[h]e had never before felt anything as meaningful as the memory."<sup>284</sup> The parents instruct Jonas to be "more precise" with his language when asking such questions, reassuring him that they definitely "enjoy" him and "take pride in [his] accomplishments"<sup>285</sup>; according to them, the usage of the word "love" is "inappropriate."<sup>286</sup> However, Jonas does not accept this explanation, and claiming to do so is "his first lie to his parents"<sup>287</sup>; it is only at this deciding moment when he starts to truly dissociate from them.

The scene is rather chilling in its absurdity; in our society where the existence and almost mythical strength of family love is rarely doubted, whenever a child seeks reassurance of his or her parents' love, the question is often brushed off as silly – but because it is considered as a matter of course that the parents *do* love the child, not that they *do not*. In the community, however, the meaning of love is deconstructed and divided into functional particles; the transcending value seems to be forgotten or deemed useless. Questioning, let alone disqualifying the love of seemingly loving parents in such a direct manner is, I contend, almost unheard of in children's literature, and can be discussed with right to one of Alston's chief propositions:

The desire to 'get it right' is inextricably entangled in the mythological construction of the 'natural' family and, while parents and children may behave badly to each other, the notion that parents love their children and vice versa is never seriously questioned. (...) The texts may question behaviour, but they cannot stray into the realm of parents and children not loving each other, for this I contend is too radical: it would break the traditions of family as represented in

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<sup>283</sup> *Giver*, 162.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

children's literature, for this literature, despite its apparent changes is inherently conservative.<sup>288</sup>

*The Giver's* family is not a "natural" family, but it is as close to it as it can be, fulfilling all of its basic functions; however, the parents actually *behave* loving rather than *are*, which is a very original approach to the problem. As evident throughout Lowry's work, there is certainly room for experimentation in children's fiction, despite its conservative core. Dystopia is a convenient middle ground, as the parents' lack of love is finally explained and slightly justified by the emotion-inhibiting pills, rather than just the fact they are not biological parents and they are conditioned to act a certain way; just like the bad mothers in Bradbury, they are victims as well as perpetrators.

While the notion of family is more Foucauldian in *The Giver* than subversive in the Freudian sense, there is one little emerging "family" that does have subversive power: the one of Jonas and Gabriel. Before taking him in, everyone in the family needs to "sign a pledge that they would not get attached"<sup>289</sup> to the baby, and the parents and Lily have no problem keeping their word. In the parents' case, the lack of real bonding with the baby might be explained by the pills – when Jonas deliberately stops taking them, he finds out that besides resuming his erotic dreams it also causes "heightened feelings"<sup>290</sup>; therefore, there is a biochemical, not only psychological factor to the community's conditioning, reminiscent of Huxley. What is a little more thought-provoking is the fact that Lily, whose emotions are not regulated in any way, does not get overly attached to the toddler either, even though she spends a lot of time playing with him; it cannot be sufficiently explained by any other way than that she is simply not that sensitive, which is quite interesting in children's literature – but also slightly rewritten in *Son*.

Jonas is initially not too interested in the baby, but he gets used to his presence, naturally bonds with him and considers the toddler very cute, soon even instinctively calling him "little brother."<sup>291</sup> Gradually, he starts nurturing him himself, making him sleep in his own room and sharing the memories that he got from the Giver, as Jonas finds out that Gabriel has the same receiving power as he does. They thus bond in a special

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<sup>288</sup> Alston, 62-63.

<sup>289</sup> *Giver*, 61.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

way, symbolizing that a real bond is created between people who share memories. While the other family members also spend time with Gabriel, treating him with gentleness and care, their approach remains utilitarian: the father would be disappointed if Gabriel was released as his nurturing would be a waste of time, while the mother even admits she hates the lack of sleep, and she would not like having another baby in the house. When Gabriel, who sleeps soundly in Jonas's room, again cries in the Nurturing Centre, nobody has any compassion for him or seems to understand that he simply wants to be with his family, which is actually rather odd considering that the community is very well-informed of children's developmental psychology.

The climax of the novel that completely separates Jonas from the rest of his family and community and makes him "team up" with Gabriel is the revelation of the meaning of release. Up until the very moment he watches a release on video, Jonas still believes that his father is "such a gentle man"<sup>292</sup> who genuinely cares about babies; however, instead of making a newborn twin "clean and comfy"<sup>293</sup> before sending him away to Elsewhere as he always claims he does, the father talks to the baby in a cute voice he uses for Gabriel as he calmly applies a lethal injection, killing him instantly, following it by an offhanded " 'That wasn't so bad, was it?' "<sup>294</sup> before cheerfully placing the dead newborn into a trash chute. This is a moment of the ultimate "exposure to adult hypocrisy"<sup>295</sup> for Jonas, who has now seen that his father's love for children was never real; it has never gone beyond the community's rules, which are much crueler and inhumane than Jonas could have ever imagined. The whole meaning of "release" that all adults know but lie about, presenting it as exile, also darkens all Jonas's previous experience of the community; only now he fully understands that the Old, no matter how highly respected, are scheduled to die, criminals and other "failures" always get death penalty, etc.

Utterly shocked and distraught, Jonas does not want to return home; all remaining illusions of his perfect family are shattered. The Giver prompts him to do so, but helps him devise an escape plan, which could heal the community, giving it back its memories; but the situation becomes all the more urgent after what is revealed at Jonas's last evening

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<sup>292</sup> *Giver*, 184.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>295</sup> Interview, 197.

home, when Lowry subverts her construct of the family dinner that she so carefully idealized at the beginning:

The family unit was eating together as always: Lily chattering away, Mother and Father making their customary comments (and lies, Jonas knew) about the day. Nearby, Gabriel played happily on the floor, babbling his baby talk, looking with glee now and then towards Jonas, obviously delighted to have him back after the unexpected night away from the dwelling.

Father glanced down towards the toddler. 'Enjoy it, little guy,' he said. 'This is your last night as visitor.'<sup>296</sup>

To Jonas's horror, the father explains that Gabriel was still not able to sleep, which is why, as he says, "'we obviously had to make a decision. Even *I* voted for Gabriel's release.'"<sup>297</sup> The mother and Lily "emphatically agree[]" as the father continues light-heartedly: "'... we'd get this taken care of right away. It's bye-bye to you, Gabe, in the morning,' Father had said, in his sweet, sing-song voice."<sup>298</sup> This is when Jonas understands just how deeply hypocritical his father is: unlike the twin, Gabriel is someone who the family has known and enjoyed for the whole year, and particularly the father has always pretended he cares about his fate and would be very saddened by his loss; but finally, when Gabriel still fails to adhere to the nonsensically strict rules, he also perceives him first and foremost as a failure and not as a human being (let alone a family member, as Jonas does). He does nothing more to save him, failing to show any compassion or regret. This original, macabre scene is the peak of the complete subversion of Jonas's previous, child perception of his family and community as honest, caring and peaceful; instead, his coming of age seems to bring the realization that he is living among lying, cold-blooded sociopaths and murderers.

Jonas takes Gabriel and escapes from the community, taking on himself fully the role of a surrogate parent as well as a big brother, his protector. On the run, he takes full care of the baby, which is a rather disturbing imagery considering that he is still a child

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<sup>296</sup> *Giver*, 205.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-7.

himself; saving the baby from death and mortal danger, he is doing what a devoted parent should do, or an adult, or at least a teenager.<sup>299</sup> Jonas instinctively protects Gabriel, which makes the journey extremely difficult, but he still knows “there had not really been a choice”<sup>300</sup> whether to leave with Gabriel or not; he needs to save his life at any cost. Both boys are cold and starving, but Jonas only “we[eps] because he [is] afraid that he [cannot] save Gabriel. He no longer care[s] about himself.”<sup>301</sup> As if he was his devoted parent, Gabriel’s life becomes the highest value for Jonas, more important than his own, something worthy of the highest sacrifice, which strengthens the notion that they have become family. As Alston writes, “family... is always worth fighting for and the battle must involve some sacrifice. The heroism of the characters is demonstrated by the extent of their sacrifice.”<sup>302</sup>

As the well-established convention of children’s literature dictates, *The Giver* ends in a kind of family reunion, although the ending is ambivalent and has been subject to much discussion. When Jonas and Gabriel are on the brink of freezing to death, Jonas first “beg[ins], suddenly, to feel happy. He beg[ins] to recall happy times. He remember[s] his parents and his sister. (...) He remember[s] the Giver.”<sup>303</sup> Although his family betrayed everything he believes in, the memories of their times together still bring him joy – he is still conflicted about their relationship. Secondly, he sees a snowy village with houses shining with “lights that twinkled from trees,”<sup>304</sup> and identifies it as a place from a “memory of his own,”<sup>305</sup> the place “where families created and kept memories, where they celebrated love.”<sup>306</sup> It is “the place that he had always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their future and their past.”<sup>307</sup> As Bradford et al. propose:

Jonas’s vision of ‘Elsewhere’... epitomises Lowry’s version of utopia. (...) That the trees Jonas glimpses are transparently Christmas trees, that they are associated with family celebrations, and that the inhabitants of these homes are waiting not

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<sup>299</sup> In the 2014 film adaptation where the ages of the protagonists were raised to sixteen and Jonas’s actor was twenty-five, this plotline lost most of its impact.

<sup>300</sup> *Giver*, 217.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> Alston, 57.

<sup>303</sup> *Giver*, 222.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

only for him but for the advent of ‘the baby’, locates the utopian community firmly within a Western imaginary where Christianity is naturalised as foundational to symbolic and ideological formations and where the nuclear family is the basis of community.<sup>308</sup>

This assessment very much corresponds with all Lowry’s depictions of ideal communities and her use of Christian symbolism and imagery, as well as with the firm association of Christmas and love; as we learn in *Gathering Blue*, Jonas and Gabriel actually survived and found their new home in utopian Village, which really is like a welcoming family and honors Christian values. Nevertheless, there is also another interpretation for the ending. The Christmas memory was given to Jonas by the Giver, which means it is not exactly his *own*; therefore, the memory of Elsewhere must be found within the boy’s own soul. As it is the place the boys have come from and the place where they return, the ending can be read as the Christ-like characters of Jonas and Gabriel coming home to their real, Heavenly Father<sup>309</sup> and Heavenly family. This interpretation is supported by the fact that “going Elsewhere” never meant going to a real place as Jonas mistakenly thought, but just “dying.”

Whether on this world on another, the novel ends with Jonas desperately hoping for the final reunion with the loving family he sees in the distance, but the ending is unusually ambivalent for children’s literature, which is surely one of the reasons why the novel gained such notoriety. Jonas has not reformed his family; instead, he had to run away from it to save a baby’s life. Although his escape might have helped heal the community, and in *Messenger* there are signs that things indeed have changed, we never find out what really happened. For all we know without the information from the sequels, Jonas might find a new family Elsewhere, but at the end of *The Giver* it is only a hope which might not turn into reality; and if Jonas really dies (possibly so that Gabe could live), the reunion with God is a very atypical picture of homecoming. The narrative

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<sup>308</sup> Bradford et al., 108-9.

<sup>309</sup> We never actually find out who the boys’ biological father is; as we learn in *Son*, all the Birthmothers are artificially inseminated, which means that Jonas and Gabriel could theoretically be half-brothers. Both have striking blue eyes (while blue is Lowry’s symbol of hope) and the same mysterious ability to accept memories, with all the pain of the sins of mankind, which suggests both are Saviors. Furthermore, Gabriel’s Birthmother Claire is literally a virgin and Gabriel defeats all evil, which makes the implication that he is the Son of God even stronger. However, there are also other Christ-like characters and characters with special abilities who are not related to either Jonas or Gabriel, which slightly complicates the allegory.

strategy of ambivalence that Sambell proposes as a solution to the children's dystopian authors' creative dilemma is certainly put to good use in *The Giver*.

In conclusion, Lowry definitely does question and explore the meaning of family in *The Giver*: What is it? What is its purpose? How is it supposed to look and function? What are its most important values? As usual, there are two main examples of family that are juxtaposed, but Jonas's family unit is presented in a way that is too complex to be unanimously called bad; until the chilling end, its deficiencies and shortcomings are presented quite subtly. Jonas's coming of age is described rather symbolically as gaining a critical view of his family and community, finding courage to pose difficult questions and handle difficult answers. As the novel progresses, Lowry herself veers towards rather conventional and ideologically loaded answers in her portrayal of the good example of family, the "ideal family" from the past that does not deserve any criticism; but the questions themselves are still more important.

#### **4.2.2 *Gathering Blue***

The opening phrase of *Gathering Blue*, and simultaneously the first thing its protagonist Kira utters is a single word: "Mother?"<sup>310</sup> That points to the fact that similarly to *The Giver*, one of the main concerns of *Gathering Blue* are the struggles of family, and this time also motherly love, in a post-apocalyptic world where "man is wolf to man." Similarly to Jonas in *The Giver*, Kira comes of age as she discovers the secrets truths about her family and community, but *Gathering Blue* places even more of an emphasis on personal and communal history and the way these two are intertwined. The family is again in the forefront of the text: Kira's personal growth, all the choices she makes and the opinions she forms of her dystopian community are in one way or another dependent on how they relate to the matters of parenthood and family.

At first sight, the village where *Gathering Blue* takes place seems as dissimilar to *The Giver*'s extraordinarily organized and orderly community as it can be, for all its primitive customs, squalor, and constant chaos and strife. On the second glance, though, there are more things in common than there are differences, as the two communities are

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<sup>310</sup> *Blue*, 1.

rather “two sides of the one coin”<sup>311</sup>: the village is also governed by the Foucauldian principle of power, being led by the untouchable, patriarchal Council of Guardians that sees to it that people adhere to its strict set of old laws, controlling and manipulating the village’s citizens both openly and secretly, again not hesitating to eliminate anyone who causes trouble. Both societies are generally based on the same principle, the survival of the fittest: any villager who is wounded in body or mind or otherwise handicapped is “taken to the Field,”<sup>312</sup> which is also a burial ground, and dragged away by the mysterious beasts, and although the villagers customarily bow to their “Worship-object,”<sup>313</sup> a wooden cross in an ancient church reused as the Council Edifice, they do not have any concepts of the mercy and the compassion it used to symbolize.

Even if there is a slightly higher degree of personal autonomy and freedom of choice in the village than in the community, as no organized psychological conditioning is employed here and no one’s personality is influenced by any pills, the villagers are still controlled by their poverty and lack of options; the living conditions are dire, the possibilities for education limited, and there is hardly any love lost among people who struggle for survival every day. It suggests that people who are allowed to act on their natural instincts in such a vicious and unfavorable setting will more often than not succumb to cruelty, violence, selfishness and greed, and that people can be conditioned by their natural environment just as affectively as if they were engineered a certain way. While *The Giver* is rather inspired by the “new world” in *Brave New World*, *Gathering Blue* is rather reminiscent of the Native reservation.

Family life is obviously shaped and affected by these dire conditions. While people seem to be able to choose their spouses freely and there are no restrictions to affections and sexual love, the approach to family is also rather pragmatic and utilitarian than emotional: its main function is the production of children. Fulfilling their traditional gender roles, men hunt and women tend the household and children; healthy children are considered a valuable commodity. If a mother dies, her children are never taken care of by their father, but instead are distributed to other families who need helping hands. Mothers often angrily scold and beat their children; siblings constantly fight and no longer

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<sup>311</sup> Bradford et al., 108.

<sup>312</sup> *Blue*, 26.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

care about one another after they create their own families, which is a motif repeated by Lowry in her detailed depiction of the community's sibling relationships in *Son*.

In such setting, the relationships between parents and children tend to be rather lukewarm; loving one's children is neither forbidden nor impossible, but certainly rare. That is why Kira's very existence is so unusual and makes her so special – were she born to anyone else, she would have been left for dead. Kira's mother Katrina's position in the society was privileged compared to most women, as her father and husband were both in positions of power: her father was the respected chief guardian and her husband Christopher, an accomplished hunter, was about to become a Council member when he was killed by beasts during a hunt when Katrina was still pregnant. Because her closest family members were important and educated people, Katrina became more sophisticated and sensitive than the average villager; therefore, she instantly fell in love with her handicapped daughter, refused to give her up, and was allowed an exception thanks to her male protectors. Katrina then raised her daughter with love, tenderness and encouragement unheard of in the community; she taught her the fine art of weaving and was delighted to watch Kira surpass her. Furthermore, she often gently explained to Kira that people “meant no harm”<sup>314</sup> when they wanted to take the girl to the Field as a baby: “It was the way, the custom, and it was the merciful thing, to give an unnamed, imperfect infant back to the earth before its spirit had filled it and made it human,”<sup>315</sup> making her understand that the villagers are not willingly cruel, but rather do not know any better.

Because Katrina gave her such an overwhelmingly positive example of motherly love and protection, Kira is sensitized to negative images of motherhood and broken families; besides that, she possesses a refined sense of compassion for neglected, parentless children, which is what gradually helps her see the shortcomings as well as the potential of her society with unusual clarity. But although her upbringing gives her many advantages, it “set[s] her apart too and ma[kes] others, like Vandara, hostile.”<sup>316</sup>

Vandara is the woman who accuses Kira and puts her on trial at the beginning of the novel, trying to get her killed. While Katrina is the perfect example of a good mother, a gentle nurturer who always makes her home neat and clean and makes her daughter her highest priority, Vandara is her polar opposite and the prime example of a bad mother.

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<sup>314</sup> *Blue*, 4.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

One of the most powerful members of the community, Vandara is a crude, heartless, mean woman who preys on the weak to make herself feel more powerful, and therefore is always ready to “destroy someone’s young.”<sup>317</sup> Even formally, she possesses unfeminine characteristics, such as being unkempt or boasting an awful scar, “said to be a remnant of a long-ago battle with one of the forest creatures”<sup>318</sup>; the villagers are impressed by this proof of the woman’s “courage and vigor as well as her malevolence,”<sup>319</sup> stereotypically masculine qualities. To emphasize her utter lack of motherly instinct and compassion, it is said that she was injured “when she tried to steal an infant creature from its mother’s den,”<sup>320</sup> just like she later tries to destroy Kira right after she loses her mother’s protection. Kira’s father later reveals that Vandara actually lies about her past to appear powerful and menacing instead of cowardly, petty and ruthless; her scar is the result of an accident for which she blamed her own small child, and when the child soon after died, she was suspected by feeding him oleander. As one of the main ideological roles of a mother in children’s literature is providing children with wholesome food, feeding a child with poison instead is the ultimate deviant, villainous act, going against all expectations of motherhood; its uncharacteristic cruelty is highlighted by the fact that Vandara killed her own child, and not a stepchild, which is a motif often seen in fairy-tales. Overall, the act of killing the young and destroying families, not even stopping before one’s own, is constructed as the ultimate act of villainy in the novel, and by introducing Vandara, Lowry disproves Alston’s theory that unloving parents do not really exist in children’s literature.

Unlike Vandara, Kira loves children and would obviously make a great mother; however, she will never be able to have any of her own, or even marry. As Vandara points out, “No one wants a cripple.”<sup>321</sup> Kira accepts this as a fact of life, understanding that “she could never be a good wife, could never perform the many duties required.”<sup>322</sup> While she is proud to know that she can “manage alone”<sup>323</sup> like her mother did and taught her, she puts her motherly instinct in practice elsewhere. The villagers’ families are always in her thoughts; like a surrogate mother or a big sister, she “recogniz[es] each little one”<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> *Blue*, 15.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

of the villager's children, "telling them stories, teaching them games."<sup>325</sup> Incidentally, this is one of Kira's main similarities to Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the most popular heroine of dystopian fiction. Despite being natural protectors and fiercely family-oriented, both girls are convinced they will never marry or have families of their own, as the nature of their dystopian societies forbids that. In Kira's case, the society where only the strongest survive deems her physically unfit to be a wife or a mother, and in Katniss' case, her conscience would never allow her to bring a baby to the world where children are in permanent danger of being sent to the murderous Games. However, that does not prevent both of them from behaving motherly towards friends or, in Katniss's case, siblings.

Kira fully demonstrates this tendency when she meets Jo, a gifted small girl, "hardly more than a toddler,"<sup>326</sup> which is brought to the Council Edifice after the death of her parents to start her training as the future Singer. Kira witnesses her guardian and mentor Jamison, the trusted man who defended her during the trial and oversees her work on the robe, harshly scolding the little girl, which immediately marks him as suspicious for the first time; later, worried by the sound of the child's crying at night, Kira is also for the first time stirred to act on her own without consulting Jamison, of whom she has suddenly become distrustful. She finds little Jo locked alone in her room, sobbing and pleading for her mother, complaining about the way the guardians treat her, always forcing her to learn new things, overexerting her for her age, causing her pain.

Although Kira realizes that the Ruin Song is important for the village community, she still disapproves of the notion of children being treated as adults, let alone deprived of their freedom. Therefore, she is moved to action, and protecting and mothering Jo becomes Kira's first small act of rebellion against the guardians. Without Jamison's knowledge, she effectively becomes Jo's surrogate mother, visiting her at night, comforting her, cuddling with her, and even intuitively putting her to bed with a little kiss on the forehead like her own mother did when she was a child. Kira passes Katrina's wisdom to Jo, urging her to "be proud"<sup>327</sup> and face difficult situations fearlessly. Jo's fate is so important to Kira that she decides to investigate the girl's past, which helps her to eventually piece together the guardians' conspiracy.

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<sup>325</sup> *Blue*, 43.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

Jo is not the only child dear to Kira, however; another one is Matt, a wild boy from Fen, the poorest and dirtiest part of the village, and the future protagonist of *Messenger*. An obvious descendant of the literary tradition initiated by Huckleberry Finn, he is a mischievous, pragmatic little rogue who has no qualms about stealing or lying and resists all Kira's efforts to be "sivilized," but he is also kind-hearted, generous and extremely observant and insightful. Matt is most likely the freest member of the community, resisting any control, doing, saying and feeling whatever he wants (remarkably, he nurses a half-dead little dog back to health and keeps him as his friend, an act of mercy and care unprecedented in the village); but this freedom has the high price of his being completely neglected by his mother. As Kira later finds out, Matt does not have any father, and his mother, living in squalor and despair, is completely apathetic and hardly cares about Matt or his little brother at all, being either dismissive or violent towards them; the society where everyone is left to their own devices creates an atmosphere where the bad example of family is usual, or even the norm. Therefore, Matt doesn't have any real idea of what a good family should look like, and learns it only through his friendship with Kira and Thomas. The girl is very concerned about Matt's safety, and Matt also protects her and helps her in many ways, finally succeeding in reuniting her with her father. Kira is like Matt's adoptive big sister; this motif is strengthened in *Messenger* where Kira's father actually becomes Matt's guardian and mentor.

Although the novel is mostly focused on motherhood, in the end it is rather Kira's father figures, her real father Christopher and her guardian Jamison, who turn out to be crucial in shaping her final perception of the community and her resulting decision.

Jamison turns out to be Kira's father's old rival for a position in the Council, which led him to attack and blind Christopher and leave him for dead. Furthermore, as a Council member who is highly involved in Kira's fate and responsible for Thomas, the Carver, and Jo, the Singer, he is very likely to have arranged the murders of all their parents (and later, Kira's mentor Annabella) in order to get hold of the gifted children; he, too is an active destroyer of families. However, even though all this would typically make him a clear-cut villain, Jamison's influence on Kira's fate remains highly ambivalent. On the one hand, he is a ruthless killer, a human beast on par with Vandara, who showed no mercy trying to murder Christopher without any regard for his wife and baby on the way (although this is left to readers' consideration, such distress in pregnancy might even have

resulted in Kira's birth defect). However, it is undeniable that thanks to her mother's courage and love, Kira's disability did not have an altogether negative effect on her life. It made her who she is, a girl made strong by her pain, humble yet proud, sympathetic with other people's suffering; one of a kind in the village. Ironically, Jamison's odious act might have benefitted Kira in the long run, although that was not the intention.

Moreover, even though Jamison has played such a dark role in her life, it certainly turned out to be a wise decision for Kira to trust his experience and knowledge during the trial and let him defend her instead of defending herself. Had she attempted that, she would likely be killed, but instead she is offered a new, sheltered life in the Council Edifice and an extremely important job for the Council. The reader can speculate that the result of the trial was decided beforehand and the whole situation was only meant to provoke gratefulness in Kira to make her more compliant, but the main point still stands: Kira has become one of the central figures of her community and has got the opportunity to fill in the empty space of the robe, both literally and symbolically; she comes to understand on her own that she has the power to change the future of her people. Furthermore, Jamison is truly kind and helpful to Kira as her mentor, teaching the girl about the repetitive, cyclical history of her world; in some ways, he actually acts like her surrogate father, protecting and teaching her while also holding a firm, controlling, patriarchal hold of her. Jamison's ambivalent role might also be symbolized by the ambivalence of the Council Edifice: like Victorian homes, it is neat, comfortable and structured, with a special room for every, where wholesome, homemade meals get regularly served; a safe space that shields Kira from the rest of the world. However, Kira eats her meals alone in her room, which is a signal the place is inherently hostile and Jamison is not a "real" father figure; only afterwards does Kira start eating and sharing her meals with Thomas and Matt, creating a surrogate family. The Council Edifice does not only serve as a shelter, but also as Kira's prison – nobody can go in or out without permission (except for the subverter Matt); Jamison's title "Guardian" signifies a protector, but also a watchdog.

Kira's father Christopher, on the other hand, gives Kira the opportunity for freedom and real family. He is led back to his old village by Matt, who set out on his journey to find blue, a symbol of hope in the novel; the color has faded from the robe and cannot be used to create the new pattern, for the blue dye is made from a plant that no

longer grows in Kira's village. Not only does Christopher, the harbinger of hope,<sup>328</sup> bring the plant and blue threads to Kira, but he also discloses the truth about Jamison and some revelations about the village, including Vandara's true story and the confirmation that in fact "[t]here be no beasts"<sup>329</sup>; the only beasts around are men. Most importantly, he presents her with the story about his village, the *yonder*, a true heterotopia. It is a place whose people saved him, nursed him back to life and accepted him in their midst after Jamison's attack left him blind and helpless: a paradisiac "village where healing people lived in harmony"<sup>330</sup>; a place where everyone "help[s] each other."<sup>331</sup> Christopher offers to Kira to return to this utopian village with him and live as a family – in fact, as he says, "the whole village is like a family."<sup>332</sup> The village is obviously the same village where Jonas and Gabriel found shelter at the end of *The Giver*; Jonas's final vision of "Elsewhere," the ideal community full of hope, Christian-like love and mercy.

Kira must confront all this information with the things she has shortly before taken in during the Gathering, on whose day her father and Matt arrived. Firstly, she noticed to her shock and horror that the Singer is in fact truly held captive by the Council of Guardians, his legs chained and bloody like a prisoner's. Evidently, he has been forced to give up his own life for the benefit of the community, and the same fate can await little Jo or even Kira and Thomas if they disobey; in other words, Kira realizes she is in great peril.

However, before she sees this, Kira also observes something very different and much more positive about the villagers: "On a typical day, families were scattered and apart, tykes scampering unsupervised, parents at work; but today hubbies stood with their wives and tykes with their families."<sup>333</sup> The Gathering is, above all, a special family day for the entire village. Even Matt's mother adheres to that: "Today she was washed and tidy; beside her, holding her hand, was the tyke who looked so much like Matt. The two stood waiting as a family."<sup>334</sup> On this ceremonial day, the most important day of the year, all families are able to unite in peace and enjoy their togetherness. They are connected by

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<sup>328</sup> As Jamison blinded Christopher, we never find out what color his now "opaque" (193) eyes originally had; they might just as well have been blue like Jonas's, Gabriel's, and maybe Claire's. Furthermore, he also has some special abilities like Jonas, Gabriel and Kira, which gains him the title Seer.

<sup>329</sup> *Blue*, 110.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-11.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-5.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

their myths and history, represented among others by the robe; and Kira can help them understand and appreciate this history, as well as envision a new future for them. Watching the villagers, the girl fully realizes how she feels about her community: “I need all of you. We need each other.”<sup>335</sup>

And that is why, in a conclusion somewhat reversed from *The Giver*, Kira reconsiders her initial decision to leave with her father immediately for the paradisiac village, but instead chooses to stay despite all the horror and threat – while her family has been reunited, it needs to be separated again for Kira to fulfill her role in the community that Jamison outlined for her, although she has decided to put a twist to it. A darker interpretation might suggest that Kira’s real father is blind and helpless and a stranger for Kira, and therefore does not have the persuasive strength as Jamison, a healthy, powerful, authoritative individual who has already played an important role in Kira’s life and made her realize her influential role in the community. This makes the conclusion of *Gathering Blue* another great example of an ambivalent ending typical for YA dystopia, far from the stereotypically happy one. Kira sees very clearly all the negative sides of her village, the betrayal of Jamison, the danger the guardians pose to the captive children. But she still postpones her personal happiness and safety and stays, not only for her friends, but for the benefit of the entire community, which at first sight doesn’t have much hope for improvement, but in Kira’s eyes does have the potential to change for the better. Renouncing her own hope for a family even more pronouncedly, Kira refuses to go even after Matt tells her that even “them broken ones... gets married”<sup>336</sup> in the other village, recommending a boy who turns out to be *The Giver*’s Jonas.

It might appear Kira finally chooses community over family – but her village is also her family, however flawed. She stays to transform her community to a more human, loving place, a place where family can thrive; sacrificing her personal family reunion, she decides to become many families’ reformer and healer.

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<sup>335</sup> *Blue*, 177.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

### 4.2.3 *Messenger*

On the surface, *Messenger* is the least focused on themes of parent-child relationships, motherhood, fatherhood, etc., of all the four novels; its main concern is the whole once idyllic community of Village, which is rapidly “disintegrat[ing],”<sup>337</sup> moving from utopian to dystopian; it is discarding its status as a “place of acceptance and healing,”<sup>338</sup> which is “echo[ing] national mythologies of the United States as a haven for those from dysfunctional and impoverished communities,”<sup>339</sup> and instead isolating itself by building a wall and denying access to the refugees, which is chillingly topical nowadays. However, at a closer look, the theme of family again drives the plot in a major way; besides other things, it becomes apparent that the disintegration of the community is highly interconnected with negative changes to the family, and that Lowry’s outlook on how the truly utopian family should look is remarkably conservative and nostalgic.

The protagonist Matty has lived with the Kira’s father, who is called Seer in Village, for the last six years. The boy is rather matter-of-fact, tough, and emotionally quite detached, which is why he does not seem too overtly attached to the Seer, who he still refers to as “the blind man.” Initially, more than anything, these two seem like good roommates and companions; Matty helps the Seer with the household chores and garden, and although they have their differences, they always share meals, jokes, and thoughts.

However, it soon becomes clear they are much more than just roommates; Seer’s home is marked by all the signifiers of a good family life. The man places great importance in cooking homemade meals together and doing so with great care and patience; he is actively trying to pass this value onto Matty, who resists, being a restless teenager, but reluctantly obliges. Their house is neat and tidy, decorated with one of Kira’s embroideries, and has a simple, old-fashioned, rustic feel; at one point, Matty describes “soft upholstered furniture decorated with fringe” as “frivolous” and its young owners as “foolish,”<sup>340</sup> which indicates there is no room for such tacky, trendy nonsense in his own house. Moreover, apart from cooking, Matty and Seer’s evenings are filled with activities such as reading together and playing music. One of their biggest (if still

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<sup>337</sup> Bradford et al., 109.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>340</sup> *Messenger*, 37.

rather negligible) conflicts is about a “Gaming Machine” that Matty’s friend Ramon’s family traded for and plays with after dinner; Matty is trying to convince Seer to also get one, because “[their] evenings would never be boring,”<sup>341</sup> but Seer protests: “[Y]our reading to me, Matty, and my listening... [i]s my favorite time of day,”<sup>342</sup> and when Matty answers that the Gaming Machine would be more exciting, Seer’s alternative is to next time read something more eventful than *Moby Dick*. When Matty still argues that the machine also produces candy; Seer says that “a nice ripe tomato”<sup>343</sup> from the garden is just as sweet, and finally wraps it up: “ ‘And so we would give up – or maybe trade away – reading, and music, in exchange for the extreme excitement of pulling a handle and watching sourballs spit forth from a mechanical device?’ ”<sup>344</sup> To Matty, this suddenly “d[oes]n’t actually seem such a good trade,” even though the device still seems “fun.”<sup>345</sup>

All in all, Lowry unequivocally and unashamedly promotes reading, cooking from bio ingredients and playing musical instruments as an infinitely better family entertainment than playing games on a “mechanical device” (clearly representing everything from computer to an XBOX) while munching processed food, which is perfectly congruent with the nostalgic myth of a good family, but the choice of a gaming console as an insidious harbinger of dystopia and societal collapse seems conservative to the point of being obsolete.

Nevertheless, being surrounded by all the things signifying domestic bliss indicates that for all intents and purposes, Matty and Seer really form a family, and Seer has become Matty’s surrogate parent, although Matty does not really realize it for a long time. The impersonal title “the blind man” might thus represent Matty’s initial emotional distance, which, however, seems to be out of character compared to *Gathering Blue*. In the previous book, little Matt is portrayed like quite a cheerful and warm child, affectionate to his friend Kira and his little dog; although he lives among squalor and violence and is very mischievous and deceitful, he is also friendly and good-hearted. In *Messenger*, Lowry seems to purposefully reconstruct his personality in a manner that could be interpreted in two ways.

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<sup>341</sup> *Messenger*, 20.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

Firstly, it might be a means to emphasize the gravity of the psychological impact of his bleak family background. Although Matty seems overall mature and composed, his highly neutral emotional processing suggests he is still healing from the psychological trauma he suffered during his “brutal beginnings,” when he had a “fatherless hovel for a home; a grim, defeated mother who beat him and his brother bloody”<sup>346</sup>; he realizes that had he stayed with his “embittered mother” who had a hard time “try[ing] make a life for children she had not wanted and did not love,” leading him to “turn[] to a life of small crimes and spirited mischief,” eventually, “he would have been imprisoned or worse.”<sup>347</sup> Such a presentation of family, though often very realistic, is certainly not common in children’s literature, and in *Gathering Blue*, it illustrated well what the dystopian environment can do to people and families, and how damaging it was to the little boy, even if it was not outwardly visible: “Matty remembered his own child self, his bravado and the terrible anguish it had concealed. He had not believed anyone would want him, ever, until he came to Village, and even then he had not trusted in its kindness for a long time.”<sup>348</sup> Still more interestingly, even though Kira’s activity in the old village brought a lot of positive changes (as we are repeatedly assured), Matty’s relationship with his family has not improved, and his family has not reunited: “His mother was dead, he had been told. His brother was still there, and looked at Matty with more respect than he ever had in the past, but they were strangers to each other now. The community where he had lived was greatly changed and seemed foreign, though less harsh than he remembered.”<sup>349</sup> Such profound estrangement from one’s background is highly unusual in children’s literature, and it still bears uncharacteristic bitterness even though Matty found a much better, even ideal family and community in Village. Matty’s grim prospects in his old environment and the lasting effects of his old abuse (at one point, he is actually “unable to speak for a moment”<sup>350</sup> when he recalls it) likely serve to emphasize what would happen to hundreds of uncared-for children like him if Village closed its borders to refugees.

Nevertheless, there is another interpretation for the changes in Matty’s personality. It is not mutually exclusive with the first one, but brings it into a new perspective, a considerably less subversive one. In short, the wild Matty got “sivilized,” which is implied by Lowry as a decidedly positive thing, considering that it takes place

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<sup>346</sup> *Messenger*, 25.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

in a village that is constructed as utopian in every way. Matty greatly values the good influences he has encountered in Village, especially Seer and Mentor, the schoolteacher; he greatly appreciates that in Village, everyone, “even the children, read, learn, participate, and care for one another,”<sup>351</sup> and he is very thankful that Seer and Mentor re-raised him to be a “honest and decent”<sup>352</sup> person like all others in the Village. We learn that whenever the naughty boy made a transgression, like lying, his only punishment consisted of not being allowed to go to school and helping in the garden instead. Being separated from the other children made Matty feel so “woefully lost” that it was enough motivation to “change his behavior and become one of Village’s happy children, and soon a good student”<sup>353</sup> – in other words, it took remarkably little for him to reform his whole personality and value system. Matt’s sudden insatiable love of learning and sitting all day at school does not really seem congruent with the little boy from *Gathering Blue* who so strongly resisted being constrained that he even struggled to get a bath; now, Matty values the time when Kira, who he thinks of as a “big sister,”<sup>354</sup> “made him wash, taught him manners”<sup>355</sup>; at these moments, it was as if “he felt the years of grime slip from him and knew that he could turn into someone cleaner, better.”<sup>356</sup>

As has been already mentioned, Matty is written in tradition of Huckleberry Finn; it shines through in *Gathering Blue*, but his representation in *Messenger* likely reflects Lowry’s idea of what would become of the spirited, rascal-like Huckleberry if he “cleaned up” and became the good, moral person he has always had the potential to become; and while presented as positive, this development comes across as conformist at best, soul-crushing at worst. Matty himself remarks that Mentor “tame[d]”<sup>357</sup> him at school, fixing some of his devilry; submitting to authorities, such as the teacher and his surrogate father, also seems to have deprived his soul of some of its freedom. Even though Matty describes being set straight as a gesture of Mentor’s love for children, it is apparent that Lowry is inadvertently touching on some of Foucauldian notions of control. The utopian version of Matty feels rather lifeless and forced, just like the whole Village; after all, what is dream for one might really be a nightmare for another.

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<sup>351</sup> *Messenger*, 25.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Although slightly problematic under the surface, Matty and Seer's family is the only one that is presented as currently positive in the text; Village is undergoing a transformation, and familial happiness again becomes a thing of the nostalgic past. Since the mysterious Trademaster took over the traditional Trade Mart and started to trade for "things you didn't see,"<sup>358</sup> people have started to change. Matty's friend Ramon's family traded for a Gaming Machine, refusing to tell him what they traded for; ever since then, Ramon is plagued by a mysterious cough that is getting worse and worse, making him bedridden; eventually, his little sister starts coughing as well, and instead of comforting her as she once would have, her mother "simply sh[akes] the child roughly by a shoulder and sa[ys], 'Shhhh.'" <sup>359</sup> Another woman whose husband has a twisted back also trades for a Gaming Machine; although they used to be "a nice family"<sup>360</sup> and she used to be "gentle", "cheerful" woman, "very loving to her husband,"<sup>361</sup> now she pays no attention to her spouse and is even mean to him: "[W]hen she was leaving, walking and talking with the other women, and her husband behind trying to keep up, she whirled around suddenly and scolded him for being slow. (...) She made a sneering face at him and she imitated his way of walking. She made fun of him."<sup>362</sup> Although people start to mistreat their families only after being affected by the evil power of the parabolic Trademaster, who evidently specifically targets families, making their fracturing the source of more evil in the society, the implication that they would be capable in the first place of trading their own children's health etc. for cheap entertainment is still rather chilling. As there is no clear answer as to what had prompted them to trade, they probably chose to do that of their own volition, which casts a rather dark shadow on the idyllic Village, whose people are quite willing to trade their souls for things of questionable value.

Another person who traded is the widowed Mentor, who wished to become more attractive and assertive to win affections of the Stocktender's widow. In this novel, the woman is constructed as a sort of an "evil-stepmother" to Mentor's daughter Jean; not only has she not lost her husband long ago at all (unlike Mentor, who has been alone with his daughter for many years), and is childless, but she also does not accept Mentor as he is; it is heavily implied she requires him to be considerably more sexually attractive to have any chance with her. Before trying to seduce her, the mentor was a wise, gentle man

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<sup>358</sup> *Messenger*, 38.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

who placed family above all. As his daughter Jean, Matty's love interest who will someday "make a good wife,"<sup>363</sup> says, she "cried when [her] father recited Macduff's speech about the deaths of his wife and children" (which are referred to by Macduff as "*the most precious to me*"<sup>364</sup>); according to Jean, "[i]t was so important to him, and he made it important to me: poetry, and language, and how we use it to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived... (...) Now he talks of nothing but Stocktender's widow, and of closing Village to new ones."<sup>365</sup> After trading, Mentor has grown taller, lost his huge birthmark and bald spot, lost weight, and has become supremely self-centered and arrogant, started building walls and (literally) kick puppies; as Jonas, now called Leader, and Seer lament, "For a woman... [p]eople do strange things."<sup>366</sup> The connection of sexuality with bad motherhood is again consistent with the children's literature ideology.<sup>367</sup> However, it is worth mentioning that Lowry slightly rewrites some of the more controversial passages of her previous books in *Son*, and that she puts a new spin on the Stocktender's widow as well; Mentor clarifies that she did not want him precisely *because* he made the trades, instead of pushing him to make more.

The movement to close Village to newcomers is also presented as first and foremost anti-familial. Village is a place where everyone "[f]inds] a home"<sup>368</sup>; "whole families" come there in hope for a better life, "relieved to be greeted by smiles."<sup>369</sup> The more Matty observes Mentor's activities and meets refugees who consider going back to their "little ones"<sup>370</sup> they intended to bring later, to places where they will likely be in mortal danger, without any more hope to escape (an image particularly disturbing in times of Trump's America), the more he realizes that "they [are] all of them doomed."<sup>371</sup> When Seer points out at Village meeting how much Matty, a former unruly refugee, has grown thanks to the positive influence of his community, a formerly kind neighbor who also "traded" argues that if the border is closed, there will be no need to bother with strangers' wild children anymore; due to manipulation and choosing their selfish interest and convenience, it becomes remarkably easy for the people to turn cold-hearted, a motif that

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<sup>363</sup> *Messenger*, 23. The attributes of Jean's potential of making a good wife are highly traditionally gender specific: she is pretty and jolly, wears skirts, bakes fresh bread, loves gardening and flowers.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>367</sup> See Alston, 112.

<sup>368</sup> *Messenger*, 29.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

is also prominent in the Unwind Dystology – where, however, the people are not corrupted by any outside supernatural force.

As Matty recognizes the danger that looms over all the families in Village and outside of it, he also starts to be more aware of the nature of his relationship with Seer. At one point, he instinctively calls him “[m]y father” when talking about him, but immediately “pause[s] and correct[s] himself[:]” “ ‘I mean the man I live with...’ ”<sup>372</sup> Soon after, Seer uses the phrase “my boy”<sup>373</sup> when speaking on his behalf, and Matty “like[s] the sound of the phrase.”<sup>374</sup> However, at the same time as their little family is finally being solidified, Seer realizes a great danger: if the wall is built, his daughter Kira will never be able to come and live with him. For all the years after Kira’s refusal to join them, Matty has acted as a connection between the two; he reunited them for the first time, he has kept them in contact, and he does not hesitate to go and reunite them now. Seer was hurt by Kira’s initial refusal: he “never talks about” her, because “[i]t makes him too sad,” though “he thinks about her all the time.”<sup>375</sup> Kira had important things to do in the village, and she accomplished them; as Matty points out, “[p]eople take good care of their children now.”<sup>376</sup> However, although Kira has never lived with her father and has built a life of her own in the village, Matty is sure that she will want to return, as she “always intended to someday” and “has no family there.”<sup>377</sup> Her father is still anxious, but Matty reassures him; and indeed, although Kira has her own home, picturesque, neat cottage full of her crafts and art, and a beautiful garden, she does not hesitate to leave; family is more important to her. Matty’s reunion with Kira is poignant, like a brother and sister’s: “She reached for Matty and embraced him. Ordinarily uncomfortable with hugs, he would have stiffened his shoulders and drawn back; but now from exhaustion and affection, he held Kira and to his own amazement his eyes filled with tears. He blinked them back.”<sup>378</sup> Around the same time at Village, Seer finally voices what has been apparent: “ ‘Matty’s like a son to me. It’s as if both my children are out there.’ ”<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> *Messenger*, 78.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-1.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

However, the Forest has become impenetrable and mortally dangerous, and both Matty and Kira eventually find themselves on the brink of death. That is when Matty instinctively uses all his healing abilities, sacrificing his life: he “g[ives] himself... willingly, trade[s] himself for all that he love[s] and value[s]”<sup>380</sup>; dies for his family, for his community. His sacrifice saves the whole Village; first and foremost, reuniting and healing all the broken and endangered families. From out of his body, he watches “Jean, beside her garden, call out in happy greeting to her father; and... Mentor, stooped once more, and balding, wave to her from the path where he was walking toward the schoolhouse with a book in his hand.”<sup>381</sup> Rather than a vain courting lover, Mentor becomes a humble, respectable father again: “His face was stained again with the birthmark, and poetry had returned to him.”<sup>382</sup> Similarly, Matty’s friend Ramon is cured, and Village is once again a safe haven for refugees and their children.

In a way, Matty’s death is a strongly subversive element. Although there are exceptions, it is generally still unusual and bold in children’s literature to let the protagonist die; furthermore, because of his death, the emerging family of Seer, Kira, and Matty never fully forms. Not only does Seer lose his dear adoptive son and Kira her surrogate little brother (who saves her in a somewhat reversed hierarchy, which could be, however, influenced by the fact they are not really siblings), but Jean also loses the potential future family she could have had with Matty. On the other hand, Matty still manages to bring Kira home to her father (although their reunion is not part of the narrative itself); “the partnering of Kira and Jonas presages the formation of a new family”<sup>383</sup>; all families in Village are rescued, as well as those that will seek refuge in it in future; and as Jonas carries Matty’s body “home,”<sup>384</sup> it is apparent that the reconstructed home will “depend[] upon traditional family structures.”<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> *Messenger*, 166.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-7.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>383</sup> Bradford et al., 110.

<sup>384</sup> *Messenger*, 169.

<sup>385</sup> Bradford et al., 110.

#### 4.2.4 *Son*

*Son* is likely Lowry's most personal novel of *The Giver Quartet*, dedicated to the memory of her own late son Martin. It takes place in three societies that all deal very differently with family matters: the community is strictly utilitarian; the fisherman village honors family as its only law; Village combines the natural with the institutional. In these three societies live many different sons; the three crucial ones are Jonas, Lame Einar, and Gabriel, who have more in common than it seems despite their very different upbringing. All these sons have their respective fathers and mothers; the most important of them is Claire, the protagonist of the entire novel, whose son Gabe becomes the final savior of the whole world, of all societies.

In the first part that takes place in the community, Lowry mostly elaborates on themes that were already explored in *The Giver*, focusing even more heavily on family structures, while again using Christian symbolism and imagery. As was already implied in the section 4.2.1, the overall depiction of the community is bleaker and more stultifying than in *The Giver*, which is linked to the fact that the protagonist Claire is already an adolescent who first finds herself at the bottom level of the society and then in the adult world where she cannot relate to anyone and is even lonelier than Jonas, who at least has the Giver; but Lowry also likely strived to make the community appear as dry and official as possible to achieve the highest possible contrast with the fisherman village, and also to highlight the uniqueness and struggles of Claire's motherly love in a society utterly devoid of love.

Claire is assigned to be Birthmother, which is disappointing, even "embarrass[ing]"<sup>386</sup>; being a mother is considered a purely biological function in the community, nothing that one must work hard for, and Birthmothers are even deemed "lazy"<sup>387</sup> and "[not]... very smart."<sup>388</sup> Even though they do not tell her that directly, Claire's parents are much prouder of her brother (another "son" in the novel), a lawyer, as his success proved they did their job very well.

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<sup>386</sup> Lois Lowry, *Son* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2012), 6.

<sup>387</sup> *Giver*, 36.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

At the Birthmothers' dormitory, giving birth is called "produc[ing],"<sup>389</sup> the child is called "the Product"<sup>390</sup> and the girls are called "vessels,"<sup>391</sup> suggesting that humans are basically "manufactured"<sup>392</sup> in the community; the Birthmothers are first and foremost "meticulously nourished"<sup>393</sup> and pretty much bred – the entire process is completely impersonal. On the other hand, Claire points out that the vessels have distinct personalities; later we find out the girls stop taking the pills for the duration of their pregnancies, which makes them less dull. Paradoxically, although they are on the imaginary lowest rank of the community, all the Birthmothers also have a special, privileged position because they do not take the pills: by comparison with their previous state, they are the only ones who can figure out what the pills really are for; the only ones who get to know true pain during childbirth; the only ones who ever desire something (their Product). Though unusually contemplative, similarly to Jonas, Claire is not the only special girl in the dormitory; another one of them, Suzanne, scoffs at the Examiners calling the mothers' pain "discomfort,"<sup>394</sup> recognizes that everything is "really boring" but "you don't really notice it"<sup>395</sup> in between the childbirths while taking pills, while during the pregnancies she is "aware of [her] own feelings"<sup>396</sup>; she has even figured out the pills are not vitamins but "something else entirely,"<sup>397</sup> which suggests that many Birthmothers are significantly smarter than the community would like its citizens to believe.

However, such conversations are said only "in a whisper,"<sup>398</sup> as the Birthmothers are carefully monitored; the special state of their pregnancy, when they are "happy"<sup>399</sup> instead of just "content[]"<sup>400</sup> (the default state of those who take the pills) and look forward to their Products, is well-recognized as potentially subversive and dangerous for the peace and order of the community. This is probably the real reason why they are more isolated than anyone else, not being allowed to leave their dormitory for the entire three years of their Assignment, as well as the reason why they are never allowed to have close

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<sup>389</sup> *Son*, 4.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

partners like spouses, let alone children, to share these past experiences with; and likely also the reason why they are so universally misrepresented as stupid, so the public does not take them seriously if they cause problems. Also, by making Birthmother the most scorned job in the overall negatively portrayed dystopian community, Lowry indirectly implies the reverse: it should be held in the highest regard. However, it is rather surprising that having felt these emotions, there are no mothers (that the reader knows of), for example Suzanne, who do not like their muted state after they resume taking their pills again, and become rebellious.

The fear of the mothers potentially causing problems is also evident during the childbirth itself, when the girls are blindfolded; the Examiners do everything to keep them unattached to their babies, recognizing the potential danger of such attachment. The whole pregnancy procedure is overall as impersonal and scientific as possible: Claire undergoes “insemination”<sup>401</sup> which is “quick and painless,”<sup>402</sup> and when there are complications during the birth, she has a caesarian. As has already been noted, that means she has remained a virgin, and what is more, she has no idea who the baby’s father is, which makes her even more analogical to Mary, mother of Jesus. C-section is very unusual as the Birthmothers are carefully selected, which is why Claire is the only Birthmother who is both literally and figuratively “left with a wound”<sup>403</sup>; she is a “failure,”<sup>404</sup> just like the Examiner who selected her, but this series of failures can be also perceived as a series of miracles leading to Gabriel’s birth, survival and saving of the world. Because of another administrative failure, Claire never resumes taking the pills (not realizing it until much later), which also makes her the only one who is “suffused with a desperate feeling of loss”<sup>405</sup> and yearning for her baby after her childbirth; soon it becomes her all-powerful, highly subversive motivation. Claire is “decertified”<sup>406</sup> as a Birthmother, but she is helped by another failure: a committee member lets it slip that she had a son.

Claire is re-assigned to the Fish Hatchery; as fish is one of the symbols of Christ, this only strengthens her association with the Savior. Claire cannot forget about her son; she thinks about him all the time, wondering where he is and what he is doing. Wanting

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<sup>401</sup> *Son*, 7.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

to help out in the Nurturing Centre, she is assured that “there’s an element of nursing at the Hatchery. All the labs and procedures”<sup>407</sup>; labs and procedures are what the community members associate with nursing the most. The yearning for her lost son makes Claire more resourceful, active and courageous. She “wonder[s]”<sup>408</sup> a lot about things she has never wondered about before and devises plans to get to him. Her motherhood and desire to reunite with her baby ignites her personal growth, gives her strength, and initiates her coming of age. Only as a mother, she fulfills her true potential and becomes the best version of herself.

Soon, Claire starts to actively break the rules of the community to get closer to her son and visit him regularly in the Nurturing Centre: “Claire decided abruptly... she would lie once again. Against the rules. She knew that. Once, she would have cared. Now she didn’t. As simple as that.”<sup>409</sup> Thanks to her son, she starts to think for herself and disobey. When she finally meets him, she immediately falls deeply in love with him, intuitively cuddles with him and mothers him. After that, “she th[inks] of nothing else, of no one else.”<sup>410</sup> When she realizes why her emotional makeup differs from others, she defiantly decides she will never be forced to take the pills again: “She would not let them take that for her, that feeling. If someone in authority noticed the error... she would pretend. She would cheat. But she would never, under any circumstances, stifle the feelings she had discovered. She would die... before she would give up the love she felt for her son.”<sup>411</sup> In a highly Freudian fashion, Claire recognizes her feeling of motherly love as one of the greatest worth, bringing her the highest form of happiness, giving her strength and purpose to defy the whole society. If all babies did not have electronic alarms attached, which is further evidence that the community is wary of Birthmothers, she would have gone as far as stolen him; contrastively, Jonas’s father, one of the Nurturers, genuinely wonders who in their right mind “would want one”<sup>412</sup> of the boring newchildren, not seeing their natural appeal.

Jonas is another important “son” in the novel. His story is only in the background of the first part and Claire never talks to him, but she feels a connection to him, sensing they are both different from the others and both just as lonely. However, she does befriend

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<sup>407</sup> *Son*, 27.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Jonas's father, who is fairly supportive of her visiting Gabe and very proud of his son's remarkable Assignment; she comes to trust him with Gabe, believing he has her baby's best interests at heart. Interestingly, Lowry opts to fill in some gaps and slightly rewrite Jonas's family history, taking some of its edge from the original chilling description. Although Jonas's sister Lily seems rather indifferent towards Gabe's release at the end of the novel, Jonas's father tells Claire an untold story: "My daughter... tried to convince me that we should apply for what they call a variance. (...) An exception to the rule. Lily thought we should try to convince them three children would be appropriate for our family."<sup>413</sup> This makes Lily seem more proactive and attached to Gabe than she seemed in *The Giver*, which makes more sense considering that most of the lack of attachment is explained by the pills, which she does not yet take. However, it also portrays Jonas's mother in worse light, as his father admits to Claire that "[his] spouse would have applied for an annulment of our pairing"<sup>414</sup> had he applied. While Claire is the exemplary nurturing mother, Jonas's mother is a cold career woman, depicted, in revision, as the only real adversary in the family; strengthening the contrast between her and Claire (and later also Kira) only highlights the highest value of loving, all-sacrificing motherhood, and the "unnatural" character of the community where many mothers do not enjoy children at all.

Jonas's mother is a very typical member of the community in her approach to motherhood. As *The Giver* implied, while people raise their children with care, parenting is only a job to them. In contrast with Claire's powerful instinct for bonding and love, no other parent really "think[s] about [the newchildren] all the time, and want[s] to hold them and not ever leave them"<sup>415</sup>; such thought seems "preposterous"<sup>416</sup> and "unintelligible"<sup>417</sup> to her coworkers. One of them is "mystified"<sup>418</sup> by the fact that his own "mother actually liked little children,"<sup>419</sup> as the job of caring about them is usually thought of as boring. While his case shows that there is some variety in the mothers' approach to children, much more common example is that of another Claire's coworkers: " 'My mother worked, just like every other mother. She took very competent care of my sister, of course,

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<sup>413</sup> *Son*, 94.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

and she took her to the Childcare Center every day... (...) She wasn't a cuddler, though. Not my mother.' ”<sup>420</sup> If we consider Alston's theory, these “competent,” but frigid mothers could be almost regarded as not real mothers at all, which would mean that the proposition about the family suffering if the mother is not present in the home could be applied and extended to the whole community. The father, on the other hand, is always permitted more leeway for confusion and struggling with his role, which, as we will see later in this section, applies to Jonas's father as well.

The community's cold, pragmatic approach to family has consequences in later life; all family attachments are completely severed after the family unit serves its purpose. Therefore, when one of Claire's coworkers finds out her father's name has been reused, which means he is dead, she is merely “surprised to hear it”<sup>421</sup>; the news of his death does not even warrant any condolences of her colleagues, just a nonchalant offer of a salad. Siblings also lose contact; Claire even wonders if her own brother would recognize her, or “care.”<sup>422</sup> This cold indifference is in stark contrast with the later depiction of the fisherman village, where everything is ruled by family love (or hatred). The dystopian community's way of life can be regarded as a criticism and extension *ad absurdum* of some of the aspects of the twentieth and twenty-first century family revolution, where work and other interests have become increasingly prioritized over family and people often let institutions take care of their children and elderly instead of accepting the responsibility themselves, and they often grow distant from their families in later life, leaving them to their own devices.

A true son of his mother, baby Gabriel finally “fail[s] to adjust”<sup>423</sup> to the rules of the community just as much as Claire herself does, and soon the decision to release him comes. This is where Lowry rewrites *The Giver* the most prominently to portray Jonas's father, in contrast with the boy's mother, as a very atypical member of the community; in a sense, also a failure. Although the man is described as indifferent towards Gabe's release in *The Giver*, making light of it and declaring that even he himself voted for the toddler's release, *Son* tells a very different story. When Claire comes to the Nurturing Centre on the fateful day, she hears a “muttered argument”<sup>424</sup> and Jonas's father is “oddly

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<sup>420</sup> *Son*, 56.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

abrupt”<sup>425</sup>; his face [is] set in hard lines”<sup>426</sup> and he cannot look her in the eyes, as if he had guilty conscience. He has evidently put two and two together and realized Claire is Gabe’s mother and his release will greatly affect her. Claire is certain that he actually “care[s] about”<sup>427</sup> her son, and indeed, he leaves the work early and takes the toddler home despite the others’ recommendation “because [his] family is fond of him, and [he] would like to have him with [them] this evening”<sup>428</sup>; at the very least, he cares about his children caring about Gabe. He is visibly very upset and affected by the whole situation, although in this version of events, the baby’s release was actually not *his* responsibility: as he says, in direct contradiction to *The Giver*, “ ‘They’re not assigning him. (...) They’ve run out of patience with him. They voted today.’ ”<sup>429</sup> Furthermore, he discloses Gabe’s real name to Claire, having overheard her calling him something else; and when Jonas runs away with Gabe, he is very distressed (which could be also caused by the released pain of the memories, although this is not addressed) and finds Claire to inform her that his son “took the babe”<sup>430</sup> (not the neutral “newchild,” as they are customarily called), which prompts her to pursue them both to “Elsewhere.”<sup>431</sup>

This all paints a very different picture of the father than we got previously – he has been breaking numerous strict rules, e.g., by not reporting Claire’s visits in the Nurturing Centre, and is evidently emotionally invested in Gabe and in his own family, unlike all the adults (that we know of) who take the pills, even though such strong feelings should be physically impossible for him. For some reason, his fatherly “love” and fondness for newchildren overrides the inhibitions, which poses more questions: Why they are not more conflicted people like this in the community? Is the psychological conditioning and peer pressure more important than it previously seemed? Were Jonas and the Giver mistaken when they thought nobody in the community could feel love? In other words, while in *The Giver*, Lowry achieves her emotional punch by subverting the expectations of the gentle, loving father, exposing him as just as inhumane as the community itself, in *Son*, she mitigates this picture by adding more layers to his character,

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<sup>425</sup> *Son*, 120.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

highlighting the power of affection, but somewhat bending and complicating her own rules.

After Claire escapes on a cargo boat and is shipwrecked, she ends up in the fisherman village, another phase in her quest to reunite with her son. The village is utterly cut off from the rest of the world by a huge cliff; it is “an isolated place where time didn’t matter, for nothing changed.”<sup>432</sup> It is even more of a polar opposite of the community than the utopian Village; a relic of times before the rise of modern science or even literacy, it might have existed side to side with More’s Utopia, and it reflects Lowry’s love for folklore, nature and traditional countryside which is prominent for example in her award-winning novel *Number the Stars*. It is a place which cannot be even called “utopian” or “dystopian” in the right sense of the word, as no institutionalized structures of power exist here; while leaning toward patriarchy, the only laws that the village is really governed by are the ancient, “natural” laws of family and love. It is a wildly romantic place of endless horror and beauty, love and hatred, suffused by ancient wisdom, the matters of which Jonas’s memories in *The Giver* are made.

Unlike in the community, a tragic death of loved ones is not an evaded taboo happening behind closed doors, but an everyday, tragic reality: “Their children fell from boats and cliffs. Their sons and brothers were wounded by hooks and rope. Their women died giving birth, and the newborns died too.”<sup>433</sup> This is what makes people bitter, but also compassionate; fearful, but also appreciative of what they have. The place is alive with children (as the people have no notion of contraception), husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters; based on natural bonds and hierarchy, although still extremely nostalgic, it is by far the most lifelike society that Lowry describes.

One of the most important people in the village is old Alys, who nurses Claire back to health; a midwife and a healer, she is the one who has the most power over life and death in the village, and “few died in the birthing”<sup>434</sup> under her hands. Remarkably, she is childless and she never even married; in her youth, she was “willful,” “wanton,” and “wild,”<sup>435</sup> and she did not want any husband. Compared to Kira who did not consider marriage because the unwritten laws of her village would not permit it, and who needed

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<sup>432</sup> *Son*, 135.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

to channel her maternal instinct elsewhere, Alys had a near-feminist freedom of choice, which shows her fisherman village in a much more positive light than Kira's, and is quite refreshing in the context of Lowry's overall very conservative work. Having informed Claire that she cannot have more children because of the complications of her first delivery, Alys even promises her that "[t]here are other ways a woman finds worth."<sup>436</sup> Although Claire is later deemed unfit to be married, condemned as "stained"<sup>437</sup> by the villagers, as "[g]irls must come to the Handfasting [wedding] untouched, or pretend to be,"<sup>438</sup> Alys also reassures her that "[p]eople learn to overlook"<sup>439</sup> (and they really do forget about it, as there are other shameful cases of people disrespecting unwritten family laws like "a woman who took up with her sister's husband, a fisherman who was caught stealing from his own brother"<sup>440</sup>). Still, Alys does earn a family, as Claire becomes as close to her as a surrogate daughter; having grown up in an artificial community robbed of such basic things as color, the girl has no notion of them and is taught by Alys as if she was a real baby, similarly to the Giver teaching Jonas.

However, even though the lack of official institutions provides a high degree of freedom, it also fully reveals their other key function beside control: protection. After all, oftentimes it is one's own family members who have the most control over a person and the person needs to be protected from them; and in this respect, the fisherman village, although an isolated "island" of nostalgic wild beauty, is not safe enough to be called a true utopia. On the contrary: it was this type of premodern society which prompted thinkers like More to even construct their utopias, imagining societies which are highly organized, and therefore secure and functional. Lowry illustrates the shortcomings of the unorganized society on the case of Lame Einar, another crucial "son" in the novel, a surprisingly naturalistic depiction of brutal child abuse from one's own parent.

When we first learn about Einar, we learn that "he lost the title Fierce, and was renamed Lame"<sup>441</sup> after "[h]e had quarreled with his father and climbed out"<sup>442</sup> the cliff, the only villager who has ever achieved that; however, he returned with maimed feet. Later we learn that "[t]hough he had stolen from his father, [the villagers] forgave him

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<sup>436</sup> *Son*, 182.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-8.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

that; his father had been a harsh and unjust man”<sup>443</sup>; however, reportedly he has never forgiven himself for breaking such an ancient law and lives in self-imposed shame, “tend[ing] sheep now, and nurs[ing] a deep despair.”<sup>444</sup> Claire becomes close to Einar, liking his gentleness with the creatures and recognizing they are both deeply traumatized in their own ways. Eventually, Einar tells Claire his true story, and it becomes clear that they have both been severely victimized by the societal system of their respective communities.

Einar’s father was a fisherman, a “[s]trong,”<sup>445</sup> terrifying authority, and he did not receive well the news that Einar’s mother died at childbirth: “ ‘They say he had wanted a son. But not the one what took his wife. (...) It was Alys kept him from flinging me into the fire. Others came and held him down.’ ”<sup>446</sup> Similarly to Vandara in *Gathering Blue*, his father is unforgiving and vindictive even towards his own child, accusing him of taking the thing that he valued the most, his beloved wife; the only difference is that Einar is protected at this key moment by a positive powerful figure, Alys. Although a great advocate of love throughout the novel, Lowry is more ambiguous in this part, implying that love is not a unanimously positive force; its loss or lack can cause enormous pain, and as is already one of the chief themes of *Gathering Blue*, pain can make people either strong or cruel, depending on their character: Einar’s father “was a hard man to start, they say. [Einar’s] mum, she softened him a bit, but when she was gone he turned to stone. And the stone had an edge to it, sharpened against [Einar], for [he] had killed her.”<sup>447</sup>

After letting the village women raise the little boy, the father reclaims him when he is around six years old, “to pay for what [he] done.”<sup>448</sup> He severely and maliciously mistreats and abuses him, both physically and emotionally, never showing him an ounce of affection or mercy. As the village has no official laws and the paternal authority is the highest one, there is nothing the villagers can do. Appalled by his story, Claire suggests that Einar should have taken the law into his own hands and “should have killed”<sup>449</sup> his father; although she has not known the concept of violence until recently, such a brutal description of child abuse awakens her basic instincts. However, Einar points out that he

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<sup>443</sup> *Son*, 160.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

“had already killed [his] mother”<sup>450</sup>; in a way, he perceives his father’s behavior as justified, governed by the ancient law of quid pro quo. Even as a grown man, Einar never thought to rebel; instead, he was quietly doing what he was told, serving as a substitute for what he had supposedly taken: “ ‘I cooked for him like a wife and washed his clothes and was a wife in other ways too terrible to mention.’ ”<sup>451</sup> The last point is shockingly naturalistic and direct, touching a taboo subject of child molestation that is very rarely explored in literature for children, proving that Lowry still has not shied away from controversial topics and definitely can portray families which genuinely lack love. It seems like the purpose of rehabilitating Jonas’s father was not merely to mitigate the controversy of *The Giver* and make the family appear more functioning, but also to highlight that sometimes, one does not need any pills to hate one’s own children, and the reverse.

Einar finally attempts to escape from his father by performing the impossible feat of climbing the cliff – he considers running away as his only option. However, as we learn, he meets Trademaster at the top; being pure hearted and self-reliant, Einar refuses a trade, and the man chops off his feet. Claire is resolved to find her son, and Einar agrees to help her achieve that, training her for many years for the extremely demanding climb, supporting her in reuniting with her family. Even though Claire and Einar eventually fall in love, it is never consummated, and Claire still chooses Gabe as her highest priority; maybe also because she would never have been able to have children with Einar, as her difficult childbirth left her sterile.

After her heroic climb, Claire meets Trademaster, who transports her to Village in exchange for her youth.<sup>452</sup> This is why Claire only watches Gabe from afar again, just like she did before; he would not be able to recognize her and likely would not believe her and she would not be able to have the energy to give him what he needs; she does not want to become a burden, and so she sacrifices her own needs, “decid[ing] that it was enough that she had found him,”<sup>453</sup> and “let[ting] him be.”<sup>454</sup> Gabriel, who is fifteen years old, lives with other parentless boys in Boys’ Lodge; being highly organized, Village has nice, homely, protective institutions for cases like his. Gabe longs for his mother just as

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<sup>450</sup> *Son*, 206.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>452</sup> Trademaster mentions that Claire has amazing eyes, but we never quite find out if they are blue.

<sup>453</sup> *Son*, 304.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

much as she longs for him, posing endless questions about his past that Jonas cannot satisfyingly answer; Gabriel does not understand him when he attempts to explain the entirely “different system”<sup>455</sup> of the community, a system where the concept of mothers wanting their children does not exist. Again a true son of his mother, Gabriel is still resolved to find his answers and family at every cost: “ ‘I’m going to find out. (...) I’ll go back there. You can’t stop me. I’ll find a way.’ ”<sup>456</sup> Just like Claire, he is quite systematic and persistent in his quest to reunite with her, building his own boat from scratch.

A traditional nuclear family is again presented as the highest goal to desire: “Boys’ Lodge was a congenial group. (...) But Gabe often wished that he lived in a house with a family, the way his best friend, Nathaniel, did. Nathaniel had parents, and two sisters; their house was noisy with bickering and laughter”<sup>457</sup>; as in a picture book, their house has a flower garden and a cat. Similarly, Jonas and Kira, now husband and wife, have created an ideal nuclear family; they both fulfill their gender-specific roles, Jonas being the one who works as a “scholar/librarian”<sup>458</sup> and Kira as a seamstress, “a wonderful cook,”<sup>459</sup> but first and foremost a full-time, stay-at-home, nurturing mother and homemaker, just like all the other women in Village, which in many ways seems even more patriarchal than the fisherman village; Village is rather reminiscent of a puritan commune. Jonas and Kira have two children, a boy and a girl, named Matthew and Annabelle to preserve continuity, which is in contrast with the community’s impersonal reusing of names. Although their home is a picture of domestic bliss, one cannot help wondering whether Kira’s potential was somewhat wasted. Even though being a fantastic mother (which was always natural for her anyway) and a wise advisor is a vital role, as the previous books suggested, she could be very well Jonas’s complete equal; her intellectual and visionary qualities are just as powerful as his, but now she is “taking the children on a picnic with some friends”<sup>460</sup> while Jonas, the former Leader, supported by Mentor, are helping Gabriel save the world. Kira’s story has again a remarkably similar ending as Katniss Everdeen’s; Katniss also goes from a heroine to a stay-at-home mother taking care of her little boy and a girl.

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<sup>455</sup> *Son*, 274.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 314-5.

In the end, saving the world means the same thing as saving his mother and getting his family back for Gabriel. As Claire is dying of old age and he learns her story and comes to believe it, he finally sets out on his boat to meet and battle Trademaster. As Jonas says, Trademaster “is Evil, and like all evil, he has enormous power. He tempts. He taunts. And he takes,”<sup>461</sup> very much identifying him with the Christian Satan. Trademaster gloats that he has “torn... to pieces”<sup>462</sup> entire families and “[l]eft them in whimpering shreds,”<sup>463</sup> and that he has “caused wars” and “destroyed whole communities”<sup>464</sup>; by his own admission, he has been the cause of all evil that Lowry has described. Gabriel refuses to trade with him, but then realizes he cannot kill him either; instead he uses his special power, which is a supernaturally heightened empathy, enters Trademaster’s consciousness and realizes the man is full of insatiable hunger, as he has never known love; and the boy finally vanquishes the pitiful Trademaster by proving to him that he has not destroyed his victims like Claire or Einar completely, as they have found new strength and healed through the power of love, something that he will never know and therefore starve.<sup>465</sup>

There are clear parallels between all Trademaster’s victims and opponents, especially all the sons. Jonas and Einar both come from families that are damaged from the very nature of their societies, which have all come into existence only after the “Ruin” mentioned in *Gathering Blue*, supposedly some catastrophic war caused by Trademaster, during which the old, “good” world was destroyed, fragmented, and then rebuilt in various, mostly dysfunctional ways. Jonas’s community attempts to inhibit all natural instincts, and his mother is therefore “absent” and his father turns out to be such a frightening figure for Jonas at the end of *The Giver* that the boy does not even attempt to reason with him and instead chooses to perform a near-impossible feat of running away from the closed community. Einar’s mother is literally absent as she is dead, since the fisherman village, in stark contrast with the community, has no medical technology that could have saved her during childbirth like Claire; and because of the unwritten principles of his village there is no way how Einar could really oppose his terrible father, and so he attempts to run away from him instead as well. Neither Jonas’s father nor Einar’s are ever named, as both just perform a “role” of the father, and neither of them is a fully human

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<sup>461</sup> *Son*, 317.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>465</sup> This finale is suspiciously similar to Harry’s defeat of Voldemort at the end of the Harry Potter series.

individual; in fact, the only “real,” named father of the novels’ main characters is Kira’s father Christopher, a Christian in both his name and character.

Jonas’s escape is successful, just like later Claire’s, maybe because Gabriel gives both of them real strength and motivation. Einar, on the contrary, fails, but his failure marks him as one of the Christ-like characters in the story. Just like Gabe, he refuses to deal with Trademaster; and afterwards, he becomes a shepherd, which is one of the metaphors of Jesus, and plays a vital role in helping Claire reunite with her son. The first one who did not trade was Matty, who bears many similarities to the other sons as well; his father, who he has never met, was free to leave his mother living in filth and abuse him due to the nature of Matty’s village. The final defeater of Evil is Gabriel, who, however, gets the opportunity to do that only thanks to the united endeavors of all the previous saviors and special characters, including Claire and Kira, none of whom has traded love for hopelessness, indifference and hatred that reigned in their dystopian communities.

The finale of *The Giver Quartet* fulfills the conventions of children’s literature completely, as Claire becomes young and vibrant again and in the final scene, “Jonas look[s] past Claire and s[ees] Gabe approaching on the path.”<sup>466</sup> The reunion of the boy with his loving mother marks the beginning of the new era of healing, uniting and restoration of the broken world; the victory of love and family announces the coming of the new utopia.

In conclusion, the theme of family is absolutely crucial for Lowry’s work; the criticism of her imagined societies is always based in their approach to families. *The Giver Quartet* is highly ideologically loaded, with an obvious underlying preference for the traditional Christian family. Still, by juxtaposing many different families and societies with different degrees of the natural and modern, organized and chaotic, affectionate and cold, Lowry manages to say something universal about human nature; her work can be examined from many angles, proving that simplicity does not have to be mutually exclusive with depth and children’s literature can have very high aesthetic quality.

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<sup>466</sup> *Son*, 393.

## 5. The Unwind Dystology

The Unwind Dystology is exceptionally clever and well-crafted, a leading example of YA dystopian fiction. Its core includes four novels, *Unwind* (2007), *UnWholly* (2012), *UnSouled* (2013) and *UnDivided* (2014).<sup>467</sup> While *The Giver Quartet* is highly allegorical, the Unwind Dystology is firmly planted in the real world; Lowry is leaning towards fantasy, Shusterman chooses sci-fi. In Lowry's work, there are subversive elements, but its final impression is conservative; therefore, in the context of children's fiction, Shusterman certainly comes out as the more daring of the two. Family also plays a vital role in his Unwind Dystology, but is presented in a highly ambivalent and often downright negative way, as the main theme, the very fabric of the imagined society, is family betrayal; the various complex reasons and motivations to betray one's own children, and the different ways how the children might cope with it.

The plot of the Unwind Dystology is very complicated, narrated from alternating points of view of dozens of characters, "heroes," "villains" and completely ordinary people alike, all with different backgrounds and motivations, subverting the usual more or less black-and-white nature of children's fiction and instead presenting the issues in all shades of grey; besides family, love, and betrayal, the series deal with extremely wide range of subjects, including the misuses of science and technology, political manipulation of masses, terrorism, religious fanaticism and cult worship, or the existence of the human soul. These topics are explored in great depth, but also skillfully weaved into an action-packed narrative. While *The Giver Quartet* (especially the first two novels) is a transition between middle-grade and young adult literature, the Unwind Dystology can be considered as a step towards adult literature; or maybe rather as another proof that "young adult" is not a synonym for "derivative and simplistic consumer goods."

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<sup>467</sup> There is also a companion novella *UnStrung* (2012) and a short story collection by different authors, *UnBound* (2015); however, this thesis focuses only on the four novels, as they form a coherent narrative, and all the relevant events, themes and characters of *UnStrung* are part of them as well and numerous recounted.

## 5.1 The Society of the Unwind Dystology

Just like *The Giver Quartet*, the Unwind Dystology takes place in the near-future United States.<sup>468</sup> The destructive Second Civil War, more commonly known as The Heartland War, split the society into two groups, Pro-life and Pro-choice, bloodily fighting over the question of abortion (or so it seems). Both groups were finally reconciled by “the Unwind Accord,” which produced a “set of new constitutional amendments,” also known as “The Bill of Life”:

The Bill of Life states that human life might not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen. However, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a parent may choose to retroactively ‘abort’ a child... on the condition that the child’s life doesn’t technically end. The process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called ‘unwinding.’ Unwinding is now a common, and accepted practice in society.<sup>469</sup>

“Unwinding” is a process that uses a ground-breaking invention of neuro-grafting to harvest one hundred percent of organs from a living human being. According to the Unwind Accord, the unwound teenager is not technically dead, but rather lives on in “divided state” in the people who received his or her organs; however, the validity of this view is highly challenged especially by the teenagers in question. Teenagers can become unwound if their parents or legal guardians choose to sign “The Unwind Order” and send them to be taken apart in so-called harvest camps; for all intents and purposes, send their own children to their death.<sup>470</sup> Not only does this become a leverage for various religious cults, whose members select their children at birth to be “tithed,” or voluntarily unwound as a sacrifice to God as soon as they turn thirteen, but first and foremost it becomes the most popular way how to get rid of rebellious, unruly or otherwise “troubled” teenagers,

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<sup>468</sup> As most of YA dystopias are written by American authors, this is true for YA dystopian fiction in general.

<sup>469</sup> Neal Shusterman, *Unwind* (New York: Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2009), 1.

<sup>470</sup> The main premise of the Unwind Dystology is in some ways similar to that of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), but I contend that Shusterman’s take on the subject is more logical and better thought-out from the point of view of speculative fiction, while also leaning towards the realistic and epic as opposed to intimate and allegorical.

supported by the ironic rhetoric that the children will fare much better and finally become productive members of the society in the “divided state.” Most of these children, called “Unwinds,” have no desire to be chopped up for the benefit of the society, and so they often run away from home, or “go AWOL,” but just as often they get caught by the Juvenile Authority, otherwise known as the “Juvey-cops” or “Juveys.”

The biggest problem is that while most parents would never think of unwinding their own children, they still silently support the practice by buying the unwound children’s organs if their family needs them; in words of one of the characters, “ ‘You want to know the real reason unwinding keeps going strong...? It isn’t because of the parts we want for ourselves—it’s because of the things we’re willing to do to save our children. (...) Imagine that. We’re willing to sacrifice the children we don’t love for the ones we do. And we call ourselves civilized!’ ”<sup>471</sup> In other words, in this dystopian society, family love is precisely what *perpetuates* the evil (along with convenience and conformity), not fights it. This is an extremely original and radical view in the context of children’s literature and adult dystopian literature alike, combining both Foucauldian and Freudian view in constructing the reasons for the society’s immorality and corruption. People are unknowingly manipulated by the power structures of the state (including the military) and giant corporations that make profit from unwinding, but they are also driven to protect their family’s interests, which in this case means they are playing into the hands of the power structures. In other words, the power structures use the people’s Freudian “antisocial,” selfish instincts for their own benefit. Moreover, the power systems are even supported by the opposite kind of selfishness or conformity that overrides natural family love and makes the parents or guardians protect their *personal* interests and give away their children, which makes the whole machinery extraordinarily difficult to break down; it is incredibly hard to force people to stop protecting themselves, in whatever way.

As we later learn, the Unwind Accord’s main purpose was not to settle the dispute between the Pro-life and Pro-choice armies, but to get rid of “ferals,” frustrated, angry teenagers led to violence and crime by the desperation and poverty of the war. Nevertheless, the ban on abortions has led to a huge number of unwanted infants; these either grow up in so-called state homes under the universal surname of Ward, but often get unwound between the ages of thirteen and seventeen if there is not enough money to

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<sup>471</sup> Neal Shusterman, *UnSouled* (New York: Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2013), 173.

support them, or they are “storked,” i.e., left on someone’s porch. The receiver of the baby, or “stork,” is ordered by law to keep it unless its mother is caught in the act.

Each one of the protagonists, as well as the minor characters, is a representative of one type of the Unwind – Connor is a troubled teenager, Risa is a ward of the state, and Lev is a tithe. In the course of the story, we hear numerous opinions on unwinding as well as numerous individual stories of children whose parents or guardians got rid of them for various reasons: Hayden’s parents did it out of spite to settle a bitter custody battle, Roland protected his mother from her abusive husband and she chose the man over him, another boy was unwound after his parents died and his aunt did not want to take care of him, a Chinese girl was simply from a family where there were too many girls, etc.

The common denominators are betrayal, disloyalty, unfairness, “the quick fix,”<sup>472</sup> or conformity; in one way or another, all the Unwinds are victims of the society that created them, and all their issues have clear parallels in contemporary society. Therefore, Shusterman’s Unwind Dystology is truly dystopian, exploring and criticizing current issues by extending them *ad absurdum* and using the method of defamiliarization (while, however, remaining far more “familiar” in its realism than is usual for YA dystopia); Shusterman carefully outlines and intertwines numerous possible psychological, social and political mechanisms that could eventually lead to things turning out badly. Although the series ends in an epic, hopeful finale, Shusterman emphasizes that it is very hardly earned and very dearly paid for; there is never one Savior on whom humanity could rely to save the world and bear their sins. Nothing will bring all the dead children back to life; the society will have to accept the guilt of the genocide that went on right in front of them for decades. Therefore, despite the spark of hope bursting into flames, Shusterman’s depiction of society and family remains rather dark and ambivalent until the very end.

## 5.2 Synopsis

All the novels are very action-packed and full of twists and turns, presenting many concurrent events from the alternating points of view of not only all the protagonists, who are numerous, but also many minor or completely random characters. As the plot is

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<sup>472</sup> Neal Shusterman, *UnWholly* (Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2012), 75.

extremely intricate and explores a large variety of subjects on a very small scale without oversimplifying them, a brief, concise synopsis will hardly do the series real credit; matching its form and content, the *Unwind Dystology* consists of innumerable small parts which all have important function and work best as a unified whole. The synopsis will show that while family is not the only important topic of the series by far, it is certainly its lynchpin.

### **5.2.1 *Unwind***

Sixteen-year-old Connor Lassiter discovers by accident that his parents have signed the Unwind Order, and decides to go AWOL. He does not get very far before being tracked down by the Juvenile Authority; as it happens on a truck stop, he attempts to escape by running out onto the highway. Meanwhile, fifteen-year-old Risa Ward, a ward of the state living in one of the state homes, does not make the budget cut, and is sent to be unwound as well. Finally, at the same time, thirteen-year-old Jewish boy Lev Calder has just had his big party before being tithed. By chance, all three find themselves on the same highway at the same time, and their paths cross when Connor causes an accident that wrecks Risa's bus and frees her; and pursued by the Juveys, Connor grabs Lev from his car, takes him hostage, and then kidnaps him to save his life after realizing the boy is a tithe. These three end up on the run together, but not before Connor manages to steal a Juvey's tranq (i.e., tranquillizer) gun and shoot him with it, which gains him national notoriety and status of an urban legend; the "Akron AWOL" becomes the hero of all AWOLs and Unwinds. Connor and Risa have the same goal – not to get killed – which only becomes complicated when Connor gets the urge to save a storcked baby from a stranger's doormat; Lev, who has been brainwashed for all his life, runs away at the first opportunity. However, his lifelong spiritual leader, Pastor Dan, urges him not to come back and save his life, rendering him stunned and confused. Lev roams the country, accompanied by a boy called CyFi, who got a brain implant containing an Unwind's memories, urging him to return "home," which results in a traumatizing reunion with the unwound boy's parents. Meanwhile, Connor and Risa end up in an AWOL shelter of old Sonia, where they meet other teenagers with harrowing personal stories; among them is Roland, who becomes Connor's enemy and rival, and a friendly Hayden. Sonia makes all of them write letters to their parents, which she promises to send after their eighteenth

birthday; she also finds a new home for the baby Connor and Risa haven taken care of. Eventually, all the teenagers are re-located to the main AWOL base at an airplane graveyard, led by a man called the Admiral, once a prominent official in the Heartland War. Connor and Roland fight for power; Connor and Risa fall in love with each other. Lev, who has been going through a giant identity crisis, eventually arrives at the Graveyard as well, only to be recruited by “clappers,” much-feared suicide terrorists with explosive blood, ignited when they clap their hands. The clapper recruiters cause an uprising during which the Admiral suffers a heart attack; trying to save his life, Connor, Risa and Roland get him to a hospital, where they are all captured and send to a harvest camp. Roland attempts to kill Connor, but is not capable of that; soon after, he is unwound. The camp is infiltrated by clappers, including Lev; two of the clappers blow up the unwinding center right in time to save Connor from unwinding, but both he and Risa are inside the building when it explodes. Instead of clapping and detonating himself as well, Lev decides to save their lives. Connor and Risa are both gravely injured, but survive, although the unconscious Connor gets the unwound Roland’s arm and Risa is permanently paralyzed, having refused a new spine from an Unwind. Lev turns himself in and his and CyFi’s case cause a public scandal; Lev’s parents do not want him back. The age limit for unwinding is lowered to seventeen, saving thousands of teenagers. The Admiral survives, but hands the command over the Graveyard to Connor, taking care of his own family matters: as a Heartland War leader, he was forced to unwind his own son, and for many years he and his ex-wife were assembling all people who got his organs to “bring him home” by symbolically reuniting all his parts, and they finally succeed.

### **5.2.2 *UnWholly***

Two important new protagonists appear in *UnWholly*. The first one is Mason Starkey, a stork with the Napoleon complex, who kills two Juvey-cops on the run from his unwinding. Eventually, he ends up at the Graveyard and starts to surreptitiously undermine Connor’s authority over the Unwinds, now calling themselves “Whollies,” building his own clique of storks. The second new protagonist is Camus Comprix or Cam, the first prototype of a “rewind” human being created solely from unwound children’s body parts by a Frankenstein-like scientist Roberta, a prominent figure in an organization called Proactive Citizenry; the boy gradually gains consciousness and explores his

humanity. Meanwhile, Lev, who now lives with his oldest brother Marcus and Pastor Dan, becomes a target of a clapper attack; Pastor Dan dies and Marcus is gravely injured. In the hospital, Lev finds out that his family has officially disowned and replaced him. He is contacted by a branch of Anti-Divisional Resistance that saves tithes from unwinding, attempting to revert their brainwashing; in their headquarters, he meets a tithe called Miracolina, who is bent on getting unwound even though her parents changed their mind. These two eventually escape and fall into the hands of Nelson, the Juvey-cop shot by Connor with his own tranq gun in *Unwind*. Having been disgraced before the nation, Nelson now makes his living as a “parts pirate,” capturing teenagers and selling them on the black market to be illegally unwound, and he is out for bloody revenge. Lev and Miracolina manage to escape and Lev sets out to warn Connor; on the way to the Graveyard, Miracolina finally gives him the absolution he has desperately needed. In a series of events, Risa ends up at Cam’s facility and reluctantly befriends the boy, who is in love with her. She is forced by Roberta to speak in favor of unwinding on television, seemingly in exchange for curing her legs, but really in exchange for the safety of the Graveyard. Not by Roberta’s fault, the Graveyard is eventually raided by the Juvenile Authority anyway, and Risa turns against Roberta during her second broadcasted interview and escapes with Cam’s help. As the Juveys raid the Graveyard, Starkey finally carries out his coup-d’état, stealing an escape jet only for his storks, leaving hundreds of other Whollies, including Hayden, to be captured. Lev arrives just in time to narrowly save Connor from Nelson. The storks’ plane crashes into a lake, but most of the teenagers survive, only to become the core of Starkey’s Stork Brigade. During the novel, small bits of the real history and background of the Heartland War and unwinding emerge – Connor finds out that unwinding was invented by a man called Janson Rheinschild, who got completely wiped out from history by Proactive Citizenry, but by a lucky chance, Connor realizes that his wife was old Sonia from their first shelter, and he and Lev set out back to Akron to get some answers.

### **5.2.3 *UnSouled***

The novel is framed by the story of Janson and Sonia Rheinschild, a world-renowned team of scientists; Janson got the Nobel prize for his invention of neuro-grafting, the technology which led to unwinding, but he also created Proactive Citizenry,

originally to oversee the ethical use of his technology. However, unwinding soon becomes a subject of the Unwind Accord, which was primarily aimed at the “feral” teenagers created by the Heartland War that took education and jobs from them. Janson wanted to stop the Unwind Accord before it would take effect by inventing an alternative solution; however, the day after he sold his new invention to a prominent company, both he and Sonia were erased from all public records. Soon after, Janson dies of a heart attack; however, Sonia has salvaged the prototype of her late husband’s new invention.

As for the main story, on the way to Sonia, Connor and Lev make a stop in a small town in Kansas and Connor falls into the hands of twenty-year-old Argent Skinner. Argent is his biggest fan, an orphan who lives with his supposedly dim-witted older sister Grace, the target of his abuse. Connor befriends Grace, who is actually quite brilliant, and he manages to escape with her help, taking her with him; but not before Argent post a selfie with Connor online and alerts the Juvenile Authority and Nelson of his whereabouts. On the run, Connor accidentally hits Lev by a car, seriously injuring him. The boy instructs Connor to take him to the Arápache rez, a peaceful Native American reservation which does not support unwinding and occasionally accepts AWOLs; Lev spent some time there before becoming a clapper. The three find refuge at the Tashi’ne family; when previously living with them, Lev was present when their son Wil, a talented musician, sacrificed himself to the parts pirates; his loss was a tragedy for the whole tribe, especially his fiancée Una (Wil and Lev’s story also form the plot of the novella *Unstrung*). Meanwhile, Risa is on the run as well, encountering many difficulties, but also unexpected kindness of strangers. Nelson comes to Argent’s town and teams up with Argent who claims he knows where Connor was headed and wants to become Nelson’s parts pirate apprentice. After being dragged across the country, Nelson figures out that Argent is lying, but the boy saves his life by telling him that Grace has a tracking chip whose number only he knows. Meanwhile, Starkey the Stork Lord organizes his storks into a real army, supplying them with weapons, and starts his mission of liberating harvest camps by brutal and bloody means, taking all the freed storks under his wing, lynching the employees, swaying public opinion in favor of unwinding, but also saving Hayden and taking him prisoner. When it becomes publicly known that Connor is alive, Cam, who has meanwhile become a legal property of the army against his will and increasingly rebels against Roberta, suspects Risa to be with him and tracks him into the reservation. He is captured by Una, who recognizes that Cam has Wil’s hands and wants to kill him,

but Connor stops her and he, Grace and Cam leave the reservation together, while Lev decides to stay and catch Wil's killers. Connor, Grace and Cam reunite with Risa at Sonia's place and find shelter in the house of the teacher who took the storked baby girl from Risa and Connor in *Unwind*, raising her now as her own; the house is raided by Roberta and the Juveys looking for Cam, but although he hates Connor, his rival in love, Cam decides against betraying him and the others. Sonia finally tells Connor, Risa and Grace about the origins of unwinding, and discloses to them that she has a prototype of an artificial organ printer in her shop.

#### **5.2.4 *UnDivided***

Connor and Risa steal stem cells from a hospital and prove the printer to be functional; it prints an ear. However, Grace accidentally breaks the machine, and Connor comes with the idea that his own father, from whom he inherited craftsman abilities, could repair it; he really wants to visit home and try and get some closure. Cam has been "rewired" by Roberta to forget all about Risa, but it does not bring him peace; he hates Roberta for what she has done to him and secretly discovers more and more of Proactive Citizenry's underhanded activities. Lev and Una catch the two parts pirates that took Wil; one of them dies, the other is brought to justice. Nelson and Argent meet a leading black market businessman Divan, but Nelson betrays Argent; he and Divan have a deal and Nelson gets one side of Argent's face after his own was destroyed in his pursuit of Connor. Lev uses the respect he has earned by capturing the murderers and goes before the Tribal Council to try and convince them to officially open the reservation for all Unwinds, but his request is denied; he is, however, fully accepted into the tribe. Cam discovers Roberta's secret: she has been building an army of "rewinds," soldiers composed solely of unwound parts. Starkey continues his gory liberation of harvest camps, becoming public enemy number one and even gaining the support of clappers; finally, he decides to crown his reign of terror by slaughtering a whole tithe harvest camp, including the children. The night before, Hayden and the storks secretly opposing Starkey decide to stop him for good, kidnapping him and tricking him into offering all the storks in exchange for his own life on record; Starkey asks the clappers for help, but they send him to Divan. The storks are under new command and Hayden starts broadcasting his own radio program, giving his perspective on the latest events and inviting teenagers who

are against unwinding to a rally taking place in a few months. Connor sets out to visit his parents and show them the letter he wrote for them two years ago; meanwhile, Grace sends out a big portion of the letters to other parents. While Connor is gone, Nelson comes to Sonia's shop, kidnaps Risa and burns the place to the ground with Sonia inside. Grace manages to escape and take the broken printer with her. Connor arrives at his old neighborhood, but just before he rings the doorbell, he is knocked out and kidnapped by Nelson and his letter is never read. Risa and Connor are taken aboard Divan's flying unwinding factory; Risa is supposed to play his monstrous piano, while Connor will be unwound and auctioned off. On the ship, there are also Argent, who has become Divan's valet, and Starkey, who is also to be unwound. Connor wakes up by Argent's mistake and Starkey begs him to kill him rather than let him get unwound; reluctantly, Connor complies. Argent again decides to be his teammate and along with Risa, they devise a plan how to get Connor unwound, but not killed. Meanwhile, Lev gets his entire body tattooed with names of unwound children and sets out to New York, where he pretends to be a clapper and willingly lets himself get shot by policemen below the Statue of Liberty, making a powerful statement, surviving only by an inch of his life; thanks to his action, the Arápache rez officially offers asylum to all Unwinds. Connor gets unwound, but his plan works; all his parts are auctioned off by the Admiral, and thanks to his resources, Connor is "rewound." When on land, Risa escapes the jet and Argent finally takes revenge on Nelson, taking him aboard and having him unwound. Cam tears down Proactive Citizenry, double-crossing Roberta and getting her to publicly admit that not only is the unwinding organization involved with the army, but also with clappers. Grace sells the printer to an independent company and the organ printing research begins. Many parents receive letters from their AWOL children, and many of them finally repent. Risa and Connor reunite at the Admiral's; Connor is alive, but he feels a certain hole inside, suggesting that some integral part of a human being, supposedly one's soul, does get completely lost during the unwinding, and only time and company of loved ones can bring it back. Risa and Connor find out that Lev's peace protest, along with all the other revelations and scandals happening all at the same time, has provoked a massive outrage; people have been finally forced to self-reflect and they start realizing what they have done. Hayden's "teen uprising" becomes a huge rally of millions at the Washington Monument. To diffuse the tension, Risa and Connor are taken there and Connor has a public speech; his family is present, and he finally reunites with them with hope for reconciliation.

## 5.3 The Families in the Unwind Dystology

As all the novels have many different protagonists whose family stories are fragmented and stretched over the whole series, I devote each section to the characters/families who play the greatest role in the plot.

### 5.3.1 Connor

Of all the families portrayed in the Unwind Dystology, the Lassiters are the closest to the middle-class, two-heterosexual-parent, two-children ideal that is typical for children's literature; their story also exhibits the highest number of narrative conventions, most of which are, however, somewhat subverted. Nevertheless, as Shusterman's work is far more realistic than what is usual in children's literature, this type of family is rather chosen to poke holes in the real-world "ideal"; i.e., the perfectly ordinary, decent suburban "white-picket-fence" domestic bliss that most Americans strive for, a family that does everything to appear exemplary and would go to great lengths to maintain a "clean record" and a sense of normalcy. As such, the Lassiters are a target of social critique of the typical middle-class, provincial, conformist America. However, though criticized, they are not demonized; just like most families in children's literature, they rather *behave* badly than really *are* bad, just like Connor himself, and symbolically, also the whole American society. Just like Connor, his family (and analogically, the whole America they represent) does not lack hope for a positive transformation, which suits the central spirit of Shusterman's work as well as the YA genre in general.

Connor finds out that his parents are going to unwind him in a way that does not exactly flatter them: by accident, he first finds only three tickets for a Thanksgiving trip to Bahamas, although they are a four-member family; when he digs more, he finds his own, already signed Unwind Order, scheduled for the day before his parents and younger brother, who is not a troublemaker like himself, set out to relax on a family holiday, "to make themselves feel better about it"<sup>473</sup>; after all, nothing soothes bad conscience and reinforces the idea of the perfect family like the ocean, palms and cocktails in the

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<sup>473</sup> *Unwind*, 6.

company of the “good” son. The order is “irreversible,”<sup>474</sup> and so Connor does not fight it, although “[t]he unfairness of it had made [him] want to break something”<sup>475</sup>; it almost seems like his parents want to celebrate his “good riddance” and the fact that their family is finally trouble-free. He decides to undermine them in mischievous ways, getting better grades than ever, bringing home flowers, making them see that he is not as hopeless as they thought, with the “simple motivation” of “let[ting] them know for the rest of their lives what a horrible mistake they made.”<sup>476</sup> It certainly has the desired effect, as his parents are distraught by the positive changes in his behavior, evidently feeling very guilty for possibly giving up on Connor prematurely. This suggests they are not wholly devoid of conscience, and therefore have some potential for redemption; however, they remain too cowardly to either confess to him or apologize, determined to keep their façade until the bitter end.

Nevertheless, Connor soon realizes that “there was no sweetness to this revenge, and now, three weeks of rubbing it in their faces has made him feel no better. In spite of himself he’s starting to feel bad for his parents, and he hates that he feels that way.”<sup>477</sup> His emotions towards them are confused and ambivalent; although he hates what they are doing, he cannot quite bring himself to hate *them* and give up on them just like they did on him; he ends up feeling almost more sorry for them than for himself. Although “he’s about to be evicted—not just from the place he sleeps, but from the hearts of those who are supposed to love him,”<sup>478</sup> he cannot bring himself to return the favor; instead, he cherishes the heterotopian memories and dreams of the better times when he was a little boy and his parents came to his aid whenever he needed them, comforting and protecting him.

In many ways, the Lassiters’ struggles represent the struggles of the whole country, and Connor’s relationship with his family soon becomes analogical to his feelings toward the entire society. Just like he cannot quite give up on his family, Connor cannot quite give up on the whole society either; despite seeing solid evidence that everything has turned hopeless and there is no place for him in the world anymore, Connor never quite manages to lose all hope himself. Even though he feels unloved, he

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<sup>474</sup> *Unwind*, 6.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

cannot quite stop loving; in this sense, Connor is the opposite of Lev, who at one point loses all hope and turns to chaos and destruction. Connor's selfless, empathetic attitude, on the other hand, marks him as a harbinger of hope and reconstruction. The empathy and compassion he feels towards his parents will eventually extend to the whole society; by being able to recognize and understand the motivations of the people, most of whom are, just like his own parents, confused, weak and easily manipulated, but not quite bad at their core, Connor is eventually able to come up with one of the strategies that will bring them out of their stupor: just like his parents, it seems like the whole society has lost its memory, which is a motif very typical for dystopian literature. Connor recognizes that they need to be reminded of who they are and what is truly important; on the scale of the whole society, he does it by uncovering the history of unwinding and finding real, tangible hope in the form of the organ printer (whose first printed organ is an imperfect ear, symbolizing the necessary, but impaired ability of people to listen); on the scale of his family, he tries to do it by writing his letter.

Although he initiates the letter by heated accusations and expects to finish with words of hate, he eventually starts writing about "all the good things that happened in their lives together"<sup>479</sup>; he intuitively understands that the memories hold the greatest value and the true key to everything can be found in them. At first, Connor uses the memories to blame his parents and cause them pain, but finally, it rather becomes about "getting them to remember, so that when he's gone... if he's gone, there will be a record of all the things he felt were worth keeping alive"<sup>480</sup>; instead of ending the letter with words of hatred, he ends it with words of love. Connor does not hate his family, and he does not hate his society; instead, he wants to reform them, but intuitively understands that it cannot be achieved by force and hatred (which his foil Starkey later tries, but with dubious motivations and destructive results), as these feelings create resistance and make people try and protect themselves, but rather by love, by targeting what is best in them rather than what is worst.

As such, Connor "adheres to the patterns established in previous generations of children's literature, where bad is contrasted with good and children are meant to redeem and teach the adults who surround them."<sup>481</sup> However, especially at the beginning of the

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<sup>479</sup> *Unwind*, 109.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-10.

<sup>481</sup> Alston, 58.

story, he is certainly not unanimously good; in fact, many would deem him utterly hopeless. Just like his family represents the most typical unwinders, he represents the most typical Unwind. He is a troublemaker who has “been in and out of disciplinary school,”<sup>482</sup> has serious problems with impulse control, cannot obey authorities, picks up fights, commits petty crimes. He is the neighborhood delinquent and thug, the one who nobody wants near their daughter, the one everyone expects will be unwound one day, and his parents are at the end of their rope.

What the parents fail to notice or acknowledge is that Connor needs help rather than punishment. Much of his behavior is evidently involuntary, as when he once acts out and starts throwing dishes during anything-but-idyllic family dinner because he was overwhelmed by numerous people talking over one another; furthermore, he becomes irritable and restless when he is not stimulated at all. However, even if Connor’s parents really are not equipped to deal with him, their solution rather reflects their own immaturity, impatience and poor impulse control than his own. As another couple whose son Connor’s Whollies save from unwinding and who actually recognize “[their] own failure as parents”<sup>483</sup> as a factor in their decision says, “We tried to be good parents... but there’s a point at which you give up trying,”<sup>484</sup> to which Connor simply answers, “No, there’s not”<sup>485</sup>; he himself actually never gives up trying, never truly gives up on the people he cares about and feels responsible for. If his parents had the ability to see the big picture and did not treat him as a sick body part that could be simply chopped off for the family to be healthy again, but rather tried to heal the whole family by healing him, they could realize Connor’s true potential; however, getting to the bottom of Connor’s problems would mean they would have to reflect on their own shortcomings, which would be infinitely more difficult than just choosing the quick fix.

Who is able to realize Connor’s true potential, though, is Risa. Ever since the very beginning the girl immediately supports Connor in saving Lev, recognizing that his decision to kidnap the tithe was reckless, but compassionate, and later two truly connect in similar circumstances over a storked baby, no matter how grumpy Risa is about the whole situation. The reason why Connor grabs the baby from a strangers’ porch marks him again as someone who has the potential to see through the adult world’s hypocrisy

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<sup>482</sup> *Unwind*, 5.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

and fight it with compassion which overrides any selfishness or even survival instinct; in fact, it is rather reminiscent of the story of Jonas and Gabriel. We learn that a couple of years ago, a baby was delivered on the Lassiter's doorstep; however, his parents did not want to accept responsibility for it, and so they broke the law and sneakily put it on their neighbor's doorstep. Nothing happened until two weeks later, when Connor found another storked baby on the doorstep – only to realize it was the exact same one as last time, just looking very sick. All that time, it had been secretly passed from house to house, nobody taking responsibility for it, although everyone must have noticed its worsening health, until Connor's parents received it again and finally took it to the hospital, where it died. Because the baby belonged to the Lassiters by law, they got it buried, and as Connor remembers, “even though no one had wanted it, the entire neighborhood came to the funeral. People were crying like it was their baby that had died... And that's when I realized that the people who were crying—they were the ones who had passed that baby around. They were the ones, just like my own parents, who had a hand in killing it.”<sup>486</sup>

Even as a young boy, Connor noticed and was deeply disturbed by the adults' hypocrisy; he intuitively realized that everyone in the suburbia always does their best to look decent and blameless and fakes compassion when the whole neighborhood watches, but nobody showed a shred of compassion towards the baby behind closed doors. Furthermore, Connor was later unanimously condemned as the neighborhood thug and delinquent and his fights and petty crimes were eventually considered bad enough offences for him to be mortally punished, and yet just a couple of years before the whole virtuous neighborhood had not hesitated to break a much more serious law with much more serious consequences when they thought nobody watched. This is also rather reminiscent of Jonas's father and the whole community, which makes a big fuss of the tiniest transgressions done in public, but behind closed doors of the Nurturing Centre and the House of Old, people kill inconvenient human beings without batting an eyelid. Connor's parents are also condemnable of these crimes, but they show a flicker hope for improvement; after all, they were the ones who finally took the baby to hospital, but they still accepted the responsibility only when it was already too late. It is no wonder that Connor does not show much respect towards his parents or community as a teenager; maybe they simply do not deserve any.

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<sup>486</sup> *Unwind*, 75.

Therefore, when Connor notices a storked baby in the Akron neighborhood and sees a boy and his mother getting upset over being storked, his past trauma is triggered; even though he knows it is not the same baby, “to some deep, unreasoning part of his brain, they’re all the same baby”<sup>487</sup>; in some way, all the “unloved”<sup>488</sup> and unwanted creatures are the same for him, and he instinctively and impulsively protects them and takes responsibility for them, behaving much more humanely than his parents have ever modelled for him, which is again similar to Jonas. Just like Jonas, Connor is also a natural protector of the weak; but Connor does not have any Giver to guide him through society.

However, he does have Risa, who has actual experience with babies from the state home, and so she does not reject this responsibility either (just like she did not reject responsibility for Lev) and for a while, these two become the baby’s surrogate parents. The ideology of family lurks here; the common parental role of Connor and Risa is a signal that they are a team that eventually might become the whole society’s role models and “surrogate parents” in a way. However, this trope is also used ironically; when they are in Sonia’s shelter, Hayden remarks that “the only reason [Roland]’s being so nice to the two of [them] is because he believes in the sanctity of the nuclear family”; and “Connor can’t tell whether Hayden’s being serious or sarcastic. He suspects he’ll never figure that out.”<sup>489</sup> It is hard to tell if the nuclear family has still remained such an untouchable ideal in the world where people regularly have their children chopped up, the state homes are overflowing with unwanted children and there are too many single mothers in their early teens to count; nevertheless, Risa and Connor protecting and taking care of the baby does signal that they are special. Like so much in Shusterman’s work, Hayden’s remark remains ambivalent.

Risa and even Admiral, a strong, firm, but reliable and trustworthy authority figure, soon show that they have much more faith in Connor than his own parents, and it pays off. Connor is entrusted with real responsibility for things and people around him, he proves himself to be very useful and capable at “fixing [mechanical] things,”<sup>490</sup> but also at “fixing” even the most difficult situations. Risa very soon notices that Connor has great leadership qualities, guiding people smartly, efficiently and kindly; his qualities

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<sup>487</sup> *Unwind*, 62.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

makes others look up to him. It seems like he has always just needed people worthy of his own respect to give him enough opportunities to show his qualities.

In the end, Connor never delivers his all-important letter; it seems like it was not the right time yet for people to listen. His attempt at homecoming after two years on the run is very ambivalent, as he cannot be sure if his parents have forgotten him or not, and everything he sees could be interpreted both ways.

The light is off in the room that had been his. He wonders what it is now. A sewing room? No that's stupid, his mother didn't sew. Maybe just storage for all the junk that always accumulates in the house. *Or maybe they left it like it was.* Is there actually a part of him that hopes that? He knows that's even less likely than a sewing room.<sup>491</sup>

His parents might have moved on completely; they could also be sitting at home, waiting for him, hoping that he returns. They could welcome him with open arms and his father could even help save the world by fixing the broken printer and becoming Connor's hero, like it happens in children's books; or they could call the police on him, betraying him all over again. Maybe they love him; maybe not. Maybe there is hope; maybe not.

In the end, this ultimate question remains unanswered, as Connor gets tranquilized and taken by Nelson just a few steps from his house. The parts pirate sees all troubled teens as "vermin"<sup>492</sup> and has no regard for them or their families, ruining Connor's family reunion for which there was a huge build-up in the novels; therefore, he is the most clear-cut villain of all. Connor's father never looks at the printer, and Connor never gives his parents his letter; one of the most important, potentially game-changing, but also conventional narrative elements is reduced to "litter,"<sup>493</sup> "illegible pulp, never to be read by anyone."<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> *UnDivided*, 231-2.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the reader does get a glimpse into the life of Connor's mother, who was disturbed from her typical suburban "exhausting task of maintaining appearances"<sup>495</sup> by some noise at the door; but maybe it was just an illusion. Maybe she has been so jumpy for the last two years because she has been scared; "[o]r maybe... or maybe..."<sup>496</sup> Or maybe because she has realized what a mistake they have done, and never has quite given up hope that Connor comes back one day. There is no way to know for certain; what we do learn with certainty, though, is that "[t]here are tickets for a vacation they never took in a drawer upstairs somewhere"<sup>497</sup> and that the family has been stuck in limbo ever since Connor left.

Such a deliberately vague ending to the Lassiters' story would be extremely original, especially considering that Connor gets very close to death towards the ending and is in grave danger of never seeing his parents again or knowing if there was ever any hope to reconcile; however, *Unwind* is children's literature after all, and as such it does adhere to some of its fundamental rules, although Shusterman manages to keep the reader in the dark until the very last chapter. Connor's family is present at the rally, and Connor hears his brother calling out to him; but the moment he recognizes them, the protesters do the same, and his "unwinder"<sup>498</sup> parents almost fall victim to the lynching of an angry mob. Just like he always does, Connor comes to their rescue and protects them from the mob by hugging them; his brother, "pulled in by their gravity, joins them in this odd and awkward familial embrace."<sup>499</sup> When Connor's father asks him, "'Can you forgive us?'"<sup>500</sup>, representing the plea for forgiveness of the whole America's society, the stereotypical sentimental reconciliation could follow, but it does not:

... Connor realizes he doesn't have an answer. Right now the yes and the no of his own pie chart are overwhelmed by the part of him that's undecided.

'I'm doing this to save your lives,' Connor tells him. But he knows it's more than that. It's as if his embrace can rewind them—not into the family they

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<sup>495</sup> *UnDivided*, 233.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*

once were, but into the one they may still have a chance to be. Connor knows he can't forgive them today; they will have to fight for his forgiveness. They will have to earn it. But if they all survive today, there will be time for that.<sup>501</sup>

Shusterman adheres to the ideology of family by making Connor reunite with his parents and brother, albeit rather in another of Connor's instinctive gestures of protection than of love; simultaneously, he also abides by the unwritten law of YA literature by ending the series on a hopeful, if a little "odd and awkward" note. However, he carefully maintains his ambivalence until the very end: after all, "Connor Lassiter holds his family *like* he'll never let them go"<sup>502</sup> – although this could be a conventional simile suggesting that Connor never wants to let go of his family again, it could also point to the fact that at this moment, Connor is also only "maintaining appearances." Some integral part of Connor's family was lost when they signed the Unwind Order, just like he himself lost something intangible, but invaluable when he was unwound; only time will tell if the rewound boy, his family, and the whole country really heal their scars and get their soul back.

### 5.3.2 Lev

At the beginning of *Unwind*, Lev is the perfect, model son, "his family's pride and joy,"<sup>503</sup> an excellent student and baseball player; which is why his family is so proud to send him as their payment to God. He comes from a rich, devout Jewish family that does not spare any expense holding him a huge tithing party on his thirteenth birthday, a farewell celebration before they will take him to a harvest camp. Lev is "all the more special"<sup>504</sup> as he is "a true tithe,"<sup>505</sup> the tenth child of his parents; some of his siblings are natural, some are storks. However, of all his siblings and numerous relatives who supposedly love him very much, it is only his eldest brother Marcus who expresses his outrage about his brother's unwinding, causing a "family drama"<sup>506</sup> at the party, whose purpose is, according to him, to "wrap up all those [Lev's] life events, all those parties,

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<sup>501</sup> *UnDivided*, 371-2.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>503</sup> *Unwind*, 31.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

into one—birthdays, wedding, funeral... efficient[ly],”<sup>507</sup> following it by a mock-toast to Lev and their parents, “[w]ho have always done the right thing. The appropriate thing. Who have always given generously to charity. Who have always given 10 percent of everything to our church. Hey, Mom—we're lucky you had ten kids instead of five, otherwise we'd end up having to cut Lev off at the waist!”<sup>508</sup>

Lev's parents are extremely righteous, inflexible and set in their ways, pillars of their community who always want to do things properly, and if sacrificing their child is what is seen as proper at the moment (as unwinding is a relatively new practice), that is what they are going to do. No matter how amazing a boy Lev is, his parents love him for the function they have assigned him from birth much more than for himself; any emotional attachment they feel to Lev is incomparable to his social value. In *UnWholly*, this is juxtaposed with Miracolina's parents: the girl was only conceived and born to be a suitable bone marrow donor for her brother with leukemia and was promised to God as a thanks for his survival; but her parents fall in love with her, feeling extremely guilty and sad to be sending her away and tremendously relieved when she suggest to them they do not have to sign the Unwind Order after all – when it comes down to it, their daughter's life has greater worth for them than even the most sacred promise.

Lev's parents see it differently; but Pastor Dan, Lev's spiritual leader and another father figure, a man that has been preparing the boy for all his life to accept his untimely death gladly and without fear and to never doubt that he is “blessed”<sup>509</sup> to be a tithe, turns out to be much more conflicted about the boy's unwinding than his own parents. When Connor takes Lev hostage on the highway, but Lev escapes him for a second, turning back to his parents' car, Pastor Dan yells at him to “run”<sup>510</sup>; at first, the boy is utterly confused, but when he call him on the run, Pastor Dan admits that he persuaded Lev's parents not to search for him, so that the boy can “save [him]self” and “be anyone [he] want[s] to be.”<sup>511</sup> Unlike Lev's own parents, Pastor Dan cares about him as a person, not as a dutifully paid tax, and he wants to give Lev a chance in life; he wants the boy to have a future, a future of his own choice. However, that can be also seen as a betrayal of sorts: “After all of his [Pastor Dan's] sermons and lectures, after all that talk year after year

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<sup>507</sup> *Unwind*, 29.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

about Lev's holy duty, it's all been a sham. Lev was born to be tithed—and the man who convinced him this was a glorious and honorable fate doesn't believe it.”<sup>512</sup> After this epiphany, Lev suddenly feels “lost in every possible way.”<sup>513</sup>

This feeling reaches its climax after Lev meets CyFi and finally faces the true, horrifying reality of unwinding. When his parents bought a whole new temporal lobe for CyFi after an accident, they had no idea that the brain still contains some of the memories and personality of its previous owner; CyFi has seizures when the personality of the other boy takes over, as if he was possessed by his ghost. The boy urges CyFi to go to Joplin, where Lev discovers the chilling truth: Tyler, the boy in CyFi's head, forced CyFi to return home; not knowing he is dead, the purpose of his dark homecoming is to beg his parents not to unwind him. He does not comprehend, and never will, that it is already late – no matter how much he wails and apologizes, no matter how hard he tries to make everything right, his parents' decision was final, and he is stuck forever in his purgatory of hurt and rejection, tormenting CyFi in the process.

Tyler's parents, another seemingly nice suburban middle-aged couple, are thoroughly terrified by his “return,” and evidently only wish for him to leave them alone; Lev needs to furiously threaten them into promising their son not to unwind him, to relieve at least some of his anguish; they would not have think of it themselves. For Lev, the worst aspect of this harrowing experience is the fact that the parents behave as if Tyler was hurting *them*, not the other way around, “as if they were the ones being victimized”<sup>514</sup>; just like his own parents later do when Lev does not do what they wanted from him, acting profoundly hurt and disappointed by his actions, completely refusing to accept blame.

It is worth noting that Tyler's awful, albeit seemingly decent parents are directly contrasted with CyFi's parents, one of the few very good examples of a family in the novels. Unconventionally, CyFi has two gay fathers who care about him greatly and have been waiting for him in Joplin to take him home. Although they are both white, or “sienna,” they adopted a son who is black, or “umber,” and raise him with the utmost respect for his heritage. They would do anything for him, tending lovingly to his mental health and needs; eventually, they even found a commune for people who got Tyler's

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<sup>512</sup> *Unwind*, 80.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

organs, honoring Tyler far more than his own parents (in fact, so much that the down-to-earth Risa finds it bizarre). By portraying a gay couple as the ideal parents, Shusterman defies the heteronormative ideal of children's literature.

However, meeting CyFi's parents does not lessen the impact of the event on Lev. The macabre, subversive family reunion of Tyler and his parents changes Lev "in some deep and frightening way"<sup>515</sup>; he decides that "[s]omeone has to pay for the unfairness of it all. *Everyone* has to pay,"<sup>516</sup> and he will become the one to force them. Although Shusterman later completes the story in the companion novella *UnStrung* to include one more event that finally pushes Lev over the edge (being cast out of the Arápatche reservation after Wil's death), it rather seems like a device to expand on the later plot; originally it is Tyler's situation that sends Lev on his path to become a clapper, a suicide terrorist relishing in chaos, vengeance and destruction. Finally seeing how disgusting unwinding is, he comes to hate his own family that made him want it,<sup>517</sup> and he wants the world to feel the same hurt that he feels inside.

Eventually, unusually so for YA literature, the positive force that sways the boy from his decision to self-destruct himself and take the harvest camp with him is neither his family that has come around, nor a newly found romantic love, but the love for his friends. Lev has not been associated with Connor and Risa for very long, but appreciates that they saved his life and cared about his well-being without any pragmatic reasons or conditions; he cares for them in return and their safety becomes a powerful enough motivation for him to alter his life path. It is an illustration of the fact that a person can form deep, healthy attachments even outside of family, and these can at least partially undo the damage caused by one's toxic domestic environment.

After saving Connor and Risa, Lev turns himself in and becomes famous nationwide as "a clapper who didn't clap."<sup>518</sup> The society cannot decide whether he is "a monster or a hero"<sup>519</sup> and tries to understand the motivations for his actions. Reading about his transformation from a tithe and a perfect son to a suicide terrorist, who, on top of it all, changed his mind, which is completely unheard of, forces people to reflect on themselves and consider what role they might have played in his downfall. However,

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<sup>515</sup> *Unwind*, 193.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>517</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

even though Lev's story prompts many complete strangers to self-reflect, not so much his own parents. Not only do they not come visit him in prison, but they refuse to take back his custody, as well as disowning his brother Marcus who wants to become his legal guardian; they are truly "the kind of people who can't bend without breaking,"<sup>520</sup> much more fanatic than Lev himself (although he also always needs to be connected to something meaningful and transcendental), and no amount of family love will change that.

Who has been reflecting on himself for a long time, however, is Pastor Dan, who does come to visit Lev. His love for Lev is stronger than his principles, and the prospect of his loss was enough for him to readjust those principles. That is why he resigned from his church position; not because he "lost [his] faith,"<sup>521</sup> but "just [his] convictions."<sup>522</sup> As he tells Lev, "I still very much believe in God—just not a god who condones human tithing."<sup>523</sup> The fact that this option even exists is what really starts Lev's spiritual and emotional healing, and Pastor Dan continues being his leader and father figure, much better than his own father who would have never accepted such a view.

However, Pastor Dan soon dies in the clapper attack and Marcus is gravely injured, and during Marcus's stay in the hospital, Lev sees his parents again for the first time in months; only to have his last hopes for reconciliation thoroughly destroyed. None of them even looks at him; his mother gives him a curt hug; his "bitter, rigid, and cold"<sup>524</sup> father bombards him with accusations, acting just as victimized as Tyler's parents. Finally, Lev notices that one of his sisters has a new baby "dressed all in white"<sup>525</sup>; a new tithe, a replacement for Lev. The boy is devastated, as he first fully admits the truth to himself:

Somewhere deep, deep down in the most irrational corner of Lev's mind—perhaps the place where childhood dreams go—he held out a secret hope that he might actually be taken back. That he might one day be welcomed home. Marcus had

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<sup>520</sup> *Unwind*, 328.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>524</sup> *UnWholly*, 189.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*

told him to forget about it—that it would never happen, but nothing could wipe out that stubborn hope that hid within him. Until today.<sup>526</sup>

Like all children, Lev has likely also been taught to expect a happy ending and never give up hope, especially when it comes to family. However, in this cold, hopeless conclusion, Shusterman chooses to utterly shatter the illusion that all families must be reunited by the sheer power of love; Lev's parents will never forgive him that he decided to live. However, Lev still had another father figure in Pastor Dan, and legally changes his surname to his, which marks a new phase of his identity and another step to maturity.

Lev's story is remarkably dark in the context of children's literature, but Sonia points out that just like every other character in the series, Lev is not one of his kind; she "see[s] kids like him every day,"<sup>527</sup> kids whose "world is shattered, and they're so desperate for validation that they'd blow themselves up to get it."<sup>528</sup> She only has contempt for the Calders: "Any parent who disowns that boy after what he did, and didn't do... doesn't deserve to have children at all, much less a child to give away."<sup>529</sup>

Although Lev's parents end up looking like unusually despicable conformists, their story still can be interpreted in the context of family ideology in children's fiction: even though Lev's mother and father are perceived by everyone from Pastor Dan to Sonia as partners in crime, whenever Lev's mother is in the picture, she is conspicuously subdued. In fact, she never says a single word and always asks her husband for advice (or maybe permission) in whisper; all in all, she seems extremely submissive and controlled, which could mean she is as good as completely absent, and therefore "the family suffers."

Eventually, Lev does get a surrogate family after all – in contrast with his parents, a good example where the mother has a strong presence, while still being equal to her husband. The Tashi'ne family also belongs to a minority, this time a racial one; Shusterman certainly strives to make his characters very diverse and favors minorities, which corresponds with his focus on the society's "underdogs." The Tashi'ne are a racial minority, as they are Native American, which also defies the norm of children's literature, but also ascribes some more normative aspects to them, such as rather traditional gender

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<sup>526</sup> *UnWholly*, 189.

<sup>527</sup> *UnDivided*, 144.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

roles, albeit not entirely clear-cut. In the Arápache rez, the modern and the old is united in the way of life as well as environment, which is reflected in domesticity as well. The mother, Elina, is a medicine woman, a loving, wise caregiver who cuddles with Lev and even sings him a lullaby<sup>530</sup> - a typical nurturer. Her husband, Chal, is a lawyer, a traditionally masculine role; compared to *The Giver*, the role of the parental figures are reversed. Chal's brother, Pivane, is a hunter, a stereotypically masculine role, which however makes sense in the Native American culture; what defies the norm is the fact that he also cooks the meals while Elina works in the hospital, and the very fact he is even part of the nuclear family, who also readily accepts new members, such as Lev or Kele, a boy who was "[taken]... in when his mother died a year ago."<sup>531</sup> As for the structure of the home, it is also rather ambivalent, as "[t]he individual bedrooms are small but numerous, and all of them open to the great room, which serves as living room, dining room, and kitchen"<sup>532</sup>; the whole area is comfortable and neat, but the bedrooms are almost bare and although the furniture is made of traditional natural materials, giving it a somewhat nostalgic feel, it has very austere and modern design. Still, the fact that in some respects, the Tashi'ne family life is homely in an almost archetypal way is confirmed when Connor accidentally calls Elina "mom" during family dinner, as the meal is "kind of the same"<sup>533</sup> as what he was used to; on the other hand, Kele immediately complains that Elina does not even allow *him* to call her "mom," which suggests that despite all her mothering she keeps some distance from her wards. Her only real son was Wil, who is still mourned not only by his family, but also by the entire tribe; none of the Native tribes give their children up willingly, and the Arápache treat Wil's forced unwinding like the murder that it is, a terrible, painful loss.

However, although Lev finally finds his peace and normality in the reservation and Tashi'ne family, and eventually is even officially accepted into the tribe, he soon finds out that the "simpler, safer way of living"<sup>534</sup> that the reservation and family can offer him does not make him as happy as he thought it would; even though he desired it, now it makes him feel "unfulfilled,"<sup>535</sup> which is quite a radical diversion from the usual patterns of children's fiction where the achievement of domestic bliss tends to be the

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<sup>530</sup> See *UnDivided*, 158.

<sup>531</sup> *UnSouled*, 148.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>534</sup> *UnDivided*, 157.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimate goal. Instead, as Lev realizes, “[a]s much as he thought he wanted it, he is immune to a normal life and is addicted to a life of dangerous sway. He *must* make a difference out there. He *must* satisfy the hunger, elbowing himself a place at the feast.”<sup>536</sup> Lev cannot keep status quo; he needs to do something meaningful, and finding a replacement family is not meaningful enough for him.

Although Lev basically finds himself in a utopia, his final goal is not to make his home there, but to recognize its shortcomings and transform it. As all utopias, the reservation can keep its status quo only by isolating itself from the outside world; even though the Arápatche rez occasionally accepts refugees, it is also quick to cast them out, as evident by Lev and Wil’s story. The Arápatche are happy with their peaceful, idyllic inertia, but only at the cost of ignoring the grave problems of the outside world. As the famous quote attributed to Edmund Burke says, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing,” and that is precisely what the Arápatche do, even if their motivation is quite understandable: as one of the council members says, “ ‘After generations of being abused, all we want is to be left alone!’ ”<sup>537</sup> Lev still recognizes the dire need to push the tribes into action, even for the price of his own life, and his protest suicide (which he survives by mere coincidence) finally achieves what he wanted, opening the reservation to all Unwinds, stating that “[a]ny incursion by the Juvenile Authority on sovereign tribal land shall be seen as an act of war against the Arápatche people, and will be met with deadly force.”<sup>538</sup> When there are things to fight and die for, keeping a utopian peace at every cost is not ideal, and the Arápatche finally recognize it; but only after it directly concerns Lev, a part of their “family.”

Lev is a fascinating character, layered in a way that is unparalleled in most of children’s literature. All the families and parental figures he encounters are tied to the many conflicts and transformations in his identity, and show both the best and the ugliest side of family in general.

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<sup>536</sup> *UnDivided*, 159.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

### 5.3.3 Risa

Risa grew up in a state home; “the closest thing [she] ha[d] to a parent” was her piano teacher Mr. Durkin, which makes her fortunate, as “[n]ot every kid at Ohio State Home 23 has a teacher they can say that about. Most StaHo kids hate their teachers, because they see them as jailers.”<sup>539</sup> However, even though Mr. Durkin is proud and supportive of her like every parent would be after her piano recital where she made only minor mistakes, he does not even come to say goodbye, much less protect her after a committee sends Risa to be unwound because she has “reached [her] potential”<sup>540</sup> as a musician and is not worth financing any longer; for all intents and purposes, Risa has been parentless for all her life.

However, unlike generations of orphans in children’s literature, Risa does not crave having a family or a mother; although she slaps Cam after he accuses her of not understanding his relationship with Roberta as “[a] ward like [her] doesn’t even know what a mother is,”<sup>541</sup> this is the only moment when she expresses any personal hurt over this topic. Her life in the state home, where she occasionally works in an infant wing that “had been massive and overflowing with identical cribs, each containing a baby that nobody had wanted, wards of a state that could barely feed them, much less nurture them,”<sup>542</sup> makes her ponder the nature of her society and wonder if the Bill of Life really increased the value of human life rather than caused its inflation and reduced it: “Which was worse... to have tens of thousands of babies that no one wanted, or to silently make them go away before they were even born? On different days Risa had different answers.”<sup>543</sup> For Risa, the world is a place where abandonment and betrayal is an everyday occurrence, and one must be tough and self-reliant to survive, because nobody protects or nurture the state home children: “Risa was always able to take care of herself, both physically and emotionally. At the state home, either you developed several layers of personal armor or you were eaten alive.”<sup>544</sup> If anything, Risa’s institutionalized childhood has made her realistic, pragmatic and slightly cynical about family and society; she is certainly no Ann of Green Gables. However, this is also why she comes to admire

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<sup>539</sup> *Unwind*, 19.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>541</sup> *UnWholly*, 276.

<sup>542</sup> *Unwind*, 114-5.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>544</sup> *UnWholly*, 101.

Connor, who shows more protectiveness and compassion to the unloved than she has ever encountered in her life; she truly understands that the world desperately needs more people like him.

Instead of creating a surrogate family, thanks to her down-to-earth approach, rich experience with nurturing children and abilities to be observant and empathetic, tools for survival in the state home, Risa becomes a protective and motherly figure to others. She becomes a calming, stabilizing presence to Connor, being his voice of reason; learning to understand his inner workings and also treating him with patience and compassion, she gives him what his own parents failed to provide, and his faith in her causes his positive transformation. She greatly cares about Lev, and his friendship with her and Connor saves him from destruction. At the Graveyard, Risa becomes a medic (a traditionally feminine role, but logical given Risa's upbringing), and similarly to Connor, she feels greater responsibility for the AWOLs, or Whollies, than their own parents ever did, eventually sacrificing herself for one of the injured boys that she needed to take to the hospital, even though she knows she will be captured instead; and finally making the deal with Roberta, she opts to destroy her own reputation completely in exchange for the Graveyard kids' life. Although Risa has never known family, she is more of a family to many people around her than their real ones.

However, even though Risa slowly changes and loses much of her detachment in the course of the narrative, she still cannot grasp why Connor would risk his life to get closure from his family, and tries to convince him that “[m]issing [his] brother is not a reason to forfeit [his] life.”<sup>545</sup> This is when Connor realizes that Risa's upbringing will always prevent her from fully comprehending dilemmas such as his:

... not only can't Risa ever understand—she can't even understand why she can't. She was raised in a state home. No parents. No family. There was no one who cared enough to love her or to hate her. No one whose lives were so focused on hers that they could be made either proud or furious by her actions. Even her unwind order was not signed out of impassioned desperation, as Connor's was. For Risa it was a product of indifference. The deepest, most personal wound of her life wasn't personal for those who inflicted it. She was a budget cut. Suddenly

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<sup>545</sup> *UnDivided*, 141.

Connor finds himself feeling sorry for her because of the pain she'll never be able to feel.<sup>546</sup>

Although Risa's approach seems logical and reasonable, and oftentimes she can see through the toxic family dynamics more clearly than others, in other ways she is just as victimized as Connor by the system; being one of millions discarded children born in the aftermath of the Unwind Accord, she has been dehumanized instead of the opposite, and robbed of something she is not even able to miss or find any real value in. Although she is not far from truth when she tells Cam, "'You'd be better off storked,'"<sup>547</sup> his defensive reaction that she knows nothing about mothers is also too close to the truth for comfort.

However, although family is not as all-powerful a motivation for Risa as it typically is for parentless children in children's literature, and although there is no "good example" of family that she strives for, eventually, she does create a sort of a family of her own. Besides becoming a mother figure for the Whollies beside Connor who is like a father to them, she finds her life partner and lover in Connor, and she eventually comes to think of Lev as someone who is "kind of like a brother"<sup>548</sup>; she also briefly bonds with a couple of maternal figures such as Sonia. And perhaps, one day she will have her own family with Connor, in the better, safer world they have both helped create.

### 5.3.4 Cam and Roberta

Cam thinks of Roberta as "the closest thing he will ever have to a mother"<sup>549</sup>; as he adds, "[s]he certainly dotes on him like one."<sup>550</sup> She is his creator, someone he has known even before his "birth"; she was there at each unwinding of the teenagers he is composed of, so that she was familiar to him when he wakes up, which is deeply ambivalent on its own: he does remember her and at first thinks of her as "pretty, in a motherly sort of way,"<sup>551</sup> but as she was technically present not only at his birth, but also

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<sup>546</sup> *UnDivided*, 141-142.

<sup>547</sup> *UnWholly*, 276.

<sup>548</sup> *UnDivided*, 28.

<sup>549</sup> *UnSouled*, 31.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>551</sup> *UnWholly*, 47.

at every of his numerous deaths, Cam eventually begins to regard her as “part of the terror,”<sup>552</sup> “the author of hopelessness.”<sup>553</sup> Both his creator and killer, she is almost like a God figure to him. At first, she behaves like a true mother, teaching him how to talk, being his “translator”<sup>554</sup> and mediator with the outside world, developing his consciousness; she is his primary caregiver, gently comforts him when he is hurting, diffuses his emotional outbursts, gradually introduces him to the public, but also fiercely protects him and reassures him about his worth whenever he has doubts; she is the one who knows what is best for him. Cam also feels “protectiveness”<sup>555</sup> towards Roberta; even “love[s]”<sup>556</sup> her. As a mother, she dines with him every day; but the dinner reveals the true nature of their relationship: as Roberta explains to Cam in her “clinical”<sup>557</sup> way, “[m]eals are when the psyche is most vulnerable to attachment”<sup>558</sup>; more than anything, even though she feels undeniable pride in her creation, her bond with Cam is the result of calculated conditioning.

As every child, Cam eventually reaches mental adolescence and starts to rebel; his coming of age begins when he falls in love with Risa, who Roberta hates; in a Freudian sense, Risa is her symbolic rival, and romantic love starts winning over familial one. Gradually, Cam, who is trying to build his own identity independent of Roberta’s wishes and fights for more freedom, starts acting like a typical angry teenager and rejects her protection and authority. Risa tells Cam he acts like “Roberta’s spoiled little boy”<sup>559</sup>; Cam asks her to “unspoil [him].”<sup>560</sup> Thanks to Risa, who brings a new perspective to everything he knows, Cam begins to understand that he is under Roberta’s full control and that his creator is not as perfect as he thought, but instead rather devious; gradually losing his trust and respect for her, he tries to figure out ways how to undermine her control. Their relationship is irreparably damaged when Roberta completely destroys Cam’s autonomy by preparing a deal that will make him the property of the military; even though she says there was nothing she could do about it, Cam finally understands that his independence was just an illusion; although privileged, he was not created to make his own decisions,

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<sup>552</sup> *UnSouled*, 101.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>554</sup> *UnWholly*, 46.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

but to comply. Roberta is a “puppeteer,”<sup>561</sup> and he is her puppet. Besides that, he also comes to understand that he is not “the center of Roberta’s universe,”<sup>562</sup> but probably just a stepping stone to a much larger project. Finally, Cam runs away from home to pursue Risa, and his rebellion makes Roberta take drastic control measures, literally rewiring him to forget Risa, his primary, and therefore subversive motivation.

However, she underestimates Cam, who has surpassed his mother, his creator; for all intents and purposes, his God. Roberta does not know it yet, but she truly, so to speak, created a monster, with his own mind, morality, and intentions; although Cam behaves much more obedient now, it is only an act. Directly opposing her, Cam gets into the bottom of all the Proactive Citizenry’s underhanded business and conspiracy and shares his knowledge with those who can destroy them. Sneaking into a secret compound on the Proactive Citizenry’s property where he and Roberta live, he discovers Roberta’s dark secret: she has been creating soldiers for the military from unwound parts, an army of his “rewind brethren,”<sup>563</sup> his “brothers and sisters,” who, as he thinks, “must never be allowed to be born.”<sup>564</sup> He no longer wants to be part of Roberta’s twisted family; although he pretends to be happy with the idea of the future she has chosen for him and with being the Rewinds’ “commanding officer,”<sup>565</sup> “a prince among peasants,”<sup>566</sup> he can already see through Roberta’s falsehood and hypocrisy. In the end, he is not able to kill his “spiritual siblings,”<sup>567</sup> as Roberta says; catching him in the act of attempting that, she falls for Cam’s pretense and sees him as helpless and vulnerable; he admits to her he has found out all about Proactive Citizenry, and to earn his absolute trust, she answers all his questions truthfully, before promising him to make everything right and “make all that pain go away,”<sup>568</sup> like a loving mother would, and tries to shoot him with her own gun. However, immediately she finds out that she is no longer the master of his life and death, as he has tricked her; the gun is not loaded, and their whole conversation was broadcasted into the world. Cam has used Roberta’s own arrogance against her, making her believe she is still smarter than him and he is just a trusting child. By smugly believing that Cam would still be on her side after everything she has done to him, unconditionally loving her as a mother

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<sup>561</sup> *UnDivided*, 117.

<sup>562</sup> *UnWholly*, 276.

<sup>563</sup> *UnDivided*, 166.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>565</sup> *UnDivided*, 166.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> *UnDivided*, 314.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

although she has not done the same, as evident by her murder attempt, he brings about her destruction.

Cam's attitude towards Roberta has been increasingly ambivalent, and while he is "deeply disappointed"<sup>569</sup> by her final "fail[ure],"<sup>570</sup> he is also "not surprised."<sup>571</sup> He has not been blinded by his love for his "dear sweet mother,"<sup>572</sup> and realized she does not deserve his unconditional trust; and thanks to this understanding, he has been able to anticipate her betrayal and betray her back. Roberta is shocked, refusing to believe her creation could be that devious, but Cam assures her that like a proper son, he has "learned from [her]."<sup>573</sup> Crowning his rebellion against his God and breaking all bonds, Cam completes his crucial role in the downfall of his creator and the murderer of everyone he is composed of by loading Roberta's gun and handing it to her, offering her the mercy of killing herself rather than being punished by Proactive Citizenry and judged by the whole world; and although Roberta "can't summon the courage to pull that trigger,"<sup>574</sup> this final gesture of ultimate separation still confirms this mother-son couple as one of the darkest, most complex ones that YA literature has to offer.

### 5.3.5 Starkey and the Storks

Mason Starkey was storked to a family that did not want him and kept him only because it was ordered by law; he knows that he has been "a potential candidate for unwinding since the moment he arrived on the doorstep,"<sup>575</sup> as his character has always made him violently lash out at people who were "singl[ing] [him] out as a storked child,"<sup>576</sup> mocking or judging him for being different and inferior; the "lifetime of injustice,"<sup>577</sup> of endless frustration and humiliation, has led him to criminal activities. His parents were never supportive or understanding of him, reprimanding him instead of trying to empathize, and Starkey is overwhelmed with bitterness when his father asks

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<sup>569</sup> *UnDivided*, 316.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>575</sup> *UnWholly*, 4.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*

him, “ ‘[W]hy didn’t you let us help you?’ ”<sup>578</sup>, because he knows his parents have always been oblivious of his plight:

They don’t know what it’s like to go through sixteen years of life knowing you weren’t wanted; a mystery baby of uncertain race storked on the doorstep of a couple so sienna-pale, they could have been vampires. Or to still remember that day when you were three years old and your mom, all doped up on pain medication from your sister’s cesarean delivery, took you to a fire station and begged them to take you away and make you a ward of the state. Or how about knowing every Christmas morning that your gift is not a joy, but an obligation? And that your birthday isn’t even real because they can’t pinpoint when you were born, just the day you were left on a welcome mat that some new mother took too literally?<sup>579</sup>

While Starkey’s predicament is genuine and shared by many other storks and shows just how deep psychological scars can a lifetime of rejection cause a child, Starkey himself realizes very well that in fact, he is a minority; most storks grow up in loving families who would never even think of unwinding them. However, the unfairness of this angers him even more, only adding insult to an injury. He does not even consider that his sister, his parent’s biological daughter, defends him and is furious with her parents for unwinding him; it is not convenient for him to see the shades of grey of the situation, as he uses black-and-white thinking as a weapon and a means of increasing his own power.

Although undeniably a victim of the system, Starkey skillfully uses this victimization to gain his followers on his path to greatness. For the first time in their lives, the storks that he surrounds himself with feel seen, heard, and respected, which is something they severely lacked in their families; finally, they feel like they matter. However, they fail to recognize this as manipulation; they are all only pawns in Starkey’s game. While Starkey would love to be seen as a “political dissident, freedom fighter,”<sup>580</sup> the stork’s savior and voice of the voiceless, he is primarily a “sociopathic mass

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<sup>578</sup> *UnWholly*, 7.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>580</sup> *UnDivided*, 272.

murderer”<sup>581</sup> and “self-serving egomaniac”<sup>582</sup> who would sell all the children he supposedly cares about in a heartbeat if it served his own selfish ends. Although he lures the storks in by playing with them at a big, happy family, he is only using them, exploiting their desperate craving for acceptance and recognition they lacked in their own homes.

Starkey’s ambivalent character and role are very important for Shusterman’s social critique: although the teenager initially provokes certain sympathy, as his upbringing could have played a huge role in the development of his inferiority complex, the importance of this role remains uncertain, and his character is rather used to represent how easy it can be to manipulate masses for increasingly evil, ego-boosting purposes, if those masses consist of desperate, unstable, vulnerable people who are rightfully angry at the society they live in. In this respect, Starkey and his storks are a complex study of the origins and motivations of dictators and terrorists, especially the role their family backgrounds and position in society might play in their rise.

### 5.3.6 The Skinners

Literature for children is full of families, and as such it is also rarely devoid of siblings; therefore, it is rather surprising that the first important sibling couple only appears in the third volume of the *Unwind* Dystology. Like most of Shusterman’s work, the brother and sister’s depiction is anything but conventional and does not lack ambivalence, which manifests in their role in the plot – at first, this Kansas duo seems like mere comic relief, but it gets progressively more important.

Both in their early twenties, Argent and Grace are orphans; they mother died when they were young, and they were just nuisances for their recently deceased father: as Argent says, “ ‘Truth be told, our father woulda unwound us both if he could, so he didn’t have our mouths to feed. But Grace wasn’t ever eligible since there’s laws against unwinding the feeble-minded, and not even parts pirates’ll do it. He couldn’t do me either, because he needed me to take care of Grace.’ ”<sup>583</sup> It is obvious that they are not a happy family; the lifelong absence of the mother could have played a role in establishing their

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<sup>581</sup> *UnDivided*, 272.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>583</sup> *UnSouled*, 22.

toxic dynamic. Argent abuses Grace, who is older than him, but supposedly retarded; he berates her, calls her names, and puts her down constantly, never even hesitating to physically attack her. An hour after meeting Connor, who treats her with kindness she is not used to, Grace already trusts him more than her own brother. Evidently, she is Argent “punching bag” and he blames her for all his frustrations; however, peculiarly, Grace recognizes this and does not hold it against him. When Connor suggest to her that Argent mistreats her, she answers, “ ‘Nah, he’s okay. He’s just mad at the world, but the world isn’t around to be mad at. Just me.’ ”<sup>584</sup>

This is the first sign that there is more to Grace than meets the eye, and that she feels “parental responsibility”<sup>585</sup> for Argent even if he pushes her into a submissive role. Unlike Argent and Grace’s parents, Connor immediately picks up on the fact that Grace is much more intelligent than everyone including herself thinks she is, and she turns out to be a typical “wise fool,” challenged when it comes to practical life, but brilliant in other areas; she is extremely insightful and a great strategist. Argent, on the other hand, considers himself very smart, but turns about to be rather foolish and never quite thinks his strategies through. Grace is great playing all sorts of games, and Argent is always angry when she beats him; their differences translate into real life as well. Also, defying gender stereotypes, Argent is more of a dreamer who believes everything is “fated,”<sup>586</sup> while Grace is more of an analytical tactician.

However, although they seem like opposites at first, they are rather two sides of one coin, and actually have quite a lot in common. There is certain childlike innocence about them both; they are both curious, enthusiastic and clingy; both are loyal and eager team players, and both make silly mistakes with grave consequences. In the course of the narrative, Argent loses some of his arrogance and dominance, while Grace becomes more confident, and their similarities becomes more and more pronounced. It seems that they both just need a real chance to prove their qualities, someone to believe in them, to bring the best in them; it turns out to be Connor for both, and in the end, both siblings save the day in their own way: Argent plays a crucial role in saving Connor and Risa, while Grace plays a crucial role in saving the whole society thanks to the printer.

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<sup>584</sup> *UnSouled*, 24.

<sup>585</sup> Alston, 51.

<sup>586</sup> *UnSouled*, 19.

In the end, it also becomes clear that despite all their fights and differences, these two care about each other very much. Although Argent seems to utterly hate Grace at the beginning, whenever he later suspects she could be in real danger, his protective brotherly instinct kicks in, which corresponds with the ideology of children's literature, where the prospect of losing one another typically strengthens the siblings' bond: "This notion of almost losing, or actually losing, a family member and thereby reinforcing the importance of the whole family... when family unity is under threat it becomes even more precious, and the characters must learn to work and co-operate with each other."<sup>587</sup> As for the family reunion, Argent and Grace are physically separated at the beginning of their story and remain so until the very end, but they somewhat reunite in spirit and function. While their story conforms to the patterns of children's fiction in some ways, it certainly does not do so conventionally.

### 5.3.7 Humphrey Dunfee

In *Unwind*, we learn that one of the most popular urban legends among teens is the one about Humphrey Dunfee. Almost everyone knows and has experienced something mysterious related to it; or at least, knows someone who knows someone who has. As the legend says, a long time ago, there was a boy who might or might not have been called Humphrey, whose parents have signed the Unwind Order and sent him away. However, there was a catch: the Dunfees were sort of crazy, and after the unwinding of their son, they went utterly insane and "decided they didn't want Humphrey unwound after all."<sup>588</sup> Having ties to the government, they find "every single person who received a piece of Humphrey"<sup>589</sup> in the National Unwind Database, and then, according to the legend, they "go traveling around the world to find them... so they can kill them, take back the parts, and bit by bit make Humphrey whole."<sup>590</sup> But despite all their murderous, bloody efforts to get back their son they have had taken apart, the boy's name is not known as Humphrey for nothing; it is " 'Cause 'all the king's horses and all the king's men... couldn't put Humphrey together again.' "<sup>591</sup> Humphrey Dunfee represents all the Unwinds: his parents

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<sup>587</sup> Alston, 35.

<sup>588</sup> *Unwind*, 106.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*

will never get him back, because their child is gone forever; even if his loss drives them mad, no amount of regret, effort and atonement will bring him back; their family will always remain fractured because of their decision.

However, Connor eventually finds out that the story of Humphrey Dunfee and his parents' quest for redemption is far from being a mere urban legend, when he discovers that the Admiral's surname is none other than Dunfee. The Admiral tells him that his son Harlan " 'a great kid. Smart. But he was troubled—you know the type,' " <sup>592</sup> to which Connor can just answer that "[he *is*] the type" <sup>593</sup>; very much the prototype of a teenager sent to be unwound. The Admiral explains to him the rest of the story: " 'It was just about ten years ago. He got in with the wrong group of friends, got caught stealing. Hell, I was the same at his age—that's why my parents first sent me to military school, to straighten me out. Only, for Harlan there was a different option. A more... *efficient* option.' " <sup>594</sup> The option was unwinding; had the "quick fix" not been available, Harlan could have gotten turned out just fine. However, as the Admiral says, " 'As one of the fathers of the Unwind Accord, I was expected to set an example. (...) We signed the order, then changed our minds. But it was already too late. They had taken Harlan right out of school to the harvest camp, and rushed him through. It had already been done.' " <sup>595</sup> The Admiral himself has never believed that the Unwind Accord will really come into use and that families will start sending their teenagers to be dismantled; for him, it was only a means of scaring both sides into ending the war, but the human nature ended up being worse than he expected, and his family were some of its first victims.

Divorced by his wife, the Admiral does his best to atone for his son's death as well as his role in the Unwind Accord by saving AWOLs and providing a structured sanctuary for them until they come of age; however, he and his ex-wife also try to get their son back in a similar, albeit more figurative way than the urban legend says: they find all the people who have received Harlan's organs in order to gather all of them to honor Harlan by holding him a huge birthday party. " 'Bit by bit I am making things right,' " as the Admiral says, " 'Bit by bit, and in more ways than one.' " <sup>596</sup> Eventually, the Dunfees assemble all of Harlan's parts, from head to toe, from voice to memories,

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<sup>592</sup> *Unwind*, 225.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

and they feel like their family has once again become whole. This is absolutely in accordance with the family ideology in children's literature: as Alston suggests, "there can be no closure to the narrative until the family is reunited, in whatever shape."<sup>597</sup> This shape is highly unorthodox, but still very valid, even taking into account that despite the poignancy of the gathering, it is still just an illusion of Harlan's life. The semblance of return of their son will ease the Dunfees' grief (and as we learn, he and his ex-wife actually get back together over it); however, unwinding will always remain a final and irreversible tragedy – Harlan will never really come back.

The one who does come back, however, is Connor, who "become[s] the real life "Humphrey Dunfee," in a way Harlan Dunfee never had."<sup>598</sup> Figuratively, Connor finds a father figure in the Admiral during his stay at the Graveyard; the Admiral was not able to give his own son a chance and show more faith in him, but he can finally make it right through Connor – after all, it is only through the Admiral's efforts to shelter Unwinds that Connor did not end up taken apart like Harlan. Also, strengthening the idea of their father-son bond, Connor becomes the Admiral's successor in his leadership of the Graveyard at the same moment that the Dunfees finally "reunite" with Harlan. And at the end, the Admiral does for Connor what he could not do for his son, concluding his atonement: he literally puts him back together and "rewinds" him, so that Connor could live on.

However, the ending is not entirely happy, as that would undermine the cautionary motivation of the dystopia. Connor still feels a "hole,"<sup>599</sup> rather than feeling "whole,"<sup>600</sup> as Risa misunderstands, confirming that the unwinding process is essentially irreversible and leaves permanent cracks in the souls of everyone involved, whether it is the Unwind, his or her family and friends, or the entire society; cracks that can heal only "bit by bit... and not alone,"<sup>601</sup> in the company of loved ones, whether they are family or not.

It is worth noting that although Lowry is a more obvious descendant of Bradbury in her highly symbolic style, her use of Christian ideology as an alternative to the dystopian ideologies and emphasis on the loss of cultural memory, at a closer look, Shusterman is also distinctly "Bradburian" in his undying faith in human nature.

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<sup>597</sup> Alston, 58.

<sup>598</sup> *UnDivided*, 338.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

Although he does not shy away from presenting the atrocities of which humanity is capable if sufficiently manipulated by its power-hungry specimen and includes characters whose views are decidedly cynical, in the end, it is the good-hearted, compassionate, hopeful Connor, a person capable of change, whose attitude turns out to be justified and applicable to his family and to the whole society. Just like Bradbury's Montag becomes the new embodiment of Ecclesiastes, Connor, the "Humphrey Dunfee," becomes the embodiment of the whole America, unwound, unwholly, unsouled, but in the end, undivided.

To sum up, although Shusterman's series still does adhere to conventions of children's literature including those pertaining to family, it does so in a highly unconventional way. Shusterman has solved the "creative dilemma" of young adult dystopian authors in an extremely sophisticated manner by using the strategy of ambivalence to its full potential; it manifests throughout the series from its beginning to its end, naturally not sparing even the main theme investigated, family.

## Conclusion

By focusing on the theme of family and the genre of dystopia in this thesis, I have presented a thorough literary analysis, both thematic and genre, of young adult fiction, a type of literature which is considered by many to be unworthy of serious academic interest. By choosing to make my analysis as comprehensive as possible, I wanted to prove that such a view is mistaken and that young adult literature is not only analyzable in many ways and from many different angles, but there is no reason to exclude children's literature from the wider literary context; just like authors of adult literature, authors of children's literature are able to say something real about human experience.

During my research, I found many bridges between young adult literature, dystopia, and family; sometimes obvious, sometimes unexpected. The theme of family connects YA literature and dystopia; these two are also connected by their ideological nature; ideology, in turn, connects children's literature and family. Dystopia and YA fiction are often connected by their coming-of-age theme, which is, as the analysis of the two YA series showed, often related to family and its ideology as well. For this reason, family has proven to be a very suitable theme for exploration of both children's fiction and dystopia. Firstly, it established a shared common ground for both, placing adult and YA dystopia in the same literary context; for example, both adult dystopia and YA dystopia could be examined with Freudian and Foucauldian views in mind, and both Lowry and Shusterman stood their ground, neither of them having been shown to be particularly derivative or simplistic. Secondly, the theme of family revealed and illustrated some of the main conventions of children's literature and showed that young adult literature is without any doubt governed by them as well; this is important, as YA fiction often suffers from being compared to adult literature, but as I have outlined in chapter 1, such comparison is meaningless and unfair. Besides that, the rejection of the family ideology in the young adult genre could for example reflect the latter's gradual shift toward adult literature, which seems to be inevitable.

However, my choice of family as the bridging theme also had its issues. The ideology of nuclear family crucial for my thesis requires historical and sociological background; therefore, it was necessary for me to plunge into works of leading thinkers and sociologists apart from those of literary critics (which were also numerous). This has

made my work very diverse, but some of the social theories I have presented might have been slightly oversimplified. Furthermore, the only more comprehensive theory about the family in children's literature I could use as a basis for my analysis was Ann Alston's, as to my knowledge no other such large-scale theoretical work even exists; this means that my approach might have been slightly one-sided, but it also points to the necessity of establishing much broader theoretical background for children's literature in general. Young adult literature specifically has fared even worse until recently, and although more and more essays examining especially the most "trendy" series have started to emerge, the position of the YA genre in literary criticism is still more than shaky.

As for the very subject of children's literature, it also turned out to be a bit of a "rabbit hole." I focused on the element of ideology, which was crucial for my thesis as it connected children's literature, family and dystopia, but there are really many more important issues coloring the general perception of children's literature, as well as its production and marketing, such as the question of readership and the construct of the reader, or the eternal question of what even defines children's literature, which has not been satisfactorily answered for decades. It is also worth mentioning that while there is a relatively large purely theoretical background for criticism of children's literature, mostly directed by Peter Hunt, these critical theories seem to have been only rarely applied to concrete works, genres, or themes (let alone all of them at the same time), although as this thesis hopefully proved, such analyses could yield intriguing results.

The analysis of Lowry and Shusterman showed that young adult literature must be first and foremost easy to read, but there is no reason for literature to not be entertaining and intellectually stimulating at the same time; these two are certainly not mutually exclusive. Just like some authors of adult books, some authors of YA books may have the ability and skill to share their human experience and perception of the world in a way that might be universally relatable. YA novels, even genre novels, can be rich in hidden meaning and symbolism, have an intricate thematic structure, can be viewed from many angles and have many conflicting interpretations. These two very different series also showed that even if children's authors work with the same unwritten rules, they can do so in their own specific, unique style and artistic expression.

All these subjects, and many more, form a large vault of topics for future study; in fact, there are still great many topics to explore even when it comes to *The Giver*

*Quartet* and the *Unwind Dystology* themselves. For example, *The Giver Quartet* is extremely rich in Christian symbolism and ideology, which was only touched upon in this thesis; other interesting subjects to consider could be the significance of color, the symbolism of the modern versus the old, the relationship of people and nature, different levels of maturity of each of the described communities, comparison of Jonas's community with Soviet children's books such as Nikolay Nosov's stories about Dunno or "Neznayka," etc. As for Lowry's work in general, the theme of family could be explored in all its breath and then put in context with *The Giver Quarter*; also, Lowry is known for her controversial themes atypical for children's literature, which is a promising research topic as well. As for the *Unwind Dystology*, there is also a vault of themes to be analyzed, such as the fragmentation of form and content, the symbolism of unwinding, the narrative techniques and their significance, the use of ambivalence, or some of the themes already outlined at the beginning of chapter 5, such as brainwashing, terrorism, religious fanaticism, etc. Shusterman is also generally known for exploring challenging subjects such as mental illness or abuse, and has recently started his new dystopian series *Scythe* (2016) about a world that has conquered illness and death; all these would be also well-worth taking a closer look at.

In conclusion, the contradictory, captivating genre of young adult dystopia has demonstrated that there is no doubt that "children's literature is worth reading, worth discussing, and worth thinking about for adults,"<sup>602</sup> and taking into consideration that there are many more fascinating themes to study pertaining to young adult literature in general, such as the fact that its popularity could be considered as an epic "return of the monomyth," it suddenly seems like young adult literature is not a garbage dump, but rather a goldmine.

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<sup>602</sup> Hunt, 2.

## Resumé

Tématem této diplomové práce je rodina v dystopické literatuře pro mládež, jinak též zvané young adult či zkráceně YA. Mým cílem je zmapovat všechny možné faktory, jež činí tento žánr tak populárním, i potíže, s nimiž se potýká. Literatura pro mládež je s dystopickou literaturou v mnoha směrech kompatibilní, ale řídí se některými nepsanými pravidly a konvencemi, které jejich slučitelnost ztěžují a s nimiž se autoři dystopie pro mládež musí vypořádat, a činí tak nejrůznějšími kreativními způsoby. Výsledný žánr je v mnoha směrech rozporuplný, ale nesmírně zajímavý a podnětný nejen pro mladé i dospělé čtenáře, ale také z hlediska literární kritiky. Zaměřila jsem se na téma rodiny, které žánry literatury pro mládež a dystopie příhodně spojuje, a dá se na něm předvést, co mají společného i v čem se liší. Téma rodiny souvisí i s problémem ideologie, která poněkud komplikuje literární kritiku dětské literatury. V první kapitole se věnuji vybraným problémům literatury pro děti a mládež včetně specifik, k nimž je při její kritice třeba přihlídnout, a také stručně představuji některé její základní koncepty. Ve druhé kapitole charakterizuji dystopickou literaturu v širším kontextu utopické literatury a dále zkoumám spojitost mezi utopickou literaturou a literaturou pro děti a dystopickou literaturou a literaturou pro mládež a zabývám se některými potížemi a rozpory, s nimiž se dystopie pro mládež potýká. Ve třetí kapitole se zaměřuji na složité téma rodiny, zejména na kulturní konstrukt nukleární rodiny, její historii a zejména ideologii, která se právě v dětské literatuře prosazuje už celá staletí. Dále se blíže zabývám zobrazením rodiny v nejdůležitějších dystopických románech dvacátého století, které má s jejím pozdějším zobrazením v literatuře pro mládež překvapivě mnoho společného a ukazuje, že dětská literatura se dá zkoumat i s přihlédnutím k literárnímu celku. V kapitolách 4 a 5 pak detailně analyzuji zobrazení rodiny ve dvou populárních a inteligentních dystopických sériích pro mládež. První z nich je *The Giver Quartet* od americké spisovatelky Lois Lowryové a druhou *Unwind Dystology* od amerického spisovatele Neala Shustermana – rodina hraje v obou z nich zcela zásadní roli. Jinak se obě série velmi liší formou, obsahem, tónem i stylem, ale obě plně využívají všech možností dystopie pro mládež a ukazují, o jak fascinující a rozporuplný žánr se jedná. V závěru shrnuji nabyté poznatky a navrhuji některá možná témata pro další výzkum.

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## **Anotace**

Jméno: Bc. Helena Šváchová

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce v češtině: Rodina v dystopické literatuře pro mládež

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

Počet stran: 160

Počet příloh: 0

Klíčová slova: literatura pro děti a mládež, young adult literatura, dystopická literatura, rodina, ideologie, Lois Lowryová, Neal Shusterman

Anotace: Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem rodiny v současné dystopické literatuře pro mládež a ukazuje na něm mnohé rozpory i možnosti tohoto populárního žánru. Literatura pro mládež a dystopie mají mnoho společného, ale v mnohém se i liší. Literatura pro děti a mládež je spíše konzervativní – jedním z jejích centrálních prvků napříč žánry je už po staletí ideologie dokonalé rodiny, dalším zase nutnost šťastného konce. Dystopická literatura by naopak měla být podvratná a skončit selháním hlavní postavy, aby dosáhla varovného účinku. Rodina je však v klasických dystopiích často také prezentovaná jako ohnisko odporu vůči společnosti. Oba žánry jsou didaktické a mají potenciál pro společenskou kritiku. Autoři dystopií pro mládež nacházejí zajímavé způsoby, jak se s těmito a mnoha dalšími rozpory i styčnými body vypořádat.

## **Annotation**

Name: Bc. Helena Šváchová

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Name of the thesis in English: The Family in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

Number of pages: 160

Number of supplements: 0

Key words: children's literature, young adult literature, dystopian literature, family, ideology, Lois Lowry, Neal Shusterman

Annotation: This thesis focuses on the theme of family in dystopian fiction for young adults, using it to illustrate many contradictions and connections of YA fiction and dystopia. Literature for children (where YA literature belongs) is rather conservative, promoting the same values, such as the ideology of the perfect family, and children's books are always expected to have a happy or hopeful ending; contradictorily, dystopian literature is expected to be subversive and needs to have an unsuccessful resolution to achieve its admonitory effect. On the other hand, family is also presented as a locus of resistance against society in classic dystopias. Both genres are moralistic and didactic and have the potential for social criticism. The authors of young adult dystopias find many interesting and creative ways to deal with all these compatibilities and contradictions.