

The Inward Quest to Elsewhere: The Hero's Journey in *The Giver*

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Abstract

Lois Lowry structures the events of her well-known young adult novel *The Giver* on the hero's journey cycle. The hero's journey is not often studied in *The Giver*, yet its stages highlight and mirror the challenging stages common to young adult readers' lives. *The Giver* also refreshes the traditional hero's journey form by presenting a mental and emotional journey instead of the standard physical quest. This unique form creates a greater connection to *The Giver*'s target adolescent readers by more closely paralleling the mental and emotional realities of their lives through their journey from childhood to adulthood.

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Introduction

The art of storytelling, whether orally or in writing, has existed almost as long as has humanity. As one studies stories, from the earliest ones recorded to present-day publications, a common thread in many of them is the hero's journey story cycle, an archetype that has its roots in thousands of years of literary history. Stories constructed with this frame feature protagonists who embark on a quest to a new world in order to gain and bring back a gift that will benefit the ordinary world they left. The hero's journey is also often understood as a reflection of the patterns of life itself. In young adult fiction particularly, the ability of the hero's journey to symbolize patterns of life is especially important because of the unique challenges that the transitional stage of adolescence presents. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) is one such young adult novel that utilizes the hero's journey structure, yet it is rarely analyzed specifically through that structure. However, young adult readers can greatly benefit from applying the lens of the hero's journey to *The Giver* because of both the power of the general hero's journey form to speak into patterns of life and the unique mental and emotional dimension in which Jonas's specific journey takes place. The hero's journey presented in *The Giver* builds on the traditional heroic quest story structure while highlighting similar mental and emotional realities to those its target adolescent readers experience as they grow up and learn to face the world, making Jonas's heroic journey a crucial aspect of study for *The Giver*'s young adult audiences.

The Hero's Journey

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell, who is regarded as an expert on mythology, defines and describes each individual step of the hero's journey story

cycle, providing examples from thousands of years of myth and legend around the world. By Campbell's definition, a hero is one who triumphs over oppressors and regenerates his or her society; and whether the heroic journey is a physical quest following the traditional form or one that takes place almost completely on a mental and emotional level, like Jonas's in *The Giver*, the basic elements of the journey and foundational aspects of a hero's character are the same (30). Such a heroic quest, Campbell explains, has many distinguishable elements of its own: a beginning in the ordinary world, where the hero receives the call to adventure; a meeting with a mentor and a decision to embrace the quest; a crossing of a threshold into a new world, where the hero encounters obstacles, tests, allies, and enemies; a climax of darkness and a showdown with the villain; and finally a victory, where the hero gains the "ultimate boon" and returns home with it to share it with the society he or she left (28-29). As a story form, the hero's journey is extremely flexible, which means it easily applies to a wide variety of genres and adapts to different types of quests than strictly the traditional physical quest. In his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Christopher Vogler argues that the inherent flexibility and adaptability of the hero's journey allows it to extend in many directions and across many dimensions and realities (x). In *The Giver*, then, Lowry presents readers with a hero's journey that takes place primarily in a mental and emotional dimension, which refreshes the narrative frame to more closely parallel the life experiences of the target young adult audience of the novel while still reflecting the hero's journey's time-tested mythic roots and structure.

The foundation of the hero's journey in myth is crucial to understanding the importance of studying such a story structure, because mythology, and therefore the hero's journey, creatively communicates truths about the world and human existence within it. Simply stated, the

power of myth, and storytelling in general, comes from its function as a “powerful picture language for the communication of traditional wisdom,” and studying it provides wisdom and education to the student, because stories engage with the energies of the human psyche (Campbell 220). Echoing Campbell’s ideas about the real-world value of myth and the hero’s journey, Ginger Grant, a business anthropologist, explains that the hero’s journey “provides a common language easily accessible to all,” and the motifs and archetypes apparent in such narratives “give us a reference point that demarks both ancient wisdom and future trends by constantly referencing the human spirit in all its aspirations” (“Revisioning the Hero’s Journey”). In other words, part of the power of the hero’s journey archetype comes from its foundation in old mythic tradition, fused with elements that touch the human spirit, which at its core has not changed from ancient times to modernity. As Ben Pugh, author of *The Hero’s Journey Guidebook: Mapping the Story of Your Life*, explains, a person is almost always coming to the end of one adventure while simultaneously beginning another and standing in the middle of yet another, and recognizing those patterns, and their overlap, can help a person apply their courage from previous adventures to the current struggles of another (xiii). The hero’s journey, then, is a valuable tool for readers to learn about their own lives and the world around and how to face the challenges therein.

The effectiveness of the hero’s journey to reflect different aspects of life is magnified when we consider young adult literature, of which *The Giver* is a part, and its target adolescent audiences. According to Mary Beth Cancienne, the reason young people read and reread stories that utilize the hero’s journey archetype is because such stories often center on the same questions of identity and purpose that adolescent readers, who are around the same age as the

protagonists of young adult novels, are currently figuring out for themselves (59). Characters in heroic quest stories often directly or indirectly face questions like, “Who am I? What is my purpose? What is the difference between good and evil?”, and reading stories that wrestle with these same questions and show the characters’ failures, triumphs, and adventures as they do so is important for teenagers developing their own identity and place in the world (Cancienne 59). Seeing those similarities shows adolescents that they are not alone. As Phillip Dybicz, a professor of social work at the University of Northern Alabama, writes, the events of the hero’s journey symbolize a rite of passage—a phrase most commonly used in reference to young adulthood—through which adolescents can mirror the unfolding narratives of their own lives and the journey of who they are becoming (271). In other words, through the hero’s journey, young adult readers can make connections between the plot and themes of a story and their own lives and can therefore be touched on a psychological and emotional level, enabling them to learn the lessons planted in the stories for their benefit, the “traditional wisdom” Campbell speaks of. The hero’s journey model also normalizes the up-and-down nature of life “by condensing the wisdom of the ages into a universal storyline that suggests struggle is inherent” and by reminding readers, even young ones, that “cycles of life and death, creation and destruction, beginnings and endings are constant” (Robertson and Lawrence 266). Exposure through story to the nature of the world, in both its beauty and its pain, allows readers to watch for similar patterns in their own lives and thereby learn how to cope with such experiences when they come.

The Hero’s Journey, Act 1: Departure

As a story cycle, the hero’s journey is commonly divided into three main sections: the “departure” of the hero for his or her quest and the quest world; the “initiation” of the hero into

the new realities of the quest, involving tests, allies and enemies, failures, and ordeals, before finally reaching the quest goal; and the “return” of the hero from the quest world back to his or her home, bearing the gift gained at the climax of the journey. Each main section, or act, is further divided into smaller, more specific moments that make up the story and that grow the protagonist into a hero by the completion of the journey. According to Campbell, this first act signals that destiny has called upon the hero to leave the only world he or she knows to accomplish some great goal (48). The first act, then, is where readers first see who the hero is and what they can expect from him or her as the story goes on. Specifically for Jonas’s heroic journey in *The Giver*, the beginning stages also indicate that instead of following the traditional physical hero’s journey, Jonas’s will instead be a journey primarily of the heart and mind. The mental and emotional dimension of his heroic quest is a unique twist on the traditional hero’s journey frame because the traditional myths and legends set heroes on literal journeys to another realm (Vogler 13). However, the inward dimension of Jonas’s heroic journey establishes a closer parallel to many realities that the young adult readers of *The Giver* face in their normal lives than does a more traditional physical journey, as will be illustrated in the following stages.

Ordinary World

The hero’s journey always begins by showing the hero in whatever lifestyle is home for him or her before destiny and adventure sweeps him or her along to a new world. Such an introduction provides a frame of reference to contrast against the “otherness” that takes place throughout the rest of the story once the hero embarks on his or her quest. For Jonas in *The Giver*, his ordinary world is laid out over several chapters as Lowry reveals bit by bit the makeup of the community and everyday life there. Readers quickly discover that Jonas lives in an

apparent utopia, governed by the structures and assignments given out by the committee of Elders (Lowry 20). His ordinary world is the community where cares are few, every need is taken care of, and politeness and obedience reign in the citizens' lives. In his article on *The Giver*, Michael Levy explains Jonas's ordinary world of the community as a society that has been "intentionally constructed...to solve many contemporary problems, particularly those likely to be of significance to twelve year olds and their parents" (52). It is controlled, carefully regimented, and easy. Even in such an environment, terrible punishment lurks below the surface: if a citizen transgresses the rules three times, they must be released from the community, which was a final and tragic statement of ultimate failure (Lowry 3). With conscientious and rule-abiding citizens, however, the community hardly ever needs to release anyone for failure to comply. It is this safe, regimented, and comfortable world in which readers find Jonas at the beginning of his story, going through the motions of living normally in his community before his life suddenly changes.

Call to Adventure

The second step in the hero's journey is what is often described as the "call to adventure," where someone or something happens to the hero to shake him or her out of the ordinary world and to show him or her that adventure lies ahead. Although the hero's ordinary world is static, currents of change and instability run in its soil, waiting for a catalyst to bring the change and growth to the surface (Vogler 99). The call to adventure, then, is whatever event kickstarts the hero into leaving the ordinary world. When a hero receives the call to adventure, he or she can voluntarily respond or be dragged into it; the call may simply have been an accident, something the hero should never have stumbled upon, or in the least, not expected to stumble

upon, or it could be something prophesied for hundreds of years (Campbell 48). However it comes, the spark that begins the hero's adventure is a crucial element to the hero's journey because without it, the hero may never be stirred beyond the comfortable confines of his ordinary existence.

In *The Giver*, Jonas's call to adventure does not appear until the much-anticipated Ceremony of Twelve. At this ceremony, the Committee of Elders reveals career Assignments to the twelve-year-old children as they exit childhood and enter adulthood in the community (Lowry 21). The ceremony proceeds in regulated order, calling each child onstage according to their numbers of birth order. The first indication that something unusual is about to happen to Jonas, however, is that the Chief Elder skips his number, Nineteen (72). She comes back to him at the very end of the ceremony, marking something rare and special. After apologizing for causing everyone anxiety, she explains that rather than being assigned, Jonas has instead been "selected" to be the community's next Receiver of Memory – a selection that was "very, very rare," since their community "has only one Receiver [and] it is he who trains his successor" (76). The Chief Elder continues to explain that Jonas had been observed for the selection for years, and the current Receiver had noticed something in Jonas that would help him with his selection – "the Capacity to See Beyond" (79). In this moment, Jonas knows that he can change nothing. The Receiver has made his decision, and ready or not, Jonas must answer the call.

Refusal of the Call

Because the heroic quest is often thrust in front of the hero without him or her necessarily wanting it, the hero sometimes tries to avoid the call to adventure before fully accepting it. Hesitation and fear are natural because for such quests as a hero is called to, there is no guarantee

of his or her safety or victory (Grant, "Revisioning the Hero's Journey"). The threshold of Jonas's journey is enough to make him refuse the call laid at his feet because his job as the Receiver requires physical pain and demands great courage every day (Lowry 78). In the moments immediately following his selection, he argues with himself and tries to think of an excuse to avoid his calling. His first reaction is to deny the Committee's choice of him, as he "froze, consumed with despair. He *didn't* have it, the whatever-she-had-said. He didn't know what it was. Now was the moment when he would have to confess, to say, 'No, I don't. I *can't*,' and throw himself on their mercy, ask their forgiveness, to explain that he had been wrongly chosen, that he was not the right one at all" (79-80). Since Jonas refuses his call inwardly, warring with himself over how much he does not want to accept his new position as the Receiver, this stage is the first of many in Jonas's case that mark his heroic quest as mental and emotional.

Jonas's initial fear and refusal of the adventure offered to him displays a very human reticence to accept change. However, when faced with the decision to excuse away his selection, he instead stands tall and accepts his call with "gratitude and pride," though also with fear and uncertainty of "what he was to become. Or what would become of him" (Lowry 81). Jonas's emotional turmoil both parallels the mental and emotional struggle young adults experience when unexpected upheaval and life-changing decisions are thrust upon them, such as joining a new sport or choosing a college upon graduating high school. However, Jonas's decision to embrace his calling, despite the fear, illustrates what Carrie Hintz summarizes as the theme of "adolescent heroes and heroines [taking] matters into their own hands" (260), or taking steps forward in life despite danger or uncertainty. Jonas's refusal of his call to adventure, followed by

his willingness to face it instead, models for young adult readers that important decisions, even life-changing ones, can be made with courage and confidence, even in the face of the unknown.

Meeting with the Mentor

Without a mentor to test, train, guide, and provide for the hero during every step, the hero would have little hope, little confidence, and little chance of success. However, a mentor gives the hero the resources he or she needs to complete their journey and guides them through the first threshold of the new world, helping them adjust to the unknown (Robertson and Lawrence 268). Meeting the mentor, then, usually occurs after a hero receives the call to adventure and while he or she still refuses to answer, or very soon after accepting his or her call. Because a mentor's knowledge and experience often give the hero the confidence that he or she can face the adventure with the mentor's help, such a meeting is instrumental in pushing heroes, especially unwilling ones, into their heroic quests (Vogler 121). For the hero to have a mentor to guide him or her from start to finish along the journey, then, is crucial to a hero's journey story.

Meeting with the mentor both heralds the true beginning of Jonas's heroic journey and further cements his journey as a mental and emotional one. Jonas meets the "Giver," as the old man requests to be called, and begins his training as the new Receiver the day after his Assignment (Lowry 100). Almost as soon as he meets the Giver, Jonas crosses the threshold into the new world of receiving memories, which, again, is another indicator of the mental dimension in which Jonas's journey takes place. He does not leave the community or even the room, but through the memory of snow, the Giver transports Jonas to a new world. As Vogler explains, this is exactly the role of a mentor character, to act "on the mind of the hero, changing [his] consciousness or redirecting [his] will" (121). The Giver does not do this maliciously or to

manipulate Jonas, but to teach him what he needs to know as the new Receiver. As Don Latham understands the Giver's mentorship role, through Jonas's training even from the beginning, the Giver helps Jonas recognize the limitations of the community in which he lives and the oppressiveness of the role that has been thrust upon him ("Discipline and Its Discontents" 148). Not only does the Giver act on Jonas's mind and consciousness by transmitting memories to him, but the Giver also imparts wisdom to Jonas as the boy asks questions, trying to understand the new world he has just entered:

"But what happened to those things? Snow, and the rest of it?"

"Climate Control. Snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn't a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness."...

Jonas frowned. "I wish we had those things, still. Just now and then."

The old man smiled. "So do I," he said. "But that choice is not ours." (Lowry 106)

Even from their first meeting, the Giver changes and expands Jonas's mind, teaching him from the very beginning what he will need to know as he continues along the task, and the mental journey, laid out before him.

Jonas's meeting with his mentor, and the Giver's wisdom and influence on Jonas's heart and mind from the beginning, is another stage along his mental hero's journey which relates to the importance of mentors in adolescents' lives to open their minds to the truths of the world. For many young adults, teachers, coaches, parents, and other wise adults serve in a mentoring capacity to guide the young people through the challenges of life. Since adolescence is "ambiguous," "conflicted and vexed," and a "transition period, a time of change, adjustment,

discontent, and rebellion,” according to Susan Louise Stewart in her article on *The Giver* (31-32), teenagers need the help of mentors to push them through barriers and guide them through new knowledge of the world. Just as the Giver expands Jonas’s mind and introduces new understanding to him to help him through the barriers of the new world of the memories, so young adult benefit from mentors in the same capacity as they navigate hardships inherent to new stages of life and emerging adulthood.

The Hero’s Journey, Act II: Initiation

Act II of the hero’s journey story cycle is where the meat of the story takes place. In these next stages, the hero encounters the inevitable tests and trials of the new world; he or she meet both allies and enemies and fail and triumph over various obstacles on the way to the goal of the whole adventure. Here across the threshold, the new world is fraught with “unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten [the hero],” and some of which provide the help he or she desperately needs to keep on towards the prize (Campbell 211). At the climax of act II, the hero wins what he or she set out to gain. However, obtaining the prize often comes at much personal cost to the hero, and he or she often must struggle long and hard to gain it.

Tests, Allies, Enemies

As the hero crosses into the new world with all of its new challenges on the way to accomplish what he or she was thrust into the world for, inevitably they meet with both allies and enemies. Sometimes these new characters themselves pose the tests and trials the hero must fight through; other times, the tests simply happen as such because the hero is new and inexperienced in this new world and must figure out how to make his or her way through it to the goal. In his

article on innocence in young protagonists, David Emerson explains the hardships inherent in the hero's beginning his journey through the new world as coming from the hardship of leaving the old world and the old relationships behind, even if it was oppressive, dull, or full of grief – but it was still home, and in that familiarity was a degree of comfort (145). To be ripped from that and thrust into a new place breeds an anxiety all its own. Any new thing the hero comes up against becomes a trial because of its unfamiliarity. The tests in this new stage happen to prepare the hero for harder and riskier trials up ahead; sometimes these are the workings of the mentor, sometimes they are inherent to the landscape of the new world and may even be dominated by a villain (Vogler 136-137). The making of allies and enemies is also a form of testing (137). This next stage of the hero's journey, then, often proves the hero's mettle as he or she faces people and trials that he or she must discover how to handle if they are to be successful on their adventure.

In *The Giver*, Jonas's trials come from how he responds to the memories that the Giver transmits to him, both good and painful, and how he learns to handle the psychological upheaval he experiences from them. The memories, specifically the painful ones, serve as obstacles along Jonas's journey because of what they reveal about how the world used to be compared to what the community is now. These memories and painful revelations can be considered the "unfamiliar but strangely intimate forces" Campbell speaks of in this stage (211). Jonas's first "trial" that affects him mentally and emotionally comes when the Giver helps him better understand his ability to see beyond. The Giver explains that "seeing beyond" is actually seeing color, which the rest of the community cannot do because "we relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences...we gained control of many things. But we

had to let go of others” (Lowry 120). Jonas instantly knew this was wrong, and he bursts out, “We shouldn’t have!” (121). Yet he is powerless to change it or have a choice about it, and this reality begins to stir Jonas’s heart to change something. Even when he learns that people used to have the power of choice – which the community had taken from their citizens in almost every capacity – Jonas thinks that it is safer that the important decisions are made for them, yet the circumstances still deeply frustrate him, even though he does not fully understand the frustration (124). These situations, then, are a sort of trial for Jonas, testing his mettle, testing his individuality, to see if he will rise to the challenge and change what he can in the community and so achieve societal change.

The trials Jonas begins to face in increasingly larger numbers around this point in the story reflect the hardships and corresponding decisions and reactions that come in day-to-day life. In her article about young adult dystopian fiction, Carrie Hintz notes that adolescent heroes in young adult dystopian fiction specifically – in which category Jonas falls – often are stuck in harsh circumstances where they are forced to make tough, even agonizing, choices, and the courage and resolve they choose to embrace renders them capable of standing up to the challenging choices that face them (256). The more Jonas learns about the world that used to be, and how his community has rid itself of the deeply important aspects of that world like choice (Lowry 124), compassion (127), family connection (129), and even being (132), the more he wants know more about the long-gone world of memories and bring that back to his community. He even chooses to know more pain through the memories, so as to lessen the Giver’s suffering and to know more of the pain of the world (135). The way Jonas willfully engages with the hardships of the memories displays for young adult readers that the harsh realities of life are

unavoidable, yet facing them produces growth of character. Watching heroes successfully overcome the obstacles along their journeys and come to the end changed and better people can spark confidence within the adolescent audiences of such novels. Through the character of the hero, a reader can see that although challenges are difficult, enduring them makes a person better than they were at the beginning.

The Giver puts an interesting twist on the “allies and enemies” aspect of the hero’s journey. The further Jonas goes in his training and the more memories he receives, the more isolated he becomes from his friends and family—he gains no new friends, he gains no new enemies, but the friends and family he does have become strange and unrelatable to him and occupy a tenuous place in the middle of friend and enemy. As the Receiver, Jonas is not allowed to tell anyone else in the community what he learns (Lowry 86); as a result, he begins to hide his thoughts, dreams, and feelings from his parents (111), and the gap in their relationship only grows the more Jonas learns from the Giver. He encounters similar interactions with even Asher and Fiona, his closest friends. After seeing memories of war from the Giver and consequently interrupting a war game his friends were playing, Jonas realizes that any carefree, easy times with his friends are over and can never be the same again, not after all he knows that they could not know (169). Asher, Fiona, and every other citizen in the community could never know the pain Jonas now understands in the world. As he learns more of emotion, love, choice, individuality, and so many more other aspects stripped of each citizen in the community in pursuit of Sameness, he realizes that he “felt such love for Asher and for Fiona. But they could not feel it back, without the memories. And he could not give them those. Jonas knew with certainty that he could change nothing” (170). Jonas’s mental and emotional outlook changes

because of the memories he gains, causing his friends and family to slip away from him on that emotional plane of his journey.

Approach to the Inmost Cave

Closely related to the stage of tests, allies, and enemies is the approach to the inmost cave, where the trials grow in intensity the closer the heroes come to the central climax of their journeys. This is the stage where heroes “are like mountaineers who have raised themselves to a base camp by the labors of Testing, and are about to make the final assault on the highest peak” (Vogler 145). At this point, the heroes have already endured several hardships along their journey, and they know it will only get harder they closer they get to their goal. As the name implies, the road often grows darker at this point, as a cave grows darker the further one goes into it.

As with the rest of Jonas’s heroic journey thus far, the approach to the inmost cave happens on a mental and emotional dimension. He has already experienced the loss of his friends on one level and encountered the trials of learning more about the inner workings of his community and what they have lost. The more he learns from the Giver, however, the darker and more painful the bad memories become, and he realizes exactly what his role in the community is for. In his article on *The Giver*, Michael Levy interprets Jonas’s role as the Receiver as that of a scapegoat, who “holds within himself all the agony of world history so the rest of them do not have to know of its existence” (53-54). The agony of the world is the darkness that Jonas dives further into the more he learns from the memories. Every training session that Jonas has now includes pain in some capacity because, as Jonas was discovering, there is so very much of it in the world (Lowry 139). The first agonizing memory the Giver transmits to Jonas is of searing

physical pain, of crashing a sled on ice and breaking his leg (137). He later receives memories of starvation (139), warfare (150), suicide (170), and other such horrendous experiences that are worse than anything he has yet seen. On top of the pain of those memories entering his consciousness, Jonas's mind is simultaneously being opened to the harsh realities of his seemingly utopian world, its brightness dimming before his eyes with his new understanding of it. Again, he is not physically journeying into a darker, more dangerous place, but his young heart is being more and more burdened by inescapable realities. When the Giver reminds Jonas that he and Jonas bear the burden of the memories for the community because the community does not want to bear its pain and weight, Jonas cries angrily, "When did they decide that...It wasn't fair! Let's change it!" (142). Jonas's continual gaining of heavy, painful knowledge, then, marks his approach to the inmost cave, the climax of knowledge and revelation that he will soon experience that sparks him towards the goal of change for his society, which so desperately needs restoration.

As Jonas faces the inmost cave in this stage of the hero's journey, much of what he faces in this "cave" lies on the mental and emotional dimension like the majority of his journey, particularly in how he loses his previous innocence and naïveté. The way Latham explains it, Jonas moves beyond both the innocence of his childhood and the innocence, or perhaps more correctly "ignorance," of his community as to both the forgotten world of memories and the truths that govern their seeming utopia ("Childhood Under Siege" 10). A story type commonly embedded into heroes' journeys with young protagonists like Jonas is the bildungsroman, or coming of age story, that parallels perfectly with heroes' journeys and shows the hero growing and maturing through his experiences in the world. In bildungsroman stories, the hero travels

from ignorance to increasing knowledge and innocence to wisdom through the trials they experience; such a story naturally implies personal change for the hero (Levy 54). This change happens completely on a mental and emotional level. Jonas's experiences of losing innocence through increasingly dark trials mirror the process of growing up and learning more about the world through adolescence, giving young adult readers a connection point with Jonas and the hero's journey in *The Giver* as a whole.

Ordeal

The ordeal in the hero's journey is the darkest moment before a hero actually achieves his or her goal. It is the stage where the hero stares down death, literal or metaphorical, and cheats death by surviving, or by dying (again, literally or metaphorically) and being reborn, after which nothing will be the same (Vogler 163). Although Jonas does not die, he witnesses someone else's death, and that experience changes who he is and how he acts permanently. Vogler also explains that the ordeal is most commonly some kind of battle against an opposing force (167). For Jonas, that opposing force is the rules of his community, which promote a utopian sense of safety and goodness but, unknown to the rest of his community, conceal acts of terrible evil and deprivation of normal human experiences. The ordeal marks the moment when the hero must fight the hardest he or she ever has to gain the reward.

Although anger against his community has been boiling inside Jonas for months because of all the memories he must hold in their place, the moment where he sees his father euthanize a baby pushes Jonas to a point of no return, and he decides to do battle with his own community. As Latham understands this point in the novel, Jonas's confrontation with death as he watches the murder of the baby – and the lies the community uses to cover it up by simply calling it

“release” instead of what it really is – is the “catalyst [that helps] Jonas recognize the true nature of the power structures on which his community is based, and thus make the decision to escape” (“Discipline and Its Discontents” 148). In other words, when faced with the death of an innocent baby and a community that condones and even regulates such action, part of Jonas’s spirit metaphorically dies, to be reborn with a spirit enlightened to the darkest secrets of his community and a zeal to help heal it. His spirit dies in the sense that it snapped under the weight of this new revelation:

Jonas felt a ripping sensation inside himself, the feeling of terrible pain clawing its way forward to emerge in a cry...

“I won’t! I won’t go home! You can’t make me!” Jonas sobbed and pounded the bed with his fists.

“Sit up, Jonas,” The Giver told him firmly...

Jonas looked up wildly. “No one heard that little twin cry, either! No one but my father!” He collapsed in sobs again...

“I will take care of that, sir. Thank you for your instructions,” the voice said.

“I will take care of that, sir. I will take care of that, sir,” Jonas mimicked in a cruel, sarcastic voice. “I will do whatever you like, sir. I will kill people, sir. Old people? Small newborn people? I’d be happy to kill them, sir. Thank you for your instructions, sir. How may I help y—” He couldn’t seem to stop. (Lowry 189-191)

The death he witnesses breaks him. It is worse than any memory he has seen so far. However, the Giver helps revive that part of his mind and heart by proposing Jonas’s escape (193),

enlisting Jonas in the fight against his community, ultimately for its good. Although Jonas physically witnesses a death through video footage, the ordeal itself is heavily emotional and mental, as his reaction shows, and further establishes Jonas's hero's journey as one of the heart and mind.

In young adult dystopian fiction especially, to which genre *The Giver* belongs, when the ugly truths about how a dystopian society really functions are revealed, the young protagonist usually begins to analyze his or her world clearly for the first time, and he or she consequently begins to figure out how to change it for the better. The hero's example sets a precedent for adolescent readers to do the same – to analyze and critique his or her world and consider how to change what is wrong (Stewart 32). In *The Giver*, Jonas's analysis and consequent action comes in learning truth from the memories and then fleeing so that his community can be restored. According to Hipple and Maupin, what Jonas learns about his dictatorial society, “students may want to think about: proscriptions on movement, intellect, emotion; forced conformity; controlled life spans” (41). Reading how Jonas reacted provides opportunities for readers to consider how they might react in similar situations. Additionally, as Wend-Walker points out, with Jonas's case, the same qualities that set him into his role as Receiver also enable him to question that role and everything within his community (“Possibility of Elsewhere” 140). Seeing how Jonas uses his unique giftings and position to act on the truths he learns from that position can encourage readers who are in similar circumstances to use who they are and where they are in life to their advantage as they make choices.

The ordeal stage of the hero's journey serves as a clear illustration of the inevitability of trials, yet shows how a hero overcomes those trials and becomes a stronger person because of

them. Emerson explains that difficulties in life are a universal experience, whether they be physical obstacles to overcome (like traditional hero's journey stories display), or, more normal to modern life, "social and emotional" challenges, like what Jonas went through (146). In this same vein, the hero's journey is as much about the goal accomplished as it is about the change that happens within the hero because of how he overcame his trials. As Liam Butchart, a researcher in the intersections of psychoanalysis and literary theory, observes, obstacles are inevitable, and the process of overcoming them often changes a person for the better (202). Watching heroes successfully overcome the obstacles along their journeys and come to the end changed and better people can spark confidence within the target adolescent audiences of such novels. Graeme Wend-Walker, a well-published scholar of children's and young adult literature, praises fictional characters who exemplify who not only recognize wrongs with the world, but also make active choices to disrupt the mechanisms that keep those wrongs in play ("Thinking Eases the Pain" 89). Through the character of the hero, a reader can see that although challenges are difficult, enduring them makes a person better than they were at the beginning, especially through the decisions they make and the actions they perform that illustrate that change.

Reward

The reward is the final stage and high point of act II of the hero's journey. The hero has fought, with literal or emotional blood, sweat, and tears, past many enemies and obstacles to reach the precipice of victory, of gaining what Campbell called "the ultimate boon" of his or her quest (29). For at least a brief moment the hero finally can gain his or her triumph and rest in it at this stage (Vogler 181). This stage is where Jonas's hero's journey takes an interesting turn. The goal he begins with was to simply complete his training as the community's new Receiver of

Memory (Lowry 80). However, as he continues with this training, learning and growing mentally and emotionally through the memories the Giver transmits to him, his goal, and therefore his reward, changes. Especially after witnessing the release of the baby, Jonas and the Giver both decide that the best next step is for Jonas to leave the community, a move that would release all the memories back into the community; as Jonas leaves the community behind, the Giver would stay to help the people navigate such a shock (194-195). Successful escape and societal restitution, then, becomes Jonas's new goal.

Interestingly, Jonas's goal to help his community by giving memories back to them is a very mental and emotional achievement, but he physically must embark on a journey in order to accomplish it. By escaping the community without being caught, even with the unexpected need to bring baby Gabe along after discovering that Gabe was scheduled to be released, Jonas achieves this goal (207-208). By Latham's analysis, "Jonas's achievement is that he breaks free of stultifying boundaries, and in so doing accomplishes a remarkably courageous thing: he refuses to be a 'docile body' and instead resists – and perhaps ultimately transforms – the power structures...embedded in this culture of punishment" ("Discipline and Its Discontents" 149). This breaking free of boundaries and defying the power structures within his community is both mental, as has already been seen in Jonas's changing attitude towards his community, and literal, as he breaks many community rules in order to leave. Escaping to freedom is Jonas's reward, and readers can celebrate with him as he physically approaches the boundary to Elsewhere and his community consequently approaches the boundary of renewed memory and emotion.

The reward stage of the hero's journey is the stage of hope. Without hope, a hero has no strength to press on into the unknown and the dangerous, and, as Balaka Basu explains in

Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults, children's and young adult literature as a whole is a genre that stresses hope (2). Jonas's specific reward stage is tied to both himself and his physical safety and the mental and emotional renewal of his community. As we will see next, Lowry leaves the ending ambiguous as to whether or not what Jonas did actually worked for the community; however, readers find hope in Jonas's safe escape and the idea that such an escape probably means healing for his community. When Jonas leaves, he leaves the community to the pain of life, through which they can also know its deep joys, portrayed by the sound of music Jonas hears at the very end of the story (Levy 56). Jonas, the young character in the story, is the one who fixes what is broken, not the experienced Giver, providing young adult readers with hope that they too, inexperienced as they may be in life, can enact change in their own lives. As Tom Henthorne notes, "young adult readers...need to balance despair with hope so that they can move forward and enact change" (124). Despair runs aplenty in both heroes' journeys and in the uncertainties and challenges of adolescence, but hope always glimmers at the end, giving heroes, and readers as they identify with heroes, the hope to keep pushing forward to accomplish their goal.

Act III: Return

At this point in the hero's journey, the hero has finally gained the reward he or she set out for, yet the last leg of the journey remains: to travel the road back home with said reward. In Campbell's understanding, it is the hero's responsibility to not only obtain the reward, but to work to bring it safely back into the world he or she left, with the purpose of renewing that community with the benefit of his or her reward (167). For dystopian fiction like *The Giver*, the way in which the original world benefits from the hero's reward is some form of societal change.

As previously explained, when Jonas gains his reward of successful escape from the community, he also begins what he hopes will be a transformation of the hearts and minds of his community and the regulations governing it. In his escape Jonas displays a typical move of young adult dystopian protagonists: he rebels against the regime that enslaves his people in order to gain freedom, having obtained the understanding that he, and his society as a whole, has been manipulated and deceived (Basu 4). However, trouble awaits heroes on the way and once they arrive back home. Their journeys are not yet complete until they are able to integrate all they learned and gained into a society that has not experienced the tragedies and joys the hero has while on the quest, and therein lies the hardship. Why not stay in the land of victory, where it is certainly easier than travelling all the way back home to a society that may resist whatever the hero brings to them? Campbell declares further that “society is jealous of those who remain away from it, and will come knocking at the door” (178). Sharing their victory in some way, then, is inevitable, even if their road back is still full of obstacles.

The Road Back and Resurrection

In his moment of victory, the hero has a moment to breathe and to rest in the glory of his accomplishment. However, he cannot stay there. He must instead “return to the Ordinary World and implement the lessons learned in the Special World,” which, as has been stated, will not be easy, since often “the wisdom and magic of the Ordeal may evaporate in the harsh light of common day,” or “no one may believe the hero’s miraculous escape from death,” or his quest “may be rationalized away by skeptics” (Vogler 195). This stage is often referred to as a resurrection of sorts, and it can take a wide variety of forms. Its ultimate purpose, however, is to prove that the hero has changed for the better and has truly absorbed all that he or she has

learned from his or her experiences so that he can communicate that knowledge back to his original world.

Jonas's road back and resurrection stages are slightly unorthodox, yet they continue on in their pre-established mental and emotional dimension. Once Jonas gains his reward, he does not return to his community at all. Perhaps, as Latham sees it, the only actual "return" Jonas completes is to his true self, "a place he has known all along, an inner strength and connectedness that transcends the oppressive and restrictive nature of his society" ("Childhood Under Siege" 12). The strength and connection within Jonas that Latham speaks of here pushes Jonas not back towards his community, but in the opposite direction of it. The release of the memories through Jonas's departure is the only way to ensure that the community experiences what he is trying to impart to them, and the Giver stays behind instead of leaving with Jonas in order to help the community embrace everything coming back to them (Lowry 195). However, imparting new knowledge to the original world invites resistance. Michael Levy sums up the opposition to the result of this "road back" by reminding readers that utopias like Jonas's community are, by definition, static, and change is seen as the enemy (53). The onslaught of new knowledge, memory, and emotions will most likely be quite unwelcome in the community before its citizens learn to handle it—which, again, is why the Giver stayed behind.

As mentioned previously, the resurrection stage can take a variety of forms, including sacrifice and personal change, which is exactly the case for Jonas. Consistent with the rest of his journey, these climactic sacrificial moments towards the end of the book indicate his changed self, particularly on the mental and emotional level. Even though Jonas is never initially characterized as a selfish person, he never knew the value and meaning of sacrifice until he gains

the memories and has a person to sacrifice for. His sacrifice is directed at baby Gabe, first facing the peril of leaving the community and venturing into the unknown to keep him from death. However, perhaps his greatest sacrifice is transferring memories of warmth and sunshine into Gabe. While doing so, Jonas feels, for a split second, like holding on to such a warm, beautiful memory to help himself, but then comes an “urge, a need, a passionate yearning to share the warmth with the one person left for him to love” (Lowry 221). Doing so is a sacrifice because Jonas has limited memories of warmth and sunshine, and transmitting the memories leaves him weaker and colder than before (222). This shows Jonas’s willingness to give up part of himself – allow part of himself to die, in essence, since he cannot regain those memories – for the good of another, which is the definition of sacrifice and shows the change Jonas has undergone as a character. As Vogler states, “[T]he higher dramatic purpose of Resurrection is to give an outward sign that the hero has really changed,” or to prove that the pre-journey self is dead, replaced by the new self (217). Prior to his training as the Receiver, Jonas had no concept of selflessness or pain. However, his actions now, particularly the act of sacrifice for Gabe, show the death of his old self who was kept in blissful ignorance by the community, raised to new life as someone who takes on danger and agony to protect another.

Return with the Elixir

The curtain falls on the hero’s journey when the hero faces the final obstacles on the way home and finally comes back to the ordinary world and readjusts to life there, with the added benefit of the reward he or she just gained. If the hero’s journey is rendered like an arc, the return is the foot of the hill, the collective sigh of relief. This final stage, often the final scene of a book or a movie, can be done a variety of ways; and while Jonas’s ending is untraditional in that his

story is not wrapped up in a completely airtight manner, the open-ended story form is still a valid way to end (Vogler 224). The ambiguity and openness of *The Giver's* ending engages Jonas, and therefore readers, in a mental trust exercise. After all the sacrifices he makes to escape the community and keep Gabe alive, Jonas still does not know whether what he did will have the desired effect on the community. Wend-Walker explains that Jonas's final destination after leaving his community "is pointedly deferred: never becoming fully present, it remains 'waiting' at the novel's close" ("Possibility of Elsewhere" 154). In the same way, many adolescent readers can connect to a similar experience in their own lives, especially in the many transitions, waiting periods, and unknowns that emerge in the teenage years. However, even amid the uncertainty, Jonas can rest in the new community ahead of him that "he was aware with certainty and joy...were waiting for him; and that they were waiting, too, for the baby" (225). He is left at a point of waiting, but waiting that is full of hope for the future.

Since Jonas never actually returns to the community, but flees it, readers never actually see the effect of the societal change he worked to send into his community, so neither Jonas nor readers know whether his escape successfully healed his community. As previously mentioned, Jonas and Gabe approach a place Jonas had seen in a memory before, and behind him (assumed to be the direction of the community) he thinks he hears music, which seems to indicate that the memories are in fact returning (Lowry 225). However, the last line of the book creates ambiguity, because, as it says, "perhaps it was only an echo" (225). No one can know for sure. Even though Lowry published three more books in *The Giver* Quartet, none of them address what happened back in Jonas's original community, so readers will never know for certain whether the boon Jonas released to his community by leaving truly helped and healed them.

Although the mention of the music and the assurance of the Giver remaining in the community to help points toward success rather than failure, the possibility that his efforts came to nothing still remains. Latham suggests that instead of truly redeeming and renewing the community, Jonas's departure and the consequent flood of memories could possibly only throw the community into chaos, after which they may simply absorb the loss of the young Receiver like they did before with no lifestyle change, and so perpetuate the structures Jonas sacrificed so much to undo (149-150). While uncommon to the tradition of hero's journey stories, the open, conflicted ending presented in *The Giver* resembles the ambiguity of many stages of life and provides adolescent readers with hope that an uncertain future is not terrible, even when they have invested much into something they may never see the outcome of. However, just as Jonas's ambiguous ending still carries notes of hope, readers can rest assured that even if they are facing uncertain stages in their lives, some glimmer of hope still lies ahead.

The hero's journey story cycle, then, is the frame on which *The Giver* is constructed, and the mental, emotional journey it presents is a refreshment of the story form for modern young adult audiences. Adolescent readers, while never having engaged in the epic battles and physical travels depicted in traditional heroes' journeys, can easily connect to the mental and emotional turmoil Jonas experienced in each stage of his heroic quest. The value of analyzing a work through the structure of the hero's journey returns to the question of a reader's identity and self-reflection as the place where literature, myth, and personal maturity combine to make meaning within each other (Butchart 215). In short, self-reflection and psychological development are intertwined and find expression in the hero's journey, and this is especially clear in Jonas's mental and emotional hero's journey.

Conclusion

The roots of the hero's journey story cycle run deep in thousands of years of storytelling and mythology, making it a pattern readers are familiar with whether they recognize it or not. Its three-act structure is the cornerstone of screenplays, novels, short stories, and other works of fiction in a variety of media, because, in short, it works. The hero's journey provides readers a hero to identify with and to draw inspiration from, especially as each many stages of the hero's journey reflect stages of life itself. Following a hero through these stages, then, can inspire readers to face the obstacles in their day-to-day life with the same courage and determination that fictional heroes often display. The hero's journey in *The Giver* specifically adds depth and value to an already meaningful story because of what it teaches audiences, especially young adults in complex stages of life, about truths of life and how to face each stage with courage, confidence, and hope.

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