

Original Paper

The Giver's Ethical Choices—Analysis of *The Giver* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract

The Giver is a novel published in 1993 by Lois Lowry, an American female writer. The novel tells a story of a future community where people's lives are arranged and regulated according to their scientific choices, but at the same time they have lost their freedom and right to choose. Since it was published, the novel has been analyzed and studied by a number of scholars, focusing on the growth of the young protagonist Jonas, the science fiction elements of the novel, and its dystopian perspective. This article analyzes both the scientific choices of the community and the Giver's ethical choices from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. It reads carefully into the correct ethical choices made by the Giver when facing the incorrect scientific ones, revealing the benevolence, wisdom, courage, and sense of responsibility possessed by the Giver, and highlighting his value as well. The article reiterates that only the choices in line with the ethical selection criteria of "truth, goodness and beauty" of human civilization can be regarded as right ones. At the same time, the article's research further prompts readers to reflect on the future of humanity and what to do in the face of scientific and ethical choices.

Keywords

Ethical literary criticism, scientific choice, ethical choice, the Giver

1. Introduction

The Giver, published in 1993, is a masterpiece by the American author Lois Lowry. The story takes place in a future "assimilated" community, where Jonas, a 12-year-old boy, is chosen as the memory heir (the Receiver) and will be trained by the current Giver, who possesses all the memories. After a year of training, Jonas gradually realizes that although this "assimilated" community has managed to avoid wars, disasters, hunger and other things considered bad by people, it has actually deprived people of their freedom of choice, and deprived people of their emotions and love. Upon understanding all this,

Jonas decides to escape, and lets these memories come back to people's minds; even though some may be unpleasant or negative experiences, they are real.

2. Literature Review

As soon as the novel was published, it sparked a range of reviews. Despite the novel's extensive readership, the response from readers varied greatly. Many readers highly praised the novel, resulting in it receiving the Newbery Medal in 1993. But there are some people who disliked the novel, claiming that it contained violent, sexual and infanticide plots that were inappropriate for children. As a result, some American towns even prohibited the book from being accessible in local schools and libraries. Moreover, literary critics have also provided differing interpretations of the novel. New Zealand's most celebrated children's writer Margaret Mahy asserts that the novel is a story about self-realization, and this "self-realization is expected, ultimately, to enrich a group of people denied self-realization themselves" (Mahy 4). In China, scholars such as Zhang Ying and Nie Aiping analyze the novel from the perspective of a growth novel. They employ the relevant theories of existentialism to analyze the growth of the protagonist Jonas, exploring its inheritance and transcendence of traditional growth education novels. By analyzing Jonas's growth experience in childhood, training and escape, Chen Fenglan emphasizes the necessity of fostering a healthy environment for the growth of children and adolescents, highlighting the crucial role that social environment, family relationships, guides and companions play, ultimately encouraging readers to ponder the future of society. In addition, many scholars interpret the novel from a dystopian perspective. Chen Xin and Li Qing argue that the novel is not a classic dystopian literary work, but rather a dystopian story with a focus on youth. Besides waking up the world by depicting a utopian society that has been alienated by science and technology, the novel is, more importantly, to give readers hope of redemption through Jonas's final escape. And Wang Jianxiang and Ding Shu maintain that the novel focuses on adolescents, who represent the future of humanity. They argue that the novel deftly intertwines elements of growth novel, adventure story, and dystopian novel to express concerns about real social issues.

Nevertheless, an alternate interpretation of this novel can be achieved by employing the theory of ethical literary criticism. Choice is one of the central themes in the novel. To avoid contradictions and dilemmas arising from choices, the Committee of Elders of this community chose "the Sameness"—a state without weather changes, colors, or personal freedoms. The lives of the community members, including their marriages, children, and careers, were meticulously planned and arranged. In this society, people were devoid of rights and freedom to make choices. However, human existence cannot be entirely devoid of choice, so the Giver chose to pass on memories to Jonas starting from the pleasant memories, and gradually made up his mind during the training of Jonas for a year or so to help Jonas escape, while he himself chose to stay and help the community solve the problems that would arise after recovering their memories. By analyzing the numerous choices made by the Giver, it can be revealed that in the face of a conflict between ethical choices and scientific choices, he chose ethics,

displaying his courage and wisdom.

3. What is the Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism?

Ethical literary criticism is a method of literary criticism created by Chinese scholars on the basis of Western ethical criticism and Chinese moral criticism, which is a critical method of reading, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating literature from an ethical perspective (Nie, 2014). The central term in ethical literary criticism is ethical selection. Ethical literary criticism holds that the development process of human civilization is composed of three stages of selection, namely natural selection, ethical selection, and scientific selection (Nie & Wang 1). After a long process of natural selection, ancient anthropoid finally evolved into human beings, thus entering the stage of human civilization and ethical selection began. In the stage of ethical selection, everyone has to make a lot of choices, and “our behavior, thoughts, emotions, morals, etc., are the result of self-choice” (Nie and Wang 9). And with the development of science and technology, natural people will gradually be replaced by scientific people, and the world will enter the stage of scientific selection, at which ethics will be replaced by technical standards and gradually fade away. Ethical literary criticism, however, argues that scientific choices cannot inherently get rid of ethical choices. It is almost impossible for mankind to be free from ethical interference and to become truly demoralized before scientific people take their place. As long as there have been human beings, they have had to face ethical choices and even scientific ethics. It is therefore crucial to analyze a person’s ethical choices, through which we can understand his/her psychological and mental state, as well as his/her emotions and morals.

4. The Scientific Choices in the Novel

The novel is set in a future assimilated community. This community, “so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made” (Lowry 68), is the result of scientific selection. Everything was designed and managed by the Committee of Elders. The purpose was to avoid the disasters and misfortunes that had occurred in human history, and to make the lives of people in the community “better”. For example, the climate was controlled by using science and technology to ensure food production and smooth transportation. Moreover, the lives of the people in the community were strictly restricted and designed. Children could not wear the front-buttoned jacket until they were 7 years old (59), and 8-year-olds were permitted to wear clothes with pockets, “indicating that [they were] mature enough now to keep track of [their] own small belongings” (64). 9-year-old children could ride bicycles. 10-year-old girls were allowed to stop braiding their hair, and boys were allowed to cut their hair shorter than men’s; 11-year-old children would look forward to the coming of 12, because it was an important age, and after careful examination and consideration by the Elders, each 12-year-old child would be placed in a career for life. They would learn some specialized knowledge, and then become teachers, nurses, engineers, doctors, legal workers... But some girls would become the birthmothers, who would give three births within three years and “after that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the

day that they enter the House of the Old” (36). If an adult wanted to have a spouse, he/she had to apply and “waited months or even years before a Match was approved and announced. ... [And their] match, ... had been monitored by the Committee of Elders for three years before they could apply for children” (68). Of course, none of their children were biologically related to their parents; they were assigned by the community, and each couple could only have one son and one daughter. When the children reached adulthood, the family would be dissolved, and the parents went to live with those who did not have children until they were unable to contribute to the community, and then they would move to an elderly center, where they would spend their old age until they were “released”.

“Release” is a technical term for the community. The lighter of the newborn twins would be released; those who violated the community rules three times would be released; every elderly person would eventually be released in the elderly center. At first, Jonas didn’t understand what “release” meant, thinking he who was released just went to somewhere else, some other communities. But when the Giver showed Jonas a video of his father personally “releasing” a baby, Jonas suddenly realized that to be “released” was to be euthanized—his father had personally killed a light-weight, so-called unqualified baby, while he remained very calm because he thought he just did it according to the rules, nothing wrong with it. This revelation struck Jonas as both absurd and merciless. In fact, “release” serves as a punitive measure and a method by which the community controlled the population and guaranteed the quality of its births based on “scientific criteria” and a scientific choice.

The existence of this assimilation community is the result of a series of scientific choices that minimize people’s opportunities to choose, because “[People] might make wrong choices” (128). Taking this into consideration, the community simply deprived people of the right to choose. To avoid having to struggle with what color to wear every day, people could not perceive the colors, and only a gray patch was visible. In order to achieve control over the people, each household could only have the necessary reference books: “a dictionary, and the thick community volume which contains descriptions of every office, factory, building and committee. And the Book of Rules” (99). Except for those, people simply didn’t know that there were other books. Yet, books are the memory of human history, the memory of human knowledge, and the deprivation of books is the deprivation of memory! Therefore, the Elders decided that there could only be one person in the entire community who had memories of the past, and that person was the Giver. When he was getting older, the Elders would carefully select a 12-year-old child to be the next memory inheritor, the Receiver. As the Giver gradually transmitted his memories to the Receiver, he no longer had them.

According to ethical literary criticism, “texts have three basic forms: brain texts, material texts, and electronic (digital) texts”, and “brain texts” are unique to the human body in “a special biological form,” which is the perception and cognition of things preserved by the human brain in the form of memory” (Nie, *Introduction to Literary Ethical Criticism*, 270, quoted by Shang 63). In the words of Professor Nie,

All brain texts are composed of brain concepts, which can be divided into two categories according to their source: object concepts and abstract concepts. The brain concept is the tool for thinking, and thinking is the comprehension and application of the brain concept; the use of brain concepts in thinking gives rise to thoughts, which are conveyed through brain texts. The completion of the process of combining brain concepts means the end of the person's thinking process, producing thoughts and forming brain texts. Brain texts are established procedures that determine people's thoughts and behaviors. ... During the process of ethical selection, people's ethical consciousness begins to arise, and the concepts of good and evil gradually take shape, which are all the results of the effect of brain texts (Nie 26, 33-34).

Deprived of memories of the past, people living in this community did not have a complete biological brain text unique to humans, and therefore lacked the ethical awareness to distinguish between good and evil (Shang 63). Although they are still natural people, not scientific people, they have been optimized and limited according to scientific standards and have become the product of scientific selection.

5. Analysis of the Giver's Ethical Choices

Ethical literary criticism asserts that the goal of ethical selection is to solve the problems of being human. How to be a human being can only be achieved through education. Education consists of two aspects: teaching and learning. Teaching is the premise of learning, and learning is the outcome of teaching. The purpose of education is to know how to be a human being through the means of teaching and learning (Nie and Wang 14).

In the novel *The Giver*, 12-year-old Jonas was chosen by the Committee of Elders as the future memory Receiver, who would receive all previous memories from the Giver. As a result, the Giver becomes Jonas's teacher and trainer.

For a Giver, he must take on the work and responsibility of passing on the memories. Even if they are painful, he must transmit them to his successor. But throughout the training process, readers can always feel the care and love that the Giver had for Jonas. Ten years ago, the Giver had a failed training experience. The Receiver at that time was a girl named Rosemary. Although the Giver also gave her pleasant memories in the first 5 weeks, Rosemary collapsed when she got some painful memories, such as loneliness, poverty, hunger and terror (Lowry 179). She chose to be released. This unsuccessful experience prompted the Giver to be more considerate of the endurance of a 12-year-old child when training Jonas and to avoid repeating the errors of the past. So, the Giver chose to start with "memories of pleasure" (113). His first memory to Jonas was about snow and sledge. What a novelty and a surprise for a boy of twelve! He could feel the "Tiny, cold, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face" (107), something "soft and without pain" (107). "No voice made an explanation. The experience explained itself to him. ...Comprehending all of those things as he sped downwards, he was free to enjoy the breathless glee that overwhelmed him: the speed, the clear cold air, the total silence, the

feeling of balance and excitement and peace” (108). In addition to snow, the Giver exposed Jonas to the warmth of the sun, which was described as “pleasurable and comforting” (112). These were Jonas’s initial encounters with such beautiful things as snow, hill, sledge, and runners and even sunshine, which were both surprising and exciting. But all those natural and wonderful things had long disappeared in the community because of “Climate Control” (110). Even though both the Giver and Jonas would like to have them “now and then”, “that choice is not [theirs]” (111). And then the Giver slowly passed on some painful memories to Jonas, from feeling the sunburn to seeing people slaughtering elephants in Africa in order to obtain tusks, from feeling the pain of fractures in leg to experiencing the cruelty of war and young lives being killed... But after each painful memory, the Giver always ended a training with “a colorful-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains” (143). And the memory of a birthday party allowed Jonas to comprehend “the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud” (156). To evoke genuine affection and love in Jonas, the Giver gave him a memory of a family sitting around at Christmas. He saw a small child sitting “on the lap of the old woman, and she rocked him and rubbed her cheek against his” (158). What Jonas felt was warmth and happiness and what a real family should be, but all of these had gone in this assimilated community.

As the only person in the community with all the memories, it can be said that the Giver is the only person in the community who knows how to love. The word “Love” had been “discarded” in this community as a “very broad” and “meaningless word” (162). When people wanted to express love, they chose more precise words, such as “appreciate”, “proud of someone”, etc. (162). Because there was no need for love, people had to take drugs every day to control their impulse to love. Moreover, as all the families in the community were artificially organized and neither of the children in the family was biological, there was no concept of grandparents in this community. This scientific choice deprived ordinary people of the right to experience the full range of human emotions, and so people did not understand what true love was. But for the Giver, he knew how to love, and he loved his successors, whether it was Rosemary or Jonas.

The Giver’s decision to make such choices for the purpose of his teaching illustrates his wisdom as a teacher and a trainer, and it exemplifies an ethical choice.

As a teacher and a trainer, the Giver taught Jonas throughout the process to think about and reflect on the scientific choices made by this assimilated community. He made Jonas realize that people could have different choices, although some choices, such as choosing their own spouse or career, were “not safe” (128). As his memories increased, Jonas, came to realize that these scientific choices had not only denied people the right to make normal choices, but even violated human ethics, so he decided to flee from the community and allow the memories to return to people’s brains. In addition, upon learning that his father would “release” the little baby Gabriel, who lived temporarily in his house, he decided to take Gabriel with him in order to save this innocent little life. From the Giver, Jonas has already acquired the ability to care for others rather than solely focus on himself.

As the only person in the community who had all the memories, the Giver must have endured loneliness because he could not tell them to the rest of the community except his successor. When Jonas saw the Giver for the first time on the Ceremony of Twelve, he found that the Giver was “sat in the midst [of the Elders] but seemed oddly separate from them. It was a man Jonas had never noticed before” (82) Because of his special status, he lived comfortably in a spacious room, but alone, with his door locked while, on the contrary, “no doors in the community were locked, ever” (99). He “was wrinkled, and his eyes, ..., seemed tired. The flesh around them was darkened into shadowed circles” (100). “This job has aged [him]” (101) because he was “so weighted” (103) with all the memories alone. Having become the Giver since he was 12 years old, he has come to realize that “[the] worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared” (194). The description of the Giver reflects his inner lonesomeness. Perhaps he was torn between the ethical dilemma of loyalty and betrayal. As the only person with memories, as the most trusted of the community elders, he should have been loyal to this community, but it was these memories of human history that taught the Giver what it meant to be truly human and to live a genuine life. Although human history has experienced famine, suffering and war, it is real. For many years, he had felt that the community needed to change, but his idea was hopeless because the people in the community had chosen to live like this-- no memories and no feelings. When he made Jonas realize that his father was killing babies and that his good friend Fiona was being trained to kill the old people, “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!’” (190-191) He refused to go back home to see his murderous father and refused to go back to the life of the community. He was in great pain and horror. Jonas’ reaction made the Giver finally make up his mind to help Jonas escape from the community, otherwise Jonas would most likely be in too much pain to extricate himself. And it was time for a change. Jonas’s escape would bring the memories he had back into the minds of those in the community, forcing the community to make changes. Therefore, he and Jonas made elaborate plans and preparations for the escape. With his help, Jonas eventually managed to run away from the community with Gabriel.

This is a revolt by the Giver against the scientific choices made by the community. Between loyalty and betrayal, he ultimately chose betrayal. This may seem like a violation of human ethics, but the Giver’s purpose is to save Jonas and save the community, to rebel against the scientific choices that violated human ethics, and to right the wrongs.

However, in the plans made by the Giver, instead of fleeing with Jonas, he himself chose to stay and help the people in the community get through the difficulties. He knew that when Jonas got away, “the community [had] to bear the burden themselves, of the memories [Jonas] had been holding for them” (195). There would be chaos and uneasiness, even fear in the community. “They’ll destroy themselves” (196). Considering this, the Giver believed that he could not go. He must stay and use his wisdom to help the community solve the problems. This is another ethical choice made by the Giver. “Ethical choice is a choice of responsibility, and everyone is responsible for their own choices” (Liu 25). And

when one is making his choice, he is in “the process of discovering and realizing one’s worth, and whether the choices made are ethical or not depends on whether they accord with ‘truth, goodness, and beauty’, which constitutes the value of ethical choice and the moral referent, thus establishing the rights and responsibilities of the subject of ethical choice (Su 103). The ethical choices made by the Giver reveal a strong sense of responsibility and love. Though he disagreed with the community’s scientific choices, he harbored concern for its people. He believed that he and Jonas “needed to care. It was the meaning of everything” (Lowry 197). He taught Jonas with his own choice that people should not merely love themselves but also care about and love others because “the relationship between people is one to seek goodness for others, which is the result of people’s understanding of their relationship with others in practical activities: what conforms to people’s purposes and laws is goodness, and vice versa is evil. ... Only by transcending one’s own love and loving all people can we eliminate the evil within society” (Li 49-50). The fact that the Giver, on the one hand, helped Jonas escape, and on the other, bravely took on the responsibility of helping the community solve the follow-up problems, shows his love for others, a kind of fraternity, a choice in line with traditional ethical concepts. This ethical choice can only happen to him due to his possession of all the memories of humanity, in which he may have already known what true love was-- love for parents, love for children, love for the country, and care for others.... In his mind, the community was not just a place where he lived, but rather involved everyone. Though the word “love” had been eliminated in the community, it existed in his mind. His choice was not to destroy the community, but to help correct the mistakes in their scientific choices and restore the love and morality. In this sense, his choice was in accordance with the ethical norms, and demonstrated his worth and integrity.

6. Conclusion

In the path of scientific and technological progress, people are confronted with a variety of choices, but not every scientific choice is correct, and its correctness depends on the judgment of human ethical and moral standards. The community in the novel made a series of scientific choices to make the community’s production and life safer, more convenient, and easier to manage, but it is essentially immoral to take away people’s freedom of choice and some of their nature. The young protagonist Jonas in the novel was originally an obedient child, who abided by all the rules of the community, respected his “parents”, loved his “sister”, accepted everything in the community, and did not feel that there was anything wrong with living in such a place. But ever since he became the Receiver, ever since he took some human memories from the Giver, he has felt increasingly irrational in these scientific choices. As a mentor, the Giver prioritized his student’s acceptance and emotional response to novel encounters and experiences. After long grappling with the dilemma of how to balance the need to embrace scientific progress with the need to maintain ethical principles, he finally made the right choice in the end– to help Jonas escape from the community, help people recover their memories, and help the community get through the difficulties. This series of choices demonstrates the Giver’s

benevolence and wisdom, which is respected and advocated by traditional human ethics. The novel is open-ended, not explicitly telling the reader what happened to the community after Jonas left, and whether Jonas ultimately survived. This kind of ending may suggest that it is almost impossible to say which will win, the scientific or the ethical choices. Where will the human race go? The author leaves ample room for contemplation.

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