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REPRESENTATION OF THE ELDERLY IN THOMAS MORE'S *UTOPIA* AND LOIS LOWRY'S *THE GIVER*

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Abstract. While the first utopias manifested aspirations for a better socio-political system, dystopias typically reflect societal fears and concerns that are intensified by the twentieth century's political and social crises that, besides other significant turns, have caused a rethinking of the role of the elderly in the society. While, typically, the protagonists of dystopias are very young or middle-aged, they often must interact with the previous generations to achieve their goals, thus providing an exciting field for analysis of how these elderlies are depicted in dystopian novels. The methodology for comparing the treatment of the elderly in *Utopia* with the treatment of the elderly in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* involves literary analysis and a comparison of the specific ways in which the elderly in both works are depicted. Special attention is paid to the specific ways in which they are treated and the roles they are assigned in their respective societies, as well as the level of respect and care they are shown especially at the end of their lives. The characteristic attitude towards the elderly suggested by More in *Utopia* is masterfully rendered in Lowry's twentieth-century dystopia, *The Giver*. The study reveals that the treatment of the elderly has often been discriminatory in More's work *Utopia* and is deliberately portrayed as such in Lowry's novel.

Key words: More, *Utopia*, dystopias, elderly, Lowry, *The Giver*

Though the aspirations to create a better socio-political system that would satisfy the needs of the majority have been known since ancient times, Thomas More is the one to whom we are thankful for the creation of the term *utopia*, which often is understood as a non-existing ideal place; the Greek meaning of the word is 'no place', but the English homophone derived from Greek implies 'good place'. More's intention in his masterpiece *Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo reipublicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia* [A truly golden little book, not less salutary than enjoyable, about the best state of a republic and therefore the new island of Utopia] (trans. mine; henceforth referred to as *Utopia*), first printed in 1516, has been to create and introduce a system that would be great for the majority, the one in which people could 'lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties'

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(More, 2012: 185). However, gradually the definition of *utopia* has developed to a somewhat ambiguous one, stating that it is perfect for everyone: the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2022) defines it as 'a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy', while the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2022) defines it as 'a place of ideal perfection, especially in laws, government, and social conditions'. The concept in both cases is unrealistic, as so far, it has not been possible to find or create a plethora of people whose views of what is perfect and what makes them happy would be the same. Thus, as stated by Claeys (2017: 44), 'Utopia is not synonymous with perfectionism but represents a guided improvement of human behavior. Perfectionism is a religious category. Utopia is not', meaning, a socio-political system that would satisfy everyone is impossible to generate and sustain.

Numerous countries have been promoting ideology aimed at establishing fair, strictly state-regulated systems – Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and North Korea being the most prominent examples. These ideologically based aspirations have instead 'made all of us into deep historical pessimists' (Fukuyama, 1992: 4), as, though claiming to follow utopian ideals, none of these has ever even sought to create a place of ideal perfection for *everyone* as in all of those a considerable part of the population is slaughtered, enslaved or exiled in the process of creating a new system – an approach which automatically makes the system imperfect. As summarised by Duncombe (2012: ix), 'History, therefore, appears to prove two things: one, Utopias, once politically realized, are staggering in their brutality; and two, they are destined to fail'. At the same time, the current situation worldwide, affected by constant wars, violence, corruption, increasing income inequality, unsustainable use of natural resources, starving communities, and the pandemic crisis, makes us eagerly look for alternatives which in fiction are often represented by dystopias.

Political and social crises of the twentieth century have made the genre of dystopias especially popular, as besides reflecting societal fears and concerns, it allows to test some popular utopian concepts in a fictional environment and encourages 'people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action' (Hintz and Ostry, 2003: 7). However, while often it is assumed that dystopias are providing a socio-political system which is an exact opposite to More's *Utopia*, both share several features, which, considered by More as forming an ideal social structure, would seem appalling if applied in practice. Thus, elements of More's *Utopia* like the lack of private property, strict daily routine, constant supervision, uniformed clothing and buildings, slavery, and limited freedom to travel (More, 2012: 90-185) all often find a place in twentieth- and twenty-first-century dystopias, limiting the freedom of their people and making the system oppressive and unbearable. Undeniably, the term *dystopia*, first used by John Stuart Mill in 1868, meaning 'too bad to be practicable' (Beaumont, 2005:31), directly applies to many aspects of the seemingly ideal system implemented by More. Thus, in *Utopia*, while More was attempting to create a complex vision of an apparently ideal society, he had created one that was in fact, deeply and subtly flawed. Thus, as Claeys pointed out, More's *Utopia*, though it is 'about perfectibility',

'does not generically portray the perfect society, even if its failings often seem swept under the carpet' (Claeys, 2013: 149).

Claeys (2017) and Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash (2010) stress that contemporary dystopias often have both dystopian and utopian elements, but the same also refers to More's *Utopia*, or, as brilliantly said by Gottlieb (2001: 8), every 'dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream'. While the concept of dystopia is difficult to conceptualise if it is defined as an inverted, negative version of a utopia, as 'dystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit' (Booker, 1994: 3), undeniably it describes a socio-political system which, as the Greek words *dus* and *topos* imply, suggests the existence of a 'diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place' (Claeys, 2017: 4).

The year 1516, when More's *Utopia* appeared, was characterised by the conquest of the New World, simultaneously promising 'remaking one part of humanity while enslaving another' (Claeys, 2017: 6). Forceful colonisation of territories belonging to indigenous people and establishing a new regime there was considered entirely acceptable by More (2012: 102) and the English society at the time. The sustainability of a society to a great extent was believed to be based on its economic and military potential and the ability to control and provide for its citizens. Thus, while for modern audiences, constant surveillance, strict daily routine, the necessity to wear uniforms, slavery, and numerous other norms introduced by More are found unacceptable, in Renaissance England, such a model, together with the promised 'plenty and security' (Claeys, 2017: 6), would have seemed quite reasonable. More's treatment of the elderly must also be viewed in the same light.

The attitude toward the elderly in More's *Utopia*, while generally characterized as positive, is one of the concepts that need critical evaluation. Some of the roles the elderly play are traditional; a few may even seem revolutionary, while several others would be considered unacceptable by contemporary audiences. Thus, positive and traditional in More's *Utopia* is the role of the elderly as esteemed leaders of the society deserving an honorary place. Magistrates, called Syphogrants, whose age and experience we do not know (More, 2012: 91-92), sit in the 'chief and most conspicuous place', but 'next to him sit two of the most ancient' (ibid.: 107) members of the community. The old men are not only 'honoured with a particular respect' and a place next to the leaders, but also are purposefully mixed in-between younger generations so that 'the gravity of the old people, and the reverence that is due to them, might restrain the younger from all indecent words and gestures' (ibid.). Besides, if the young ones behave, they receive special treats from the hands of the ancients: 'The old men distribute to the younger any curious meats that happen to be set before them if there is not such an abundance of them that the whole company may be served alike' (More, 2012: 91-92). Thus, More distinctly shows that the elder in *Utopia* are not only honoured but serve as educators in power to reward good behaviour and are better fed than the young ones. As adequate nutrition for the young ones does not depend on the treats received from the elderly, it may be assumed that this reward system, though aimed at retaining stability and respect towards the elderly, does not cause stagnation and does not prevent

the young ones from developing ideas of their own. As such, the system introduced by More can be considered a positive feature of the described society.

Traditional is the role of men as the leaders of the society and families, and also here, the elderly take the upper part: 'the oldest man of every family, […] is its governor; wives serve their husbands, and children their parents, and always the younger serves the elder' (ibid.: 103). At the same time, almost revolutionary for Medieval England is the role of elderly women if they happen to be widows: 'sometimes the women themselves are made priests, though that falls out but seldom, nor are any but ancient widows chosen into that order' (ibid.: 177). Even nowadays, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and many other religious communities all over the world do not allow women to become and serve as priests. Alas, More does not specify why only elderly widows are chosen for the role, but the suggestion that women can be made into priests is praiseworthy. At the same time, the constant use of the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* when speaking about the duties and privileges of the leaders of *Utopia* reminds one of More's preference for patriarchal hierarchy where the possible female priesthood is an exception.

Though typically the elderly in More's *Utopia* are treated with respect and honour, a considerably more complicated situation arises if they fall sick and become 'a burden to themselves and to all about them' (More, 2012: 141). Here, discrimination, as defined by Sally Witcher (2013), is caused by over-protection or patronizing attitudes in line with dehumanisation. When the elderly, according to More (2012: 141), 'have really out-lived themselves', it is suggested that they should 'choose rather to die since they cannot live but in much misery'. Though the cited passage starts by stressing that this opportunity is offered to the incurably sick suffering pain, which would be similar to the modern concept of euthanasia, More considers 'old age, which, as it carries many diseases along with it, […] is a disease of itself' (ibid.: 144). Thus, believing in a happy afterlife and being persuaded by priests and magistrates to end their lives, they 'either starve themselves of their own accord, or take opium, and by that means die without pain' (ibid.: 141). Though certain persuasion takes place, 'no man is forced on this way of ending his life' (ibid.), and they are taken care of. Still, as More stresses 'a voluntary death […] is very honourable', so it is evident that moral pressure to end one's life lies quite heavily on those who have become a burden to society, whether they like it or not. Thus, discursive discrimination, as defined by Boréus (2006), occurs by arguing for unfavourable treatment of the elderly and forcing them to make an ultimate decision that may go against their own wishes.

Peter Stansky (1982: 3) suggests that 'as long as the world is an imperfect place to live, we shall have Utopians, envisioning a world in the future in which all imperfections have been cleansed away', and seemingly, the land of *Sameness* in Lowry's novel *The Giver,* first published in 1993, is such a place. Like in More's *Utopia,* the ultimate goal here is to give everyone an opportunity to lead a serene life void of anxieties and to build a system that ensures everyone is satisfied with one's place and role in society. To reach such general satisfaction, some principles introduced in More's *Utopia* are instituted, new ones are added, and some liberties are denied.

Common to both *Utopia* and Lowry's land of *Sameness* is the leadership role of the *Elders* (2018: ch. 2, para. 19), but in Lowry's novel, their duties are more specific. Also, in More's work, the employment career of all citizens is state regulated, but the Committee of Elders in *Sameness* not only assigns an appropriate job to each child at age twelve, thus establishing daily routines they will follow up to old age, but also Elders are responsible for *Matching of Spouses*. To accomplish it, they spend enormous time and consideration to find an ideal spouse for each adult, so that 'sometimes an adult who applied to receive a spouse waited months or even years before a Match was approved and announced' (Lowry, 2018: ch. 6, para. 50). Similarly, in *Utopia* marriage is a state-regulated affair and a special warrant from the Prince is necessary to obtain rights to get married in case the young people have 'run into forbidden embraces before marriage' as it is believed that otherwise 'very few would engage in a state' (More, 2012: 142), but in *Utopia,* at least men and women are allowed to choose one's life partner by themselves. In both works, mistrust in one's ability to form a healthy marital relationship without interference from officials is demonstrated, while only in Lowry's the role of providing the necessary guidance is defined as the duty of the Old.

Accurate preservation of historical records is another feature common to both lands. In *Utopia* 'their records, that contain the history of their town and State, are preserved with an exact care, and run backwards seventeen hundred and sixty years' (More, 2012: 91) and are used as a common source of knowledge. While the age of historians in More's work is undefined, in Lowry's, this honorary and extremely responsible assignment falls to the Chief Elder. He is the only one with memories of life beyond *Sameness*, and, though he can deliver his knowledge only to one carefully selected follower, is the key source of knowledge and information in an emergency. The rest of the society in *Sameness* has reached what Francis Fukuyama (1989: 18) defines as 'the end of history' where any 'struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands'. Thus, while in both works history is used as the source of knowledge, the chosen method and its application are strikingly different, providing limited access to historical records in Lowry's dystopian society and leading to dehumanisation or *mankurtism* (Aitmatov, 1983), that is, the inability of people to recognise themselves, their history, their kinship, and their values.

In both versions of perfect lands, there can also be observed parallels in relation to attitudes towards the sick and elderly. Similar to More's (2012: 105) description of ideal hospitals that 'are furnished and stored with all things that are convenient for the ease and recovery of the sick' and provide 'tender and watchful care' of the sick, excellent care of inmates is provided in Lowry's dystopian world at the House of the Old. There is not only 'occupational therapy' but also 'recreational activities, and medications' in the House of Old, and, like in More's *Utopia*, the *Old ones* are gently taken care of, entertained, and 'always given the highest respect' (Lowry, 2018: ch. 10, para. 37). But, similarly to what David Sisk (1997: 6) asserts about dystopias in general, which 'even though they may at first appear pleasant,

they always depict horrible societies', the reality is much darker also in the land of *Sameness*. The first dissonant accord is brought in by Lowry (2018: ch. 12, para. 21) when the narrator learns that there is also 'punishment for disobedience […] [for which] they use a discipline wand on the Old, the same as for small children', but the idea of a perfect end of life is entirely destroyed when readers learn what happens after the *Ceremony of Release* for the Old. To the knowledge of the community, when requiring too much care, the elderly are *released*, but what exactly this *release* means is neither questioned nor explained, though they do know that typically release is a form of punishment. At the same time, citizens believe that the only exception to the rule is in the case of 'Release of the elderly', which is 'a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived' (ibid.: ch. 1, para. 50). According to official ideology, for everyone else *release* means that people are 'sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community' (ibid.: ch. 6, para. 19) and, though also after the elderly never return, no one questions what exactly *release* means in their case. In the House of the Old the Ceremony of Release takes place in the presence of all the Old and the telling of one's life takes place, glasses are raised, toasts are pronounced, an anthem is sung, and the Old one to be released delivers 'a lovely good-bye speech' (ibid.: ch. 4, para. 34). Neither inhabitants of the House of the Old have an idea where exactly the Old ones go after the release ceremony, nor is it known to the majority of the society, except only few whose duties are related to the release ceremony. What actually happens with the released elderly in the land of *Sameness*, is that after the celebration, the Old receive a lethal injection. Such an ending of the life of the elderly highly resonates with More's *Utopia*, though there the celebration of one's life takes place after the death: 'when they come from the funeral, they discourse of his good life, and worthy actions' (More, 2012: 172). In both cases, the old ones condemned to death, because they have become a burden to society, must meet their fate with pleasure and acceptance. In *Utopia*, after the funeral, people should be able to 'speak of nothing oftener and with more pleasure than of his serenity at the hour of death' (ibid.), but in Lowry's (2018: ch. 4, para. 37) world of *Sameness*, the Old are supposed to meet their death with a look of 'pure happiness' and enter the ceremony being 'thrilled'. The key difference is that the Old in Lowry's dystopia are not aware that they are going to receive a lethal injection immediately after the ceremony, while the inhabitants of More's *Utopia* are conscious of their destiny. In both cases, the increase of the welfare and peace of the society is sought at the expense of the individual rights of the elderly citizens.

While More's *Utopia* is based on a strict patriarchal hierarchy that gives men power, authority, and privilege to rule over an entire society, in Lowry's work, the community is ruled by a comparatively impersonal collective called the Council of Elders with no reference to gender hierarchy. While both the protagonist Jonas and the key character Giver are men, most likely this is just a coincidence, as the previous Giver's apprentice was a girl. While Lowry provides very little information about the members of the Council of Elders, it is stated that the Chief Elder is elected every ten years, and at the moment, it is a female, but no specific attention is devoted to the issue, it is revealed just by the use of the pronoun

she when quoting the speech of the character. Thus, contrary to More's *Utopia,* the social hierarchy in Lowry's *The Giver* is not gender-based.

There are numerous works portraying how systems that were intended to perfectly serve their citizens turn into mind-numbing dystopias when the theme of death is debated, like recent Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* series *Scythe* (2016), followed by *Thunderhead* (2018), *The Toll* (2019) and *Gleanings* (2022) or earlier ones like *Among the Hidden* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (2000), *Watchstar* by Sargent (1980), *The Talking Coffins of Cryo-City* by Parenteau (1979) and many more; the promotion of euthanasia of the elderly, however, is one of those utopian features that is seldom depicted in fiction. Thus, Lowry's *The Giver* is an impressive example of a dystopian novel illustrating a peculiar treatment of the elderly resonating not only with this but with several other practices outlined in More's *Utopia*. While the world created by Lowry in *The Giver* does not immediately strike the reader as nightmarish, eventually this utopia also turns out to be a restrictive system, unable to reach the goals it set.

Both utopian and dystopian works make the readers question the essential values of humanity and consider the rights and roles of individuals and society in the promotion of enhanced well-being of both. Though intended as a perfect state satisfying the needs and wishes of the majority of its citizens, both More's *Utopia* and Lowry's *The Giver* introduced systems and attitudes towards the elderly which would be considered highly unethical and dangerous if implemented in European welfare states.

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