

# Marginalisation of Motherhood in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and Lois Lowry's The Giver

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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## **Abstract**

This paper deals with how motherhood is represented in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. The two societies represented in the novels have both adopted different methods that have replaced natural human procreation – the unnamed society of *The Giver* has chosen surrogacy, while the more technologically advanced World State opted for human engineering using *in-vitro* fertilisation. Although the methods themselves are completely different, both societies have a strong negative attitude towards the traditional notion of motherhood. The society of *Brave New World* rejects the very notion of it and deems it shameful and obscene. While *The Giver's* community still understands and practices the concept of the nuclear family, it is far from what it typically implies. The main focus of this paper is to explain that a once noble and revered role got transferred to the fringes of society because of World State's aim to retain stability and *The Giver's* community's efforts to remove pain and suffering. In order for this to happen, the attitude towards family and birth were changed and mothers are denied dignity and autonomy over their own bodies in the novels.

Keywords: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Lois Lowry, *The Giver*, motherhood, marginalisation

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## **Introduction**

This paper will analyse how motherhood is perceived in Aldous Huxley and Lois Lowry's respective dystopian novels *Brave New World* and *The Giver*. The first chapter deals with the terms dystopia and dystopian literature and will explain why these novels belong to this genre.

The second chapter focuses on what constitutes motherhood and provides different definitions of motherhood along with how it is perceived within the societies of *Brave New World* and *The Giver*. It also tackles how the term may lose parts of its meaning in totalitarian regimes that are described in dystopian literature.

The third and fourth chapters offer brief summaries of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* respectively. These chapters are here to familiarise the reader with the general plot of the novels and also offer an overview of their publishing history and general reception.

Finally, the last chapter offers an extensive analysis of the unnamed society of *The Giver* and World State. Emphasis will be placed on their outlook concerning motherhood and how it deviates from the traditional definition. Both societies will be thoroughly scrutinised to understand the main reasons for their dismissal of traditional motherhood. The last part of the paper is the Conclusion which summarizes the thesis' findings.

## 1. Dystopian Literature

Both Huxley's *Brave New World* and Lowry's *The Giver* belong to the literary genre of dystopia. Dystopia is, according to *Oxford Dictionary*, “an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic” (“Dystopia”). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers a similar definition of dystopia as “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, and fearful lives” (“Dystopia”). Both definitions imply that the term is used in literature to describe literary works that depict a fictional society in which people lead miserable lives.

Speaking of literature specifically, Erica Gottlieb defines dystopian fiction in the following way:

Dystopian fiction looks at totalitarian dictatorship as its prototype, a society that puts its whole population continuously on trial, a society that finds its essence in concentration camps, that is, in disenfranchising and enslaving entire classes of its own citizens, a society that, by glorifying and justifying violence by law, preys upon itself. . . . dystopian society is what we would today call dysfunctional; it reveals the lack of the very qualities that traditionally justify or set the *raison d'être* for a community. (40-41)

Authors often find inspiration for their dystopias in their own societies. They extrapolate the problems that they have with their own country or community and create a distorted society with extreme views and values. According to M. Keith Booker, defamiliarization is the principal technique of dystopian fiction, which authors achieve “by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (19). By distancing from the present reality and instead creating a futuristic society that is very different from one’s own, the problems of the present moment become more visible to the reader. Both *Brave New World* and *The Giver* are set in futuristic societies, one more advanced than the other, who have eradicated all emotion to ensure the stability of their community. Despite all of their technological progress, they have become alienated from one another as a result of the government’s interference in their private lives. Because of this, dystopian texts can often be interpreted as cautionary tales that describe what might happen if people are not self-aware.

In summation, dystopian fiction provides a picture of a society where the government has full and complete control over both private and public lives of its citizens, annihilating any possibility of freedom or personal choice. The novels that are in focus of this thesis depict such societies, and the present analysis will specifically be directed toward the issue of motherhood as represented in these novels.

## 2. Definitions of Motherhood

In most societies, that is, in societies perceived as “free,” issues related to family and parenting belong to the private sphere. In other words, they are treated as something intimate and personal, regulated and organized mostly according to the wishes of parents, that is, mother and father. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, motherhood is defined as “the state, condition, or fact of being a mother” (“Motherhood”). Mother itself means “the female parent of a child or animal; a person who is acting as a mother to a child” (“Mother”). The definition of mother implies that in some cases the one who acts as a mother is perceived as a mother. It is also implied that the mother is a female person who decides to engage in motherhood.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow defines a mother as “the person who socializes and nurtures . . . a primary parent or caretaker” of children (11) and states that it is expected of women to “take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants” (Chodorow 3), which is problematic because “[w]omen’s mothering is central to the sexual division of labor” (Chodorow 11). Thus, the key difference between motherhood and mothering is the fact that motherhood, as the state of being a mother, is restricted to women, whereas mothering, as a process, may include a person of any gender. Relatedly, Sara Ruddick suggests that mothering means “to take upon oneself the responsibility of childcare, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life,” and states that anyone who takes on “maternal work” (Ruddick 17) is mothering. By expanding the role to more than just the children’s biological mothers, Ruddick validates and welcomes both adoptive parents and men in maternal roles. Whereas the new, progressive ideas include both genders, it seems that the dystopian societies depicted in Huxley’s and Lowry’s novels consider motherhood to be, on the one hand, still connected with women, and, on the other, a rather undesirable state that should be avoided.

Rather than focusing on gender issues, the two novels represent the problems that occur when governments begin to meddle in the private lives of its citizens. This invasion of privacy, which is often portrayed in dystopian literature, is a stepping-stone towards disenfranchisement of certain groups. Thus, the two novels take a more extreme approach, but in a different direction: rather than discussing problems related to women being restricted solely to the role of mothers, they focus on the situation in which the state takes over that role.

According to Mary E. Theis, marginalisation or complete absence of motherhood is a common topic in dystopian literature. It is oftentimes used as a tool by those in positions of power to ensure political stability and obedience of their inhabitants. Mary E. Theis further states that “to dramatize the extent of the state’s total control of an individual, his isolation and oppression are invariably associated with either the complete abolition of the maternal role as primary educator or with the complete regulation of family life that permits neither parent to educate their children or show their love for them as they wish” (Theis 34). By dismissing everything traditionally associated with the concept, either by removing mothers from the equation completely and replacing them with artificial in-vitro fertilisation like in *Brave New World* or by introducing surrogacy and having the Elders of the community assign children to each family like in *The Giver*, each government is essentially either policing women’s reproductive rights or denying the children a traditional upbringing, or both. These societies are marginalizing a once revered role for the purpose of achieving certain political goals, which will be discussed later on.

### 3. *Brave New World*

Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World*, first published in 1932, is considered to be one of the most influential works of dystopian fiction. The novel is set in a technologically advanced World State and its society is divided into five castes: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons. Natural procreation has been eradicated and eventually replaced by genetic engineering. All members of the society are conditioned to fit each of the castes to ensure the stability of the World State. At first, it is presented as a perfect country where everyone is happy, but it will soon be revealed to be the opposite.

The story follows two characters, a World State citizen called Bernard Marx, an Alpha who is unhappy with his life, and a "Savage" called John, who was born in the Reservations and does not know anything about life in World State. Marx travels to the savage reservations with Lenina Crowne, where he encounters John and his mother Linda. He quickly realises that they are the Director's long lost family and decides to bring them to London to secure his social status. John's arrival in London results in the Director's resignation because natural human procreation is forbidden. He is shamed for having a natural, biological family and can no longer hold a respectable position in the society. John, however, cannot comprehend their way of life and decides to live in isolation, but despite his rejection of World State's ideology, he becomes a celebrity. Unable to cope with it, he decides to hang himself.

According to Kate Lohnes, the novel was not well received amongst the public and the negative reviews were a consequence of the fact that "[m]any were offended by the nature of Huxley's future, and very few understood the novel's philosophical implications. Many schools and libraries all over the world banned the novel, and even today it remains on lists of censored books" ("*Brave New World*"). Despite the initial backlash, *Brave New World* had an enormous impact on dystopian fiction and served as inspiration for many subsequent dystopian novels.

#### 4. *The Giver*

Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* follows the story of the twelve-year-old Jonas who lives in an unnamed community which, at first glance, appears to be a utopia. Pain, suffering, and hunger have ceased to exist and it seems like a perfect world where all problems of the past have been solved. However, Jonas becomes aware that there are many things that his community is lacking, such as memories, feelings, or free choice. Even colour was eradicated to reflect the community's state of "sameness." Everything within the community is controlled by the Committee of Elders, even though people are not aware of it. Everyone in the community has a certain role (a job or function they perform in the community) which is assigned publicly at the age of twelve. They live in strictly regulated traditional nuclear families, but the people performing the role of parents in the family are never the children's biological parents. Namely, all children are effectively "produced" by Birthmothers: women who have been artificially inseminated and whose job it is to bring the pregnancy to term and give birth to the baby. The baby is taken away immediately and the Birthmother never even sees it.

When it is Jonas' turn to receive his assignment, he is chosen as the new Receiver of Memory whose job is to receive and store memories of the past. He starts his training with the Giver, who was the Receiver of Memories before Jonas and now has to pass them down to him. As the Giver starts to forward the memories to Jonas, Jonas learns about the past which is kept secret from the community. As he encounters sunshine and snow, joy and sadness, and love and hate for the first time, he realizes that his community is far from perfect and decides to escape from the community with the baby Gabriel, nurtured by his family until he either gains strength or is killed for not being "adequate."

The novel initially received positive reviews, although the novel's ambiguous ending may have left some readers unsatisfied. It made it on several best-selling lists and won the Newbery Medal Prize in 1994. However, the novel received a lot of criticism for its "offensive language" and was thought to be "sexually explicit," too "dark" and too "violent" (Blatt). According to Blatt, it remains "one of the most banned books in American Schools" ("Why Do So Many Schools Try").

## 5. Depictions of Motherhood in Huxley's *Brave New World* and Lowry's *The Giver*

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* begins with a detailed description of the process of child breeding in Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. Through the director's tour of the factory, it is revealed that society is divided into a five-caste system and, to ensure that this status quo remains, all embryos but the Alphas and Betas undergo "Bokanovsky's Process," which essentially splits the embryo into ninety-six identical parts, each of which becomes its own person:

"Bokanovsky's Process," repeated the Director, and the students underlined the words in their little notebooks. One egg, one embryo, one adult-normality. But a bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. Progress. (Huxley 3-4)

This process is used to increase the stability of the system because it ensures that people will do identical tasks. The main goal of the state is to make sure that all castes act the way they have been conditioned to and do not associate with those above or below their station.

From the moment that they are born, children are subjected to numerous hours of conditioning which are essentially brainwashing them to have the same frame of mind. Through such rigorous conditioning the government is instilling a set of values which are supposed to bring order and stability. World State's community is very sexually liberated and children engage in a number of sexual games at a rather early age. After they have grown up, children are expected to lead solitary lives, rejecting all values that might be associated with the Savages, in particular monogamous relationships and motherhood.

Consequently, the society of World State has no notion of family. They have a saying that "everyone belongs to everyone else" (Huxley 37). Natural procreation has been abolished completely and is now considered shameful, but is still present in the Reservations among the Savages. Words like "mother" and "father" have ceased to exist in their community and have become obscenities. Matthew Vranicar argues that this happened because "the strong bonding between mother and child is seen as disruptive to the stability of the state: 'When the individual feels, the community reels' (p. 62)" (Vranicar 1).



In *The Women of Brave New World*, Jessica Eylem underlines signs of misogyny in Mustapha Mond's reasoning for the abolition of emotions and motherhood. He explains to the students in the Hatchery that people, women in particular were “reeking with emotion. What suffocating intimacies, what dangerous, insane...Manically, the mother brooded over her children (her children) ...brooded over them like a cat over kittens” (Huxley 31-32). Mond saw emotions as a nuisance that crept in the minds of people, leading them astray and creating instability. According to Eylem, “Mond is exposing the view that more stereotypically feminine qualities were ‘unfit’ and unwanted in this new society. The Fordian state no longer wants families, mothers, monogamy, or even emotion. The state wants social stability which can only be achieved by getting rid of emotion and many qualities normally associated with women” (4). There are multiple parts of the novel that describe the society’s attitude towards motherhood, one of which happens when Linda returns to London:

Linda, on the contrary, cut no ice; nobody had the smallest desire to see Linda. To say one was a mother – that was past a joke: it was an obscenity. Moreover, she wasn’t a real savage, had been hatched out of a bottle and conditioned like any one else: so couldn't have really quaint ideas. Finally – and this was by far the strongest reason for people’s not wanting to see poor Linda – there was her appearance. Fat; having lost her youth; with bad teeth, and a blotched complexion, and that figure (Ford!) – you simply couldn’t look at her without feeling sick, yes, positively sick. (Huxley 133)

Linda's pregnancy was not voluntary, meaning she did not plan it. Once she was stranded on the Reservation, she did not have access to contraception and became pregnant with John. After she returned, the rest of society ostracised her not only because she became pregnant but because she was conditioned against it. The conditioning made it sound deplorable and no one wanted to be associated with someone who had betrayed her society's values. Motherhood is discussed once more in a recollection about the "pre-moderns":

Mother, monogamy, romance. High spurts the fountain; fierce and foamy the wild jet. The urge has but a single outlet. My love, my baby. No wonder those poor pre-moderns were mad and wicked and miserable. Their world didn’t allow them to take things easily, didn’t allow them to be sane, virtuous, happy. What with mothers and lovers, what with the prohibitions they were not conditioned to obey, what with the temptations and the lonely remorse, what with all the diseases and the endless isolating pain, what with the uncertainties and the poverty—they were forced to feel

strongly. And feeling strongly (and strongly, what was more, in solitude, in hopelessly individual isolation), how could they be stable? (Huxley 35)

Here, Mustapha Mond explains the reasons why their society is superior to that which came before. His main argument is that their old way of life worked against their favour and made them miserable. As a result of such circumstances, they had no choice but to feel intense emotions which, in his opinion, made them unstable. He specifically mentions mothers first because a mother's love was the most “unstable” in this regard as it formed an unbreakable bond with her child. This bond may lead her to act irrationally and forget her own needs while caring for her child. This is unimaginable to citizens of World State who live in a hedonistic society where they use soma to avoid pain, have multiple partners, and only care for themselves.

While Huxley decides to erase the concept of motherhood in its entirety from the minds of World State's inhabitants, Lowry offers a possibly more complex outlook on motherhood than her predecessor in *The Giver*. Similarly to that of *Brave New World*, *The Giver's* community has eradicated all emotions, pain, pleasure, and even colours in order to adhere to the idea of “sameness.” All children are expected to contribute to society as much as the adults and they do so by volunteering after school to complete an assigned number of hours. If they fail, they are not eligible to receive their Assignment and have, therefore, lost their purpose within their community.

Conversely to *Brave New World's* community, which does not have the notion of family and is in that sense entirely individualistic, this society is community-based and still understands and upholds the concept of the nuclear family. Nevertheless, it lacks depth and is devoid of all emotions. This is easily seen from a kind of mechanic term used for the family: a family unit. Essentially, all family units consist of four members, a mother and a father who are assigned two children, one male and one female. While the conception of the family unit seems ideal, the members actually lack any emotional ties as they are prevented by the drugs they use to stop “the Stirrings” (Lowry 55), that is any kind of hormonal surge.

The most important part of a child's life is the Ceremony of Twelve during which each child is assigned a role they are expected to fulfil. These roles are chosen by the Committee of Elders based on how the child spends their community hours. At the age of twelve, all children begin their training, after which they are integrated into their communities as full-fledged adults. Children do not get to experience childhood. Don Latham argues that, aside from engaging in activities commonly associated with growing up, such as learning how to ride a bicycle, or having a comfort object, most

often a stuffed animal, the children never get to experience childhood because they are expected to behave like adults at a very young age, and states that: “It would seem that in this kind of society, there is no blurring of the line between childhood and adulthood, with every stage in the development process so clearly defined. However, this is not really the case, for in this society everyone is expected to behave as an adult and, at the same time, everyone is treated like a child” (10).

*The Giver's* community is aware that all jobs are necessary, but, despite that, certain occupations, like being a Birthmother, are less valued than others. This attitude can be seen when Lily tells her parents that she wants the Elders to assign her the role of the Birthmother: “‘Three years,’ Mother told her firmly. ‘Three births, and that’s all. After that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the old. Is that what you want, Lily? Three lazy years, and then hard physical labor until you are old’” (Lowry 36). During their family discussion, in order to further dissuade her from it, Lily’s father even suggests that she should hope to become a Nurturer instead because “Birthmothers never even get to see new-children” (Lowry 37). Since he refers to them as “new-children” instead of “their children,” it is evident that he does not consider them to be the Birthmothers’ children; hence, it is clear that they are only seen as vessels that carry the children until they can be assigned to their rightful family.

Even though they are the ones who are bringing the children into the world, Birthmothers are denied the opportunity to ever experience motherhood in its full right. This is discussed during Jonas’ volunteering hours at the House of Old: “‘Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course,’ she added primly, ‘all lives are meaningful, I don’t mean that they aren’t. But Edna. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here. She never even had a family unit’” (Lowry 48-49). It appears that in this society the only way to lead a purposeful life is to have a family unit, but the irony is in the fact that the family unit is composed of biologically unrelated people, put together by the state (government). Moreover, even though these women enable the birth of new children and the creation of family units, they are deprived of the right to bring up children of their own, which puts them on the fringes of society. In this way, the women (Birthmothers) are constituted as the lowest class of people despite their essential role in the society as a result of the government's decision to eradicate all emotions because they were believed to be the main cause of human suffering.

This decision is revealed in an exchange between Jonas and the Giver in which Jonas wonders why only the two of them are burdened by the pain of the memories, to which the Giver replies: “But

then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don't want that. And that's the real reason The Receiver is so vital to them, and so honored. They selected me - and you - to lift that burden from themselves" (Lowry 146). With the intent of creating a world without pain, the Committee of Elders thought it was necessary to sever all bonds between humans, most importantly the one between a mother and her child, and introduced surrogacy as a primary way of procreation. The reason why women were no longer permitted to give birth to their own children may be because a mother's unconditional love is deemed one of the strongest emotions, which, according to the Elders' reasoning, guaranteed suffering to both parties upon separation. To prevent this bond from ever forming, Birthmothers are forbidden from having a family unit of their own and as a result of this practice, they have lost their place in society and are perceived as mere tools in the process of procreation.

## Conclusion

Huxley's technologically superior community of World State has adopted genetic engineering as the primary method of reproduction. With this method they managed to produce identical individuals. Growing up the children are conditioned to obey a certain set of values and are encouraged to engage in sexual games. Promiscuity is commonplace within their community and women are obliged to take contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Motherhood has lost its purpose and has become an obscenity, something only associated with the Savages of the Reservations who still practice a traditional way of living. If a woman were to become pregnant, like in the case of Linda, no one would want to associate with her because she too was conditioned to despise the very notion of motherhood and should have known better than the Savages alongside whom she had been living all those years. Ultimately, Huxley has depicted a society where technology has progressed so far as to replace meaningful relationships. In this way, he shows the dangers of eliminating all human flaws (such as emotional instability) as emotions are the key component that makes people who they are. In fact, the most intimate and natural process of birth and mothering is eliminated and replaced by technology.

*The Giver's* community is described as advanced, albeit not as much as the one of *Brave New World*. They too have rejected traditional motherhood and have replaced it with surrogacy, but have, as opposed to *Brave New World's* society, kept the notion of family. While *The Giver's* community is familiar with the concept of the nuclear family, it lacks the warmth and emotional connection which is usually associated with it. The family unit consists of four members who were assigned to each other by the Committee of Elders. Children are treated as adults and are assigned a job at the early age of twelve. Even though they are the ones who are bringing the children into the world, Birthmothers are not allowed to start their own families. In fact, out of all professions, Birthmothers are the most undervalued and face inequality and discrimination. The reason for such social organization is the government's plan to erase all emotions to create a world without pain. By removing the bond between the mother and her child and reinforcing the idea of a rigid family unit that functions without any emotional ties between members, the Committee of Elders dehumanizes Birthmothers to the extent of them being thought of as just temporary vessels for the children until they reach their rightful families. In this way, Lowry illustrated how dangerous a community devoid of emotions like love and empathy can be harmful to its own inhabitants.

Both of these fictional societies are portrayed to initially seem as more advanced than the one in reality; they seem like utopian societies. Life seems more comfortable and fulfilling in certain aspects, and violence and conflict have ceased to exist. However, after seeing how much of personal freedom and basic human rights they are infringing upon, it becomes apparent that they are technologically advanced, but far from an actual utopia. Both societies associated emotions with reckless behaviour and blamed them for all the problems they faced in the past. Because the relationship between mother and child, and between family members, is both the basis of our society and produces the strongest emotions, the writers decided to eliminate that from the lives of their protagonists to better illustrate that we are human and not machines and that emotions are core components of our human self.

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