

Critical evaluation of *Messenger* by Lois Lowry

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ABSTRACT: Lois Lowry's *Messenger* forms part of a utopian/dystopian trilogy aimed at young readers, depicting an ideal village surrounded by a threatening forest. The narrative follows Matty, a messenger with the power to heal, on his mission to save Kira. Through Gérard Genette's narrative perspective, the reading reveals an omniscient narrator and a structure that alternates between scene and summary. The village and forest form a dual framework symbolizing the fragility of utopia in the face of selfishness, while Matty embodies the values of altruism and sacrifice in a profoundly educational and humanistic vision.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Moral Education; Children's Literature and Pedagogy; Lois Lowry; Narratology (Gérard Genette); Utopia and dystopia.

The novel *Messenger* (2004) by the American writer Lois Lowry, published in its seventh edition in 2014 by Harper Collins Children's Books with a length of nearly two hundred pages, constitutes part of a series directed at young readers and constructs a world situated between utopia and dystopia through the portrayal of a secret village surrounded by a desolate forest. The text follows the path of the protagonist Matty the messenger, a boy endowed with a magical healing power, on his perilous journey through the forest to rescue Kira before the village closes its gates.

This review adopts a narratological approach through the perspective of Gérard Genette, focusing on the nature of the narrator, the modes of narration, and the techniques of dialogue and summary in order to reveal how the text constructs a utopian and dystopian world suited to the young reader.

The village in *Messenger* represents a modern reworking of the idea of the «ideal city» as formulated by Plato, yet the text reveals from the very beginning the fragility of this ideal model. The utopian space that grants newcomers full rights and promises them safety and equality quickly proves to be condi-

tioned by both natural and symbolic obstacles, foremost among them the forest that surrounds and guards the village. If the forest is read through the lens of Genette's narratology, it is not merely a spatial frame but a narrative device that regulates entry and exit and establishes a tense relationship between the inside, which is the ideal society, and the outside, which is the rejected world. In this sense, the village and the forest together function as a binary narrative structure that reproduces the dialectic of utopia and dystopia. What begins as a space of tolerance and altruism swiftly turns into a mechanism of exclusion when the logic of selfishness and the desire to close borders infiltrates the community. Matty's journey to bring Kira back is not only an adventure plot but also a test of the «ideal society's» ability to confront its own internal contradictions, which makes the text closer to a critical discourse on the impossibility of utopian perfection.

The narrator in *Messenger* is positioned outside the story as a non-participating voice with internal knowledge of the characters' psychology. This corresponds to what Genette terms zero focalization, where the narrator's knowledge exceeds that of any character. This narrative choice does more than recount events. It provides the text with interpretive authority that allows it to penetrate the inner lives of the characters and expose their inner conflicts, which strengthens the pedagogical dimension directed toward the young reader. One example of this anxiety is the secret the Leader kept from Seer when he saw Matty in danger: «he had not told the blind man. But while he had watched Matty, Kira, and the puppy enter Forest, he had been able to see, too that Forest was shifting, moving, thickening, and preparing to destroy them»¹.

On the level of narrative mode, the novel simultaneously employs the techniques of scene versus summary and alternation. The text begins with daily scenes that reveal Matty's routine as a central character, then opens up to flashback passages that illuminate the past of other characters, such as Matty, Seer, and the gatherer. This variety does not serve an informative function alone but works to expand the scope of the story by presenting the characters in the light of their past, so that each present action is saturated with memory. In this way, what Genette calls the network effect of plot is achieved, where individual trajectories intersect within a single fabric that reflects the nature of the village as an interconnected community built on interdependence.

The technique of summary in *Messenger* reveals a dual narrative awareness. On the one hand, it performs a condensing function that accelerates the rhythm of the story, but on the other hand, it is sometimes exploited to create new suspense. The narrator's sentence quoted from the Leader, «they have been doing this for several days»², is not a neutral condensation but rather opens new narrative paths, as the text later returns to detail what took

¹ Lois Lowry, *Messenger*, 7th ed., Great Britain, Harper Collins Children's Books, 2014.

² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

place during those days. In this sense, the summary shifts from being a tool of temporal compression to a device of delay that postpones knowledge and pushes the reader to anticipate what is to come. Alongside this, the novelist uses dialogues, which break the monologic voice of the omniscient narrator and introduce polyphony. The dialogues begin in the novel after a few opening paragraphs with Matty and Seer.

The construction of Matty's character does not rely on external features as much as on internal development, which is a notable narrative choice. The almost sole reference to his age, «Matty was no longer a boy, but not yet a man. Sometimes, standing outside the homeplace, he measured himself against the window»³, places the reader before a character positioned between childhood and manhood, a narrative site that allows for the representation of transformation and growth. The absence of physiological detail is not a deficiency but a strategy that leaves space for the reader to participate in imagining the hero, while this gap is filled through dynamic internal traits: the rebellious and playful tendencies of adolescence, the desire to own a «gaming machine»⁴, and a gradual trajectory toward maturity and responsibility.

When Matty is entrusted with the role of messenger, the act of moving between villages is not merely a practical function but carries symbolic weight. It signals the trust that the community places in his character and his capacity to fulfill the vital role of communication. And if his aspiration to the title of Messenger was never realized, his ultimate sacrifice reveals that his true title is healer, which suggests that heroism in this novel is measured not by social recognition but by the ability to sacrifice and act selflessly.

Themes in *Messenger* are not presented as ready-made moral lessons but are constructed within the narrative fabric through the dialectic of the individual and the community. The ideal society built on simplicity and sharing is paralleled with the deviation of some characters toward selfishness, which is captured in Jean's remark about her father: «Jean began to cry softly. 'Yes,' she said. 'he has traded his deepest self'»⁵. This sentence is not simply a reference to an individual change but a narrative condensation of the transformation of communal values into individualistic drives that threaten the utopian structure of the village. Thus, characters and events are mobilized as instruments to deconstruct the stability of utopia and expose its fragility in the face of impulses of possession and greed. As for the themes of solidarity, cooperation, and sacrifice, they are not presented as direct moral preaching but are embodied through the trajectory of the hero who sacrifices himself for the survival of the community. This gives the text a veiled dystopian dimension that reveals that utopia can only be preserved through collective action and individual altruism.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

In addition to its narrative construction, *Messenger* fulfills an educational function that invites the young reader to reflect on moral responsibility and human empathy. Through Matty's transformation from a playful adolescent into a self-sacrificing figure, Lois Lowry constructs a model of moral education consistent with contemporary theories in children's literature that emphasize the development of ethical awareness among youth. The novel appears to adopt the pedagogical principle that children's literature should convey values indirectly, stimulating critical thinking and emotional awareness rather than prescribing lessons overtly. In this way, *Messenger* contributes to a long-standing tradition that regards children's literature as a means of civic and moral education, demonstrating how narrative imagination can deepen the reader's understanding of community, solidarity, and self-knowledge.

When *Messenger* is read alongside Lois Lowry's earlier works such as *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*, it becomes clear that the novel continues to employ literary imagination to present a utopian vision within children's literature. While *The Giver* addresses the suppression of emotions based on the belief that erasing memory and denying feelings can prevent suffering, it ultimately reveals that the elimination of these human dimensions comes at a heavy cost, namely the loss of the essential value that gives meaning to human existence. *Gathering Blue*, on the other hand, focuses on how creativity can be transformed from a form of freedom and expression into an authoritarian tool of control and the reconstruction of a false vision of the world. *Messenger* brings together both dilemmas, exposing the moral cost of isolation and closure in contrast with the right to connection and openness, and the tension between selfishness and altruism. From this perspective, the novel can be seen as a continuation of a literary trajectory that strives to affirm human values and to reflect on the challenge of making the most ethical choices in modern societies.

Lowry's text succeeds in building its narrative worlds using imagination and the marvelous, yet the value of this construction lies not only in spectacle but in the way these elements are harnessed to intensify the ethical vision of the work. Simple and direct language is not merely a fit for the intended young audience but a narrative choice that enables the transmission of major values such as altruism, resistance to greed, and the fight against evil without a complicated linguistic medium. Nevertheless, the simplicity of narration does not conceal the fragility of the plot, as the sudden transition from the conflict of closing the village to the confrontation with the forest reveals a certain imbalance in managing narrative tension. Even so, the novel succeeds in producing an ideal human model that embodies good in its struggle with evil, granting it a symbolic dimension that transcends young readership to interrogate collective values in any society.