Fall 2018

Empowerment of Isolated and Othered Young Adults through YA Dystopia

Lily Hunger
lah127@zips.uakron.edu

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Lily Hunger

Department of English

Honors Research Project

Submitted to

The Honors College

Approved:

M Biddinger Date 11/27/18
Honors Project Sponsor (signed)

Mary Biddinger
Honors Project Sponsor (printed)

Hillary Nunn Date 11/27/18
Reader (signed)

Hillary Nunn
Reader (printed)

Heather Braun Date 11/28/18
Reader (signed)

Heather Braun
Reader (printed)

Accepted:

Jill Gentry Date 11/28/18
Department Head (signed)

Alejandra Zanetta
Department Head (printed)

Heather Braun Date 11/28/18
Honors Faculty Advisor (signed)

Honors Faculty Advisor (printed)

Date
Dean, Honors College

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When thinking of literary analysis and books that have made a significant impact on readers' lives, many readers often immediately think of traditionally canonical authors such as Shakespeare or Dickens. However, there is a genre that has become wildly popular and increasingly important in recent years, but is often overlooked as not being as significant or meaningful as the classics despite its significant impact. This category of fiction is young adult literature. Some critics, like Ruth Graham in her controversial article "Against YA," see the genre to be low quality when compared to adult fiction, as evidenced by Graham's clear contempt for "the transparently trashy stuff like *Divergent* and *Twilight*, which no one defends as serious literature." She continues on to share her disapproval of both adolescent and adult readers who read it saying that "if they are substituting maudlin teen dramas for the complexity of great adult literature, then they are missing something" (Graham). Despite what Graham and other critics opposed to YA say, this genre does indeed have significant literary merit and the various sub-genres tackle themes and questions that are as paramount and serious as many adult and classic novels.

One sub-genre within the YA literature umbrella that is especially popular at the moment and typically deals with deep and serious themes is that of YA dystopia. Dystopian novels typically present readers with a society that is deeply flawed, usually taking place at some point in the future or after some form of major, worldwide catastrophe. Dystopian books have been popular for a while, since Orwell's *1984* published in 1949, but ever since the release of *The Hunger Games* in 2008 and the subsequent movies that premiered in 2012, the demand for these novels for young adults and their spread has increased exponentially. While *The Hunger Games* is the most well known, it is far from the only one. Other novels that are most relevant and

widely read by young adult readers today would be *The Giver*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner*. Not only are these all popular YA novels and series, but they have all had movies made of them and released in the past few years. While they all present distinct societies and deal with different issues, common and meaningful themes can be found upon further analysis of these books, especially when focusing on the first books for those that became a series. Throughout many YA dystopian books, particularly evident in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, readers are presented with protagonists who are othered and feel estranged from their peers and society, a feeling which is amplified in the context of the dystopian world, but which results in their empowerment and their ability to change or free their society from the oppression or danger they are facing. This isolation and their atypical personality and character traits are reminiscent of feelings typical to the young adult audience reading these books, and the empowerment of these characters is directly linked to the qualities that make them different. This trend encourages teens to accept their individuality and demonstrate how to transform inspiration into resolve and motivation to improve their own lives and communities.

The Recurring Appearance of Themes of Isolation and Otherness in YA Dystopian Novels

Dystopia is the ideal genre to reflect isolation and otherness as well as the intensity of adolescence due to the severity of circumstances that the genre demands. Young adults are known for their mood swings and during this time of their lives many experience the world in extremes. An article from the journal *Articulāte* describes adolescence by saying that "The entire juvenile stage of life as an expression of revolt, contesting the principles inherited from their upbringing and experimenting with new, personal philosophy" (Roozeboom 22). Likewise, the

protagonists of YA dystopia learn of the perils and complexity of their society, develop their own philosophy, and discover a sense of agency. While the exaggerated worlds common to dystopia are in no way realistic to the real world, teen readers can empathize with the extreme emotions and choices that the characters are forced to make because their own situations feel similarly dire in their minds. The world of dystopia also heightens the degree of the isolation and otherness that the characters experience, which can result in readers feeling better about their own lives or less alone in managing their issues. These themes are particularly evident in the novels analyzed here, presented from the oldest to most recent to demonstrate the evolution of the genre and the persistence of isolation and empowerment being present even with the passing of time, proving the necessity of these themes for this audience and in this genre.

Lois Lowry's 1993 novel *The Giver* was among the first YA dystopian novels, and since then it has become a staple text in many schools and has reached a wide array of young adult and older readers. While this is a book that really sparked an interest and the writing of more dystopia for adolescent readers, due to the evolution of the genre and qualities of the novel itself, it is different than one might expect when thinking about dystopia. In an introduction to the novel written 20 years after its initial release, Lowry discusses the genre and her book, saying that "in so many recent dystopian novels (and there are exactly that: so many), societies battle and characters die hideously and whole civilizations crumble. None of that in *The Giver*. It was introspective. Quiet. Short on action" (Lowry ix). While many readers turn to dystopia for the action and the danger, the introspective qualities of this novel enhance the protagonist's isolation and the readers' ability to connect and grow with the characters.

The community presented in *The Giver* is a very strict one of "Sameness" where everything is as uniform as possible. There is a lack of emotions, colors, books or anything that

could have the potential of promoting individuality or choice. The elders of the community have erased all knowledge of history and have eliminated the possibility of problems by making all of the major life decisions for each person: what their job will be, whom they shall marry, and what children they shall adopt. Characters of the novel are constantly preoccupied with avoiding the "uncomfortable category of 'being different.'...Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same" (Lowry 49). In an article examining political consciousness in youth and *The Giver*, Alison Roozeboom talks about how there is no room for difference of any kind in the novel and there is no alternative for people who don't fit in but to die (22), as mentioned in the book when Jonas says that "if you don't fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released" (Lowry 60). While this is quite extreme and profoundly dissimilar from society now, the increased isolation that Jonas, the protagonist, experiences as he discovers more about his society and how it works certainly parallels that which adolescents can feel as they mature and learn how their society works. Also, despite how unfortunate and dismal the Community is, the contrast between the Sameness and reality could make readers thankful for the freedoms they do have in addition to Jonas' inspiring them to take action in regards to their own moral or social issues.

While Jonas appears to be fairly young in comparison to other major dystopian heroes, spending the majority of the novel at twelve years old, his age is perfect for examining the transition process from childhood to adulthood, witnessing the realizations the are made about people and the world in adolescence, and how that can lead to teenagers feeling displaced and disconnected from their peers and family members. In the study "Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction" written by a middle school teacher and a university professor with the goal of examining the allure of dystopia for young adults, the authors claim that "morally, adolescents are moving from the black–and–white view of children toward the more

nuanced view of adults, and the large number of significant transitions they experience can lead to uncertainty about their identities and futures" (Scholes). This is the same for Jonas. At the beginning of the novel, he is innocent and has complete trust in the wisdom of his parents and why the community is structured the way it is. Even so, he is already different, albeit in minor ways. He is apprehensive about what job the elders will choose for him, a worry that his peers do not share and neither did his parents. His father recounts the details of his own Ceremony of Twelve, saying that "for me there was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what my assignment was to be" (Lowry 18-19). Unlike his dad, Jonas "hadn't the slightest idea what Assignment the Elders would be selecting for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came" (Lowry 24). However, despite Jonas' uneasiness, he is reassured by his parents that, whatever it is, it will be right for him. After this conversation, Jonas decides that "it didn't worry him [anymore]. How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made" (Lowry 61). At this point, Jonas has complete faith in his parents' and community's ability to ensure his safety and happiness like most children do in real life until they enter adolescence and really begin to mature and learn more about how the world works.

The Ceremony of Twelve marks the noticeable beginning of Jonas' isolation from his friends and family in both a physical and an emotional manner. As the Chief Elder calls his classmates to the stage one by one, she skips Jonas, leaving him alone in his seat with everyone staring anxiously at him. He is physically set apart from his peers by this and by being chosen for the honorable position Receiver of Memory, a job he is selected for because of his ability to "see beyond," an ability Jonas possesses that no one else in the community has besides the Giver himself. He is informed of how he is and will be different from everyone else as the Chief Elder

tells him and the rest of the Community that he "will be faced now… with pain of a magnitude that none of us can comprehend because it is beyond our experience" (Lowry 79). As the Ceremony concludes, Jonas immediately notices that his friends and family are hesitating and more solemn around him and he declares that "now, for the first time in his twelve years of life, Jonas felt separate, different" (Lowry 82), making him feel emotionally isolated from everyone. The majority of young adults probably do not have such a dramatic turning point in their lives as Jonas does, but the repercussions of this moment and the process of his growing isolation have similar attributes to moments in their lives.

As Jonas' training progresses, he grows apart from his childhood friends, like many adolescents at this time of their life do. Before his Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas is extremely close to his friends Asher and Fiona and cannot imagine not being friends with them despite his father's warning that "you'll move into a new group. And each of your friends will. You'll no longer be spending time with your group of Elevens… So your friends will no longer be as close" (Lowry 22). Readers witness this disconnection from his friends as Jonas begins and progresses in his training to be Receiver of Memory. He is no longer able to talk to Fiona as freely and Jonas is horrified when he sees his friend Asher playing a game of war with children after the Giver has transferred a memory of real war to him. Asher cannot understand why Jonas has a problem with the game because he, like the rest of society, does not possess the same knowledge that Jonas has. This isolation from childhood friends is important when thinking about young adult readers because, as Scholes and Ostenson state when discussing YA dystopia and adolescence, "the choices teens begin to make about studies, extracurricular activities, and careers may distance them from formerly close friends. They find kindred spirits, then, in the protagonists of dystopian literature who, by virtue of their growing awareness of society's flaws,

find themselves similarly isolated from adults and even from their own peers" (Scholes). As adolescents get older and start developing their own interests, they may find that those do not correspond with those of their close childhood friends and start to grow apart from them. Therefore, reading novels with characters in similar, or often much more extreme, situations help them feel less alone and help them learn how to cope with their own issues.

In addition to his friends, Jonas becomes distanced from his family. Many children see their parents as their heroes or think that they can do no wrong until they begin to mature and start to see their parents as people, a realization that usually begins to take place during adolescence. Jonas experiences this as he begins to question and doubt all that he knows about his parents, particularly his father. When the Giver's instructions tell Jonas that he is allowed to lie, he is shocked, but then begins to wonder, saying "His parents did not lie. Not one did. Unless...What if *others - adults* - had...all been instructed: *You may lie?*" (Lowry 90). His growing awareness leads him to being more suspicious of his parents and he therefore begins to keep secrets and lie to them. This is especially relevant when considering young adult behavior because teenagers are notorious for keeping secrets and acting out against their parents in similar ways as Jonas does, increasing potential kinship between readers and the characters as readers see similar behavior and mindset reflected in these works of fiction.

While some causes of Jonas' isolation from friends and family are due to them going in different directions or just seeing them in a different way, the largest contributing factor, for Jonas at least, is the opinions he develops about society itself and how those opinions differ from everyone else. Jonas' emotional separation from his parents increases when he begins to feel more deeply as a result of the memories that the Giver imparts to him, and, when he asks his father if he loves him, his father says that love is an outdated word that is essentially

meaningless. No one else in the Community besides the Giver and Jonas understand the beauty of colors, emotions, and choice or how atrocious it is to Release infants, different people, or the old. This understanding that no one else possesses weighs on him and makes him want to change the way things are. In an analysis of themes of isolation in YA dystopia, the article asserts that "as protagonists in dystopian YA literature come to recognize the truth about the societies they live in, they often feel alone, separated from family and friends who do not share the same realizations...These protagonists' growing understanding of the society around them mirrors important growth taking place for teen readers" (Scholes). Since teens are attempting to develop their own values and views of society, opinions that people they care about may be opposed to, Jonas' journey with accepting and developing his stand on his Community is essential to an audience of young adults.

Unlike *The Giver*, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, which came out in 2009, presents readers with a smaller, more contained society consisting entirely of teenage boys, with the exception of one female character named Theresa. For the characters of the book, the world is limited to the Maze and the Glade, the Glade being a relatively small outdoor space where the characters live and work that is surrounded by the enormous walls that make up the Maze they have been trying to escape from. While this smaller and more contained society may seem abnormal when considering the more complex and extensive societies usually depicted in dystopian novels, young adult readers may be able to identify with this society a bit more easily as, when looked at in a certain way, it shares some similarities with one of the biggest parts of their lives: school. While there are no teachers or adults around to guide them, the group consists of people of the same age in the same place following the rules and trying to pass and defeat the massive test that they were sent there to figure out. Before being sent to the Maze, all of the

characters have their memories wiped - the only thing they can remember being their first names when they come out of the Box - so the entire society is completely isolated and unknowledgeable of the rest of the world. Even though this is certainly not something young adult readers can relate to, the consequence of the characters having to try to figure out who they are and what group they fit into definitely does since, as discussed in relation to the previous novels, adolescence is a time of self-discovery. Also, the characters have developed their own system and slang, with words such as Griever, Runner, shank, slinthead, and the Changing, and young adults are known for having their own form vocabulary and slang. The society of the Maze and the Glade has been functioning this way and the Runners have been exploring the Maze and trying to find a way to escape for two years with no luck. Until Thomas arrives.

Thomas is the protagonist of the book, and he is set apart from the others from the beginning. While he similarly has none of his memories from his life before, the Maze seems familiar to him in a way it never has to anyone else. He is trying to fall asleep after his first day there when "suddenly, the Glade, the walls, the Maze-it all seemed… familiar. Comfortable" (Dashner 34) and he tells his friend "I...I think I've *been* here before" (Dashner 35), a revelation which shocks his friend and anyone else he mentions it to. If this weren't unusual enough, immediately following his arrival something unprecedented occurs: a girl is sent to the Glade. She arrives as everyone else has, but half-dead. She announces that "everything's going to change" (Dashner 57) before falling into a coma that lasts for the majority of the book. This makes people suspicious of Thomas, especially when he recognizes her, remembers her name, and feels a strong connection to her.

Suspicion and dislike for Thomas only grows among the Gladers as the novel progresses, which sets him apart even more and leads to a kind of bullying, a situation that an unfortunately

large amount of young adult readers have or will experience in this time of their life. Characters who have been stung by Grievers, atrocious machine-like creatures that live in the Maze, and have gone through a gruesome process called the Changing, which temporarily returns memories from their life before, remember Thomas and declare him dangerous. Gally and Ben are the most opposed to him, as they both threaten to kill him. Ben shouts "He's not one of us!...I saw him--he's… he's bad. We have to kill him! Let me gut him!" (Dashner 73) before trying to follow through on his threat to Thomas. While Gally doesn't attempt to kill Thomas after his threats, he does try to discredit and accuse him of being bad by telling the leaders of the community that "I think he's a spy from the people who put us here" (Dashner 157). Mistrust increases a lot more when he is the first person to ever survive the Maze at night and kill Grievers, especially after only being in the Glade for a few days. While the extreme circumstances and threats against Thomas are unique to the novel and unrealistic, bullying can be a major issue for young adults, particularly those who feel like social outcasts and are alone. Bullying and isolation is even more important for the teenagers of today with social media and the potential for cyberbullying that has increased a lot in recent years. While for Thomas the majority of his bullying is more physical and confrontational, the ideas of danger spread about him mimic rumors and gossip that spreads in middle and high schools by crueler students. The root of Thomas' bullying stems from him having a different perspective of the world and a different manner of going about life than his peers, and, though this may not be a primary cause for bullying for today's young adults, it is definitely a feeling most young adult readers share at this time of their lives and can empathize with.

There are a few factors about Thomas' isolation from his society and peers that distinguishes it from those previously seen in *Divergent* and *The Giver*. Unlike Tris and Jonas,

Thomas instinctively knows what he should be doing and where he belongs in the Maze. In the beginning he says that "nothing about this place made any sense. Except for one thing, he was supposed to be a Runner" (Dashner 40). Though the reason why he feels so strongly about this are unknown to him, he still has a purpose and a goal that other protagonists don't have. While a large contributing factor of Tris' and Jonas' separation from society stems from an uncertainty as to where they belong, Thomas' stems from being inherently different in knowledge about and approach to navigating the society he finds himself in. Also, while Jonas and Tris also struggle with their identity and trying to discover more about themselves, who they are, and who they want to be, this is seen most evidently in Thomas, whose search for identity is strongest due to his lack of memory of his life before the Maze. Another aspect that makes Thomas different from Tris and Jonas is that, even from the beginning, he doesn't really seem to want to fit in with everyone else and seems more determined to find a way out and get answers than anything else. The variety in types of protagonists in this genre that all deal with similar issues is beneficial to readers as they can feel less alone by witnessing struggle and empowerment associated with problems they experience in multiple ways.

In sharp contrast to Lowry's *The Giver* and Dashner's and *The Maze Runner*, Veronica Roth's 2011 novel *Divergent* takes place in a much more ominous and dangerous society and presents readers with a female protagonist. In this novel, the society is divided into five factions that each value a particular virtue: Abnegation honoring selflessness, Dauntless honoring Bravery, Candor honoring honesty, Erudite honoring intelligence, and Amity honoring kindness. Factions are seen as more important than family, as evident by the society's slogan "Faction before blood" (Roth 43), and, if one chooses a faction that they were not raised in, they must leave their family. An aptitude test taken a few days before the Choosing Ceremony is meant to

help 16 year olds choose what faction they belong in. If the test results fail determine a singular faction for someone and instead suggest multiple, then that person is labeled Divergent. Since Divergents can fit in to multiple factions unlike the rest of society, they are seen as dangerous because there is no place for anyone who doesn't belong.

Although consequences and decisions for teens are not nearly as extreme in the real world, there are many points for comparison to be considered. While young adults do not have to formally choose a faction at this age, beyond the limits of their own social sphere or group, they are most likely considering and beginning to make significant choices about their future careers and university which may help shape the rest of their lives and, in some cases, damage their relationships with family and friends is they choose something that the family doesn't approve of. Revisiting the article "Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction" from earlier, the authors assert that "every choice the characters make can carry enormous consequences, often to the point of significantly altering the world they've always known. Teenagers connect with these protagonists as they feel a similar weight on their shoulders" (Scholes). While the consequences for young adults in the real world are not as drastic as they are in dystopian literature, teens will likely not end up factionless and homeless for choosing the wrong careers, but the exaggerated world of dystopia and its amplified emotions and fears reflect the intensity of the anxiety and isolation that adolescents could experience in real life situations.

The protagonist of the novel is Beatrice, or Tris, which is the name she changes it to after the Choosing Ceremony. Tris feels extremely isolated in her society and among her family because, unlike them, she is a Divergent and does not have one faction that she belongs to. The faction she is raised in is Abnegation, but she isn't as instinctually selfless as her family is in most cases, making her feel different and separate from them. This is evident even on the first

page of the novel as she thinks about her mother saying “She is well-practiced in the art of losing herself. I can’t say the same of myself” (Roth 1). This feeling of not belonging in her family and with that faction is amplified as she considers which faction to choose and compares herself to her family members, like her brother as she notes that “My instincts are not the same as his-it didn’t even enter my mind to give my seat to the Candor man on the bus...It should be easy for me” (Roth 10). Despite not having factions to worry about, teens can similarly feel like they don’t fit in among their family members. Adolescence is stage of life where people discover their identities and begin to make life-altering choices about their future, like determining which college to attend and future careers. In Tris’ situation, she knows that, if she chooses the faction that she wants over the faction expected of her, she will disappoint her father and it would have potentially detrimental effects on her relationship with her family, as seen when she remarks that “I know that if I [choose Dauntless], it will place another wedge between me and my family that I can never remove” (Roth 90). While making these decisions may not permanently estrange young adults from their families and where they grew up to the same degree as seen in *Divergent*, those who choose to leave home for their studies or pursue different career paths than what their family wants them to take can empathize with the struggle Tris faces and be guided by the decisions that she makes. In a video interview about her novel, Veronica Roth says that Tris is “very confused about her place in the world, and she wants to be one person, but she doesn’t want to leave the people she loves...I think these are things people experience no matter what age they are, who they are, or where they are from” (ScreenSlam), making Tris’ character and her internal conflict relevant to young adults and broadens it to be meaningful for older audiences as well.

Tris' status as Divergent makes it so she not only doesn't fit in with her family, but also so she does not have a place to belong in her society as a whole, placing her in extreme danger should anyone find out her secret. The danger and increased isolation begin when she takes the aptitude test, a required test meant to rule out other factions and determine which one best suits one's personality to make the decision at the Choosing Ceremony easy. Unlike everyone else, the woman who administers her test, Tori, informs Tris that her results say that she has the attributes for three factions instead of one: Abnegation, Erudite, and Dauntless, and that Tris "should never share them with anyone, *ever*, no matter what happens. Divergence is extremely dangerous" (Roth 23). This places the decision and unknown, ominous threats to her safety entirely on her shoulders, like she says after being sent home from the test, realizing that "It's my choice now, no matter what the test says" (Roth 23). This is very much like the decisions of great magnitude in the lives of young adults are always ultimately up to them. The author of the novel comments on this factor of the novel in an interview, describing the process stating that "I wrote these books at a point when I was growing up. Senior year in college, about to do what Tris [the protagonist] does, she's making decisions about what she's going to do with the rest of her life" (Cothran 26), choices that plague all young adults. The most dreaded questions for nearly all teens are "what are you going to be when you grow up?" or "what are you doing after you graduate?" and Tris deals with intimidating questions of equal importance as well. The choice is far from easy, as many major life decisions are, and Tris is extremely indecisive, but says "It will require a great act of selflessness to choose Abnegation, or a great act of courage to choose Dauntless, and maybe just choosing one over the other will prove that I belong. Tomorrow, those two qualities struggle within me, and only one can win" (Roth 37). She hopes that whatever she chooses will end her feelings of displacement and otherness in her society.

At the Choosing Ceremony, despite oscillating back and forth until the very last moment, Tris chooses Dauntless because she believes that it will make her happiest despite all of the unknowns and the fact that she has to abandon her family. When justifying her reasoning to herself, Tris says that "When I look at Abnegation life as an outsider, I think it's beautiful… It's only when I try to live it myself that I have trouble. It never feels genuine" (Roth 24). This is opposite how she feels once she chooses Dauntless and begins her training. In regards to her new faction, she declares that "I didn't jump off the roof because I wanted to be like Dauntless. I jumped off because I already was like them, and I wanted to show myself to them. I wanted to acknowledge a part of myself that Abnegation demanded that I hide" (Roth 263). In choosing as she does, she encourages teens to make choices that they think will make them happy and will result in a future where they feel like they can be themselves and belong, which is a very important lesson for anyone to learn, but especially young adult readers at this point in their lives. Tris' brother Caleb advises her that "We should think of our family...But we must also think of ourselves" (Roth 37). This piece of brotherly wisdom helps Tris make her decision, and despite it being extremely difficult and her having doubts about it after the fact, it ends up being the right decision and assists readers to make the decisions that they genuinely want despite the trepidation that may feel or the potential fallout.

Despite joining Dauntless, Tris is still othered and doesn't completely fit in. While she obviously feels more included and free in Dauntless than she does in Abnegation, she still values selflessness along with bravery, which means she nearly gets revealed to be a Divergent when attempting to defend her other initiates. Her problems and the danger of others discovering her secret increase in the second part of training; she is able to solve problems in the simulations in a way that no true Dauntless can. In order to succeed as Dauntless and not be caught, she must

suppress her selflessness and try to blend in with the help of her instructor and love interest Four. An article in *Signal*, a literary journal which focuses on young adult literature, analyzes the negative effect Tris' situation in Dauntless has on her by arguing that "In order to join Dauntless, Beatrice gives up something of herself" (Cothran 27) and that "Beatrice is told that she must be either one or the other; she must choose a consistent motivating characteristic if she is to be part of a community" (Cothran 27). Young adult readers may similarly have difficulty finding places where they truly can be themselves. Between peer pressure to conform, familial expectations, and unrealistic standards found on social media, it can be challenging to accept oneself and make decisions for oneself and not based upon other people's opinions. As such, teens can find solidarity and reassurance in protagonists of dystopian literature like Tris who are likewise othered and isolated.

In these novels and others of the same group, the repetition of themes of otherness and displacement from society or peers is especially meaningful in young adult literature because it is a sentiment that many young adults share at that particular time of their lives. In an analysis of YA dystopia and significance of the genre for young adults, the authors agree with this assessment and provide some real-world causes for it with their statement that "feelings of isolation, of course, are not unusual for today's teenage readers. Social issues, such as finding a place and fitting in, take on increasing importance for teenagers… [and] the choices teens begin to make about studies, extracurricular activities, and careers may distance them from formerly close friends" (Scholes). There are various causes for such isolation in real life and this is reflected in the characters. Arguably, a lot of these factors contribute to the fact that people spend a large portion of adolescence trying to figure out and exploring one of life's most daunting subjects: identity. In an analysis of the psychology of adolescents from the University of

Minnesota discussing the development of independence and identity, the author explains that "the main social task of the adolescent is the search for a unique identity—the ability to answer the question, 'Who am I?'" (6.3 Adolescence). Attempting to figure out what kind of person one wants to be and trying to find their place in society can result in young adults feeling separated or distanced from their friends or family, as seen in the novels discussed. Another psychological article examining alienation and isolation describes this emotional state as "the state of being emotionally separated from others and from one's own feelings" (Alienation). Whatever the cause of it in adolescents may be in today's society, it exists for many and is certainly reflected in young adult dystopian novels such as these.

The Empowerment of the Protagonists and its Impact on Young Adult Readers

Furthermore, while it is one thing to note the reflection of themes of isolation and otherness in these novels, it is the later empowerment of the characters being directly linked to the qualities or circumstances that are the source of them feeling like or being an outsider that really make these novels as influential and popular as they are to readers. The portrayal of isolation in the books echoes the reality, but the empowerment inspires readers to accept about themselves the source of their perceived isolation and do something about it. Each character's journey to saving their society and self-acceptance is unique and comes in different forms, like that of the individual readers, and serves to encourage and give strength to readers as they attempt to find their own personal form of empowerment.

Since *The Giver* is a much more introspective novel and one of the first of the genre, Jonas' form of empowerment is a bit different than one might expect of a dystopian novel. Instead of a concrete ending with the Community understanding the error of their ways and

Jonas being the hero, the ending is ambiguous and open to interpretation. The Community is peaceful; therefore there is no dramatic battle or clear enemy for Jonas to liberate them from. Instead, Jonas saves Gabriel, the infant that has been living with his family for the past few months, from being Released and leaves the Community, returning all of the memories that the Giver had shared with him to the people. However, readers never find out what happens to the Community, and they aren't really certain what happens to Jonas either. Jonas hearing music and discovering Elsewhere could signify his and Gabriel's success, but it could also mean that they have frozen to death and that the Elsewhere they arrive at is the afterlife. Due to the introspective quality of the novel and how closely it follows Jonas though, it can be argued that this final moment is not his moment of empowerment and what teen readers are supposed to take from the novel, but that it comes a bit earlier.

Jonas struggles with his view and opinions about how the society works, wavering on occasion and reaching concrete conclusions towards the end. After witnessing the Release that his father conducted on the twin, Jonas is immediately determined to take action to rectify what is wrong with his society and save Gabriel. This is the most evident moment of empowerment for Jonas, especially given how internal and introspective the novel is, because it is when he reaches definitive conclusions in spite of him having to leave his friends and family behind forever in order to help them realize the truth as well. The article "Lois Lowry's The Giver and Political Consciousness in Youth" agrees with the significance of this moment, as the author analyzes the potential impact and significance of isolation on his actions towards the end claiming that "Jonas's discovery of his agency is made heroic by the fact that his nonconformity continued despite being ostracized by his peers" (27). It is after this discovery of agency that he leaves his home alone with Gabriel, before the Giver is able to provide any assistance. In doing

so, Jonas becomes his own person and leaves the place that makes him feel so isolated in search of somewhere the two of them can belong. Jonas' journey and action towards the end takes a lot of strength and courage, and witnessing his struggle and development throughout the novel encourages young adult readers to do something about the problems in their life as well. In an interview from the actor who plays Jonas in the recent movie released in 2014, Brenton Thwaites says that "the lessons that Jonas learns throughout the book, every human goes through...I think it's important for teens to know that fear is relevant to growing up, and it's important to face those fears and be challenged by them, and to challenge yourself to overcome them" (Lowry 233). Despite the fact that readers never know the fate of Jonas or his Community, they can understand and be inspired by his transformation as a character and his ultimate decision to do what he feels is right. While the ending is not concrete by any means, it can be read as a reflection of the real world; people's futures based upon these important decisions or efforts is unclear, but they, like Jonas, can be at peace if they do what they believe is necessary to make things better instead of ignoring the problem and being miserable.

As for Thomas, he eventually discovers what makes him, and Theresa, different from the others: the Creators made him help create the Maze. Theresa is the first to tell him, saying "It was you and me, Tom. We did this to them. To us" (Dashner 184), and then he realizes the full extent of his involvement and role in the Maze after getting himself stung by a Griever to briefly regain his memories. This residual knowledge, his high intelligence, his courage, and his determination to find a way out, which previously made the others suspicious of him and threaten his life, end up being the key to finding a way to shut down and escape the Maze when the end is triggered. Before his entrance into the world of the Maze, the other characters, while they weren't content with how their life was, were stuck in a cycle of searching and not finding a

way to escape. Thomas serves as a catalyst from the monotony and never ending hopelessness that the Gladers have experienced for years. While many characters perish in the subsequent escape, a lot more would have died without Thomas, making him another excellent example of an othered and isolated character in YA dystopia being empowered by the very qualities that they were previously criticized for.

On the other hand, Tris' empowerment is much more dramatic and action-packed. Her Divergence enables her to prevent the Erudite's endeavor to usurp Abengation's position in the government, which they attempt to do by brainwashing the unsuspecting members of Dauntless to massacre the Abnegation. The realizations that Tris makes about her society not being designed with a place for people like her, the discoveries that she and Four make about Erudite's plot to overthrow the government, and the values that her family and former faction instilled in her since childhood compel her to act. Like Jonas, she begins to form her own opinions about society and sees its flaws. She, too, is in a unique position to bring about change, though she has a significantly less passive role than Jonas' is. Tris' status as Divergent makes her one of the only Dauntless members who cannot be controlled by the simulation drug used to control everyone in the Erudite coup. This, along with the skills and knowledge about both factions that she has acquired, makes her the only one with the ability to stop the eradication of such a huge and innocent part of her society. Which she does, despite the losses she endures in the process.

One especially compelling element of Tris' character that makes her empowerment greater in *Divergent*, that isn't apparent in Jonas and Thomas, is the indecision and emotion that she feels leading up to and after the major decisions that she makes, but nevertheless deciding and acting as she does anyway. Despite Jonas taking a while to come to conclusions about what is wrong with the Community and Thomas' difficulties coming up with a plan, they don't really

waver in their decisions or show much fear or doubt about them in the same way that Tris does. There are many moments where Tris is extremely anxious about her actions in the novel, like before the aptitude test where she says that "I feel like there is a bubble in my chest that expands more by the second, threatening to break me apart from the inside" (Roth 10). She does not have a clear sense of purpose or how she fits into the society as Thomas does in *The Maze Runner*, and even after her decision to become Dauntless like she wanted, there are moments of regret and uncertainty. Tris survives many overwhelming and difficult situations throughout the novel that are realistic and parallel those that unfortunately many young adult readers are familiar with like bullying, sexual assault, and isolation. The resulting intense anxiety and emotions that Tris experiences makes her relatable to readers, as they struggle in the same way as they attempt to navigate the issues of their own lives. Her self-doubt, along with the fact that she constantly questions whether the decisions she makes are the right ones even after she makes them, makes her more realistic as a character since many young adults will question themselves, especially over large choices. The fact that she overcomes what she has endured and the choices she makes result in giving her the required skills to be able save the members of Abnegation from being murdered by Erudite is inspiring and empowering to those readers dealing with similarly drastic or life-changing situations.

Divergent, as the most recently published of the ones discussed here, also provides insight as to where the genre could be going. It is the only one in this list with a female protagonist, marking a shift in the genre which incorporates more heroines into a stereotypically male-centered genre. *Divergent* also deals with themes like sexual assault and how to cope and process that, a topic not really appearing in literature until recent years that should definitely be included due to the unfortunate amount of young adult readers who go through ordeals. Tris'

empowerment in that sense makes her particularly meaningful and marks an important new direction for YA dystopian novels to help readers cope and improve their own lives. The finale of the novel is arguably the most dramatic of the three, reflecting the increasing frequency of large, world-altering battles. This is a far cry from the mostly peaceful flight of Jonas at the end of *The Giver*. Nevertheless, young adult audiences are still very much drawn to dystopia for the plethora of value it holds. The genre is evolving to meet the needs and demands of its audience and does not seem to be going away or decreasing in popularity anytime soon.

The methods of empowerment for each protagonist are distinct to each novel, but different ones may speak more to or help different readers in different ways. As seen through the discussed texts, there can be a variety of factors contributing to feelings of isolation and otherness within the intended age group of these novels. Many psychological studies discuss the prevalence of this in young adults, like one from the Psychology Encyclopedia, remarking how "many sociologists have observed and commented upon an increase in this feeling of alienation among young people since the 1960s" (Alienation). Be this increase due to social media and technology increase, which are definitely relevant and potentially detrimental to the mental health of young adults, or other causes, it is clear that YA dystopian novels such as these with empowering and self-accepting themes are essential to younger readers. This is particularly important when considering the increased potential that young adults have for depression and anxiety. A statistical study of this called "National Trends in the Prevalence and Treatment of Depression in Adolescents and Young Adults" researched this and shared findings that "The risk of depression sharply rises as children transition to adolescence. In the US National Comorbidity Survey (NCS)- Adolescent Supplement of 2001 to 2004, 11.7% of adolescents 13 to 18 years of age met criteria for a lifetime major depressive disorder" (Mojtabai 2). The potential of these

novels benefitting teens is high, and the advantages and positive impact that reading these novels can have on the intended audience is profound.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a tumultuous period of strong emotions, self-discovery, and a multitude of other factors that commonly results in increased isolation or feeling like an outsider, a phenomenon mirrored in young adult novels, particularly in the extreme versions of these experiences in YA dystopian literature, as seen through the discussed novels *The Giver*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner*. These books empower their readers and help them cope with the struggles of their own reality by presenting similarly flawed and then empowered characters, facing equally or more daunting problems, with whom they find solidarity and can give readers courage to face and overcome their own circumstances. Isolation and otherness are among a variety of other life-altering themes that are present in these novels, making YA dystopias to be clearly beneficial for their intended audience. Multiple literary critics and teachers agree with this assessment, like the 7th grade language arts teacher and Brigham Young University professor referenced earlier assert after their study, who conclude that “we feel strongly that the connections between these novels and teens' lives and concerns argue for a need to showcase these books...While the same could be said of most YA literature, dystopian literature seems to speak particularly strongly to teens at this time and to the choices and challenges they face as they move toward adulthood” (Scholes). This is far from the only example of support for the genre from literary scholars, as seen in the article “Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Political Consciousness in Youth” which argues that “Youth is situated in a difficult stage in life where the individual is locked in two divergent roles and conflicting needs as they seek independence

and free expression while also holding on to the parental foundation... Books, especially popular fiction... helps them to digest the complexities of life and to confront the problems they face" (Roozeboom 22). These sources, along with the multiple others in existence as well as the clear value of the novels outlined through the novels analyzed here, promote the reading as these novels and prove that readers have the potential of gaining as much from YA dystopia as they do from more traditionally canonical texts.

Despite this, there are still many who oppose the reading of YA dystopia, or YA literature in general. Roozeboom states how "It is one of the most 'challenged' (petitioned to be removed from a school library) novels in schools across the US (American Library Association)" (Roozeboom 18), and *The Giver* is just one of multiple protested novels in the genre. Also, the previously cited and infamous article "Against YA" analyzes the primary readership for the genre and criticizes the increasing amount of older readers with the observation that "the definition of YA is increasingly fuzzy, but it generally refers to books written for 12- to 17-year-olds. Meanwhile, the cultural definition of 'young adult' now stretches practically to age 30" (Graham), acknowledging the increasing number of adult readers turning to these novels for enjoyment while also shaming those adults who read young adult literature. However, given the established value and complexity of the content found in these novels, the fact that more and more older readers are turning to them and taking books of this genre seriously is further proof that these novels should not be immediately dismissed in favor of more known and classic literature on the sole basis of the age of their intended audience. Young adult literature should be considered, in many cases, as valuable as more mature, adult novels for its exploration of complex issues particular to that age group. With this in mind, schools, parents, and those that

reject the genre should reconsider their stance on type of literature and analyze it more closely in order to take advantage of all that the it offers to younger, and adult, readers.

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