

## Depictions of Evil in Lois Lowry's *Messenger*

Crumbling is not an instant's Act  
A fundamental pause  
Dilapidation's processes  
Are organized Decays.

'Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul  
A Cuticle of Dust  
A borer in the Axis  
An Elemental Rust-

Ruin is formal-Devil's work  
Consecutive and slow-  
Fail in an instant, no man did  
Slipping-is Crash's law

Emily Dickinson

**E**vil, or as Dickinson calls it, ruin, is not a sudden or unambiguous force in our world today, yet children's and young adult fantasy literature have often portrayed evil in dichotomous or uncomplicated ways. Indeed, St. John's early study of evil as portrayed in Newbery Award and Honor books between 1945 and 1972 found that, while evil had multiple representations within most of these books, good and evil characters in fantasy were generally presented one-dimensionally as all good or all evil so that young readers would have no trouble telling the difference. Robinson noted in a more recent article that since good and evil are often still shown as complete opposites in adolescent fantasy literature, this depiction may lead students to continue to view good and evil in superficial ways which do not reflect the complexities of the adult world.

There is, of course, some cause for this simplistic representation of evil in books written for adolescents. The work of Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan and other

developmental theorists warns us that young readers do not process information in the same way as adults, and as a result their literature will need to be more concrete and clear. Yet while this is certainly true, it does not mean that adolescents should not be exposed as they mature to more complex views of good and evil. Coles, for example, in his book *Spiritual Life of Children*, noted repeatedly the capacity his young patients had for ambiguity. And Frye pointed out that young readers are in the business of "building unities out of units" (36). It would seem especially important for young readers, who are endeavoring to build their own moral traits, that depictions of good and evil as they naturally appear on an ever-changing continuum be available for consideration. *Messenger*, the third book by Lois Lowry in what is coming to be known as *The Giver* trilogy, addresses this need for fantasy literature with more ambiguous and progressive depictions of good and evil.

*Messenger* is a young adult fantasy novel in the subgenre of utopian/dystopian fiction, an area of literature in which good and evil are often dichotomized. *Messenger* is the newest book in a loosely connected series which includes Newbery winner, *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*. Although Lowry did not set out to write a series or even to write a sequel to *The Giver*, she did so to "sort things out" for herself ("Interview"). All three books deal with utopian/dystopian societies that have the familiar elements identified by Hintz (254) of a controlled society, a choice for the good of society over the good of the individual, and an adolescent protagonist who is grappling with how to mature individually and make a difference in such a controlled society.

While all three books use variations of this utopian/dystopian setting and follow an adolescent protagonist as he/she progresses toward individuation and societal usefulness, *Messenger* has features that make it particularly useful for the study of evil. These features include the point at which we join the story which is as good and evil begin to meld and become less distinguishable from one another, the increased ambiguity of good and evil within characters, and the portrayal of evil as progressive and cumulative. These areas form the base of the discussions in this article.

Before beginning this examination, though, it may be useful to briefly summarize *Messenger* and its connections to the previous books in the trilogy. In *The Giver* the young protagonist, Jonas, makes the choice to help his society by leaving it. We join him several years later in *Messenger* as Leader of the utopian Village, to which his flight in *The Giver* brought him. The adolescent protagonist in *Messenger*, who is named Matty, also fled as a child from the dystopian society portrayed in *Gathering Blue*. He left behind there the young woman, Kira, who chose to help her society by staying in it. Kira's father, Seer, was violently blinded and driven away from Kira's society. He now lives in Village and serves as the foster father for Matty. In this way the quests of Jonas in *The Giver* and Kira in *Gathering Blue* are interwoven with Matty's quest in *Messenger*.

The reader joins Matty just as he stands on the edge of adulthood, signified by the time when he will receive his true name, which he hopes will be Messenger. Not only is Matty on the edge of a vast change, but his society is also at a turning point. This timing makes the analysis of *Messenger* particularly important for exploring what evil looks like in its early, more subtle stages before it is readily discernible to all. As noted in a *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* review of *Messenger* (427), Village is a utopian society that is not built on lies or deception. In fact, when Matty first arrived in Village, calling himself the Fiercest of the Fierce, he was so accustomed to a world of lies that he found it hard to change. He says, "It bothered him a little to lie about small things. But he always had; he had grown up lying, and he still found it strange that people in this place where he now lived thought lying was wrong" (8). But as Village turns toward evil, it also turns toward increased secrecy. In relating to his foster father what

happened at Trade Mart, for example, Matty notes that what people are trading *for* is made public, but what they are trading *away* is whispered and recorded in a guarded book (61-63). This movement from truth and openness to secrecy and lying coheres with what M. Scott Peck describes in his book, *People of the Lie*, as the very basis for all evil. Peck notes that evil is a "particular variety of narcissism" in which people not only lie to one another but lie to themselves in an effort to appear good (76-77). In Village, we see the secrecy necessary for evil developing rapidly in a previously open society.

This change to increased covert behavior is only one of several observable changes taking place in Village at this time. There is also a movement from tolerance toward intolerance as evidenced by the reaction to her handicapped husband by a woman who had recently traded. Before the trade she was described as, "Gentle. Cheerful. Very loving to her husband" (65). After the trade this woman ". . . made a sneering face at him [her husband] and she imitated his way of walking. She made fun of him" (66).

Intolerance of this sort is particularly noteworthy in Village because most people there are described as "damaged." Many had come from places with, "cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty" (25), and they arrived injured or ill. Some were like Seer who lost his eyesight to violence before coming to Village. Others, like Mentor who had a large birthmark on his face and was stooped, had left their old places because imperfections like these were not allowed. A defining trait of Village had been that the broken, damaged, ill and orphaned were all welcomed and cared for. Yet, as evil gains strength in Village, intolerance for physical imperfection increases and with this intolerance comes a desire to change these imperfections. As evil becomes stronger in Village, for instance, Mentor's birthmark fades away and he becomes less stooped (51). Paradoxically, perfection which would often be considered a synonym for good, and imperfection which would seem to better describe evil, play reversed roles in *Messenger*, again highlighting evil's deceitful and ambiguous nature.

Perhaps the moves in Village toward lies, perfectionism and intolerance might best be summed up as a reviewer of *Messenger* in *Horn Book* did by saying Village is "changing into a selfish society" (332-333). This is demonstrated numerous times, such as when

Mentor pushes others aside to be able to trade first (59), or when a formerly caring mother shakes her coughing child to make her be still (84). Matty feels the sting of this selfishness personally during a defining moment at a town meeting called to decide whether Village will close its doors to more “new ones.” Matty’s foster father, Seer, is arguing that Village should remain open, and he uses the contrast between the old stealing and swearing Matty who arrived in Village years ago to the productive Matty of today as an argument for Village’s importance in people’s lives. This argument is perverted, however, by a woman who yells out, “I remember what he was like! If we close the borders, we won’t have to deal with thieves and braggarts and people who have lice in their hair . . . ” (86). Matty looks to see who is speaking so harshly about him and finds to his surprise it is his own kind neighbor who had lovingly made clothes for him when he first arrived. He remembered that, “She had a soft voice then, and talked gently to him while she sewed” (86).

This same incident also serves to propel the evil that has been growing in Village from an individual level to a collective one. At the beginning of the book, it is obvious that certain negative changes were happening in individual people, such as Mentor, but the collective wisdom of Village was still oriented toward good. Eventually though, enough Village people move toward evil and a synergistic change takes place in the very character of the town. Peck, in *People of the Lie*, devoted Chapter 6 to the phenomenon of group evil and calls it, “. . . the diffuse cancerous forces at work in our society” (212). In his chapter on group evil, Peck noted that one of the best ways to increase the likelihood of group evil is to encourage the demonization of some outside enemy (225).

This happens with increasing regularity in *Messenger* and is brought to the foreground in the same incident described above in which Matty’s neighbor publicly criticized him. At the moment the woman called out to remind the people that Matty had been “a thief and a braggart” when he arrived at Village, “. . . her voice incited others, and now large numbers of people were calling out, ‘Close Village! Close the border!’”(87) This mob behavior leads to the vote that Village will not accept any more newcomers and eventually culminates in the building of a strong

wall around Village to keep “new ones” out.

Peck pointed out that group evil is more likely to occur when individuals no longer must be accountable for their actions (218). However, clearly it is the individual who forms the building block of group evil by individually choosing evil, committing evil and condoning evil. It is necessary, then, whenever evil is present to look at individuals in stories who are evil or who are becoming evil. In Lowry’s, *Messenger*, Mentor is the most obvious character who is changing from good to evil. It is, therefore, illuminating to examine the changes we find in Mentor as the story progresses.

All the people in Village are given a true name when they reach maturity. This name reflects the true self of the person, and therefore, the name Mentor alone gives us insight into this character. Mentor is the beloved school teacher who becomes the leader of the group that wishes to close Village’s borders to newcomers. The startling changes in his character are described several times. For example, Mentor’s daughter, Jean, says of him, “Father always welcomed new ones. It was the most wonderful part of Father, how he cared for everyone and tried to help them learn” (70). Later she says in a puzzled voice, “It was so important to him and he made it important to me: poetry, and language, and how we use it to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived. [ . . . ] Now he talks of nothing but Stocktender’s widow, and of closing Village to new ones” (82).

As Mentor changes inwardly his physical appearance also begins to change. Jean realizes that her father is trying to become more physically perfect so that he is attractive to Stocktender’s widow. Jean describes the changes as, “He’s becoming taller and straighter. The bald spot at the back of his head has grown over with hair. His birthmark has disappeared” (69). This narcissistic fixation on physical perfection mirrors the increased emotional selfishness demonstrated by Mentor in his wish to close the borders of Village, making the change from good to evil all the more obvious to adolescent readers. Yet the real question to be answered is how do these changes come about in a previously virtuous character? Further, how does the truthful, tolerant, welcoming Village move progressively toward increasing evil? The focus point of all these changes is repeatedly shown to be the old custom of Trade Mart.

Trade Mart is first mentioned on page two of

*Messenger* and dominates the first half of the book as a depiction of the place where evil begins. Both Seer and Leader remember Trade Mart as a very old custom that used to be a lighthearted thing but has changed in some way they cannot quite describe. Leader says of Trade Mart, "I never go anymore, but I did in the past. It seemed folly and time-wasting. Now it seems worse" (74). And Seer says, "It's changed, Matty. I hear people talk of it now, and I feel the changes. Something's wrong. . . . There's a secrecy to it now" (53). Matty goes to Trade Mart once and describes the atmosphere as one of intentness, seriousness and worry, nothing like the light-hearted and good-natured ambiance of Market Day. Leader, Seer and Matty have never traded at Trade Mart, and though they cannot fully explain their reservations, each one knows in a visceral way that something is amiss.

It is Jean, though, who understands what happens at Trade Mart that is so dangerous. She has been able to observe the work of Trade Mart closely through her father who has been actively trading to make Stocktender's widow love him. Jean realizes that what her father has traded away is "his deepest self" (69). This helps Matty understand why no one at the Trade Mart he watched carried anything tangible to trade. While the people are trading for tangible items such as physical attractiveness they are often trading away intangible possessions, such as character traits that are not easy to describe.

It also explains to Matty why the things people traded away were kept secret. Lowry leaves most trades ambiguous, though she does hint that at least in one case a mother has been willing to trade away the health of her children (84). Clearly, though, the trades recorded in the guarded book are of a life-altering nature. Trademaster, the shadowy figure who "had come already named, as a new one some years before" (58) serves as a satanic representation who approves and records each secret trade as the people take part concretely at Trade Mart in the age-old story of selling their souls to the devil.

In the specific case of Mentor he has traded his deepest self in an irreversible trade for physical attractiveness. Others trade unknown attributes for an easier lifestyle as represented by a fancy sewing machine (87), or superficial pleasure as represented by a much-coveted Gaming Machine that spits out candy if three pictures match when a handle is pulled (16).

Each of these physical acquisitions, however, demands less obvious character payments in the people who receive them. In general these changes set a trajectory toward an increase in intolerance and selfishness and a decrease in truthfulness, but it is easy to understand how the physical goods of Trade Mart could be so alluring when the payments for these goods are nebulous and unexamined by the traders. Trade Mart, then, which began as a seemingly innocuous bit of fun, has now become the place from which evil emanates.

This is the real strength of Lowry's portrayal of evil in *Messenger*. Since the story begins when Village is mostly good and progresses to a point when evil has taken control of the town, the reader is able to examine the subtleties and ambiguities of evil as it gains strength. Many fantasies for young readers, with their polarized depictions of good and evil, do not allow the reader to see the early, elusive and complex forms of evil in a way that young readers could understand. Yet one of evil's most frightening aspects is its cumulative nature. In *Messenger* we see clearly that it is the trajectory of evil that is important. Early manifestations may be unalarming as in Trade Mart's light-hearted beginnings or may even appear to be positive as in the lightening of Mentor's birthmark. Yet the trajectory is set by the motivations behind these early actions, and the slow and cunning progression of evil begins, often without conscious thought on the parts of the people who are succumbing. As Dickinson points out in the poem at the beginning of this article, evil is, ". . . consecutive and slow."

Developmental theorists remind us that young readers need concrete manifestations if they are to successfully deal with abstract concepts. In *Messenger* we find a story addressing the very complex theme of the nature of evil. Lowry figuratively seems to be asking such questions as: "What does evil look like when it begins?" and "How does evil gain ground in a good society?" Yet Lowry often depicts the answers to these questions in concrete terms that make them more comprehensible to adolescents. Young readers who see Trade Mart as the origination of evil, Mentor's lightening birthmark as the physical manifestation of evil and the building of the wall to close the borders of Village as the culmination of evil are encouraged to see the subtle complexities of evil in ways they can concretely envision.

One of the main values of utopian/dystopian literature in general is to illuminate real problems in our own world through their understandable examination in a fantasy world. Madeleine L'Engle, in discussing the subject of evil in her own writing, once said, "I think there are powers of evil. [ . . . ] I think the best thing we can do is to give a child light to see them" (Hearne, 30). As teachers, then, we have the responsibility of helping our students recognize and examine evil in the light of our classroom discussions. *Messenger* can serve as a thought-provoking beginning to these discussions. Questions, such as "Could our current desire for physical perfection lead to evil as it did for Mentor," or "What would Trade Mart be for our world as the source of evil" can pull the abstract discussions of this book toward the real-life depictions of evil prevalent in our world today. Noting that in *Messenger* evil is cumulative and deceitful, teachers can ask how we can recognize it in its early stages before the trajectory is so firmly set toward border-building? Young adults need to grapple with these questions, and are eager to do so. Discussions of *Messenger* can lead to increased understanding of the nature of evil and may also lead to ideas on how to prevent evil from gaining ground in our own society.

The following additional discussion questions may be helpful to teachers who want to lead their classes into a deeper understanding of this book.

- What do you think is the significance of the title of this book? Why didn't Lowry name the book *Healer*?
- In the first part of the book Trade Mart represents evil, but in the second this representation shifts to Forest. How are these two settings alike? Different?
- Each of the main characters has extraordinary gifts. What do you think these gifts signify? Do you know people who have these same sorts of gifts? Do you have any of them?
- What is Kira's significance in the story? Why is it important that she is handicapped?
- How does Matty change from the beginning to the end of the book? How does Mentor change?
- Why do you think the book ended the way it does? How would you end it differently?
- The main characters in this book sometimes have an uneasy feeling that they cannot describe that tells them something is wrong. Have you ever had

the unexplainable but real sense of evil? How would you describe it?

- What one important learning can you take from this book that will help you recognize and combat evil in your own life?

*Messenger* is especially good at illuminating the progressive and cumulative nature of evil with all its ambiguities to a young audience. But beyond this group of implied adolescent readers, the book also speaks to adults in its uncanny depiction of a good society moving toward increased secrecy, intolerance and selfishness which is so frighteningly recognizable as the trajectory in numerous societies of our world today.

*Messenger*, then, fulfills its title by becoming a messenger to our general society warning us of the abstruse and wily ways in which evil gains ground in a society while people are preoccupied with other things. Edmund Burke is widely quoted as saying, "It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph" (qtd. in Partington: 160). The charge to young readers, and to us, of *Messenger* may be to do *something*. Recognize evil in its infant manifestations of secrecy, intolerance, perfectionism and selfishness and stand against it before it grows into a life-threatening force. This is the strong message delivered to adolescent and adult readers alike by this *Messenger*.

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