

THE GIVER

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

What does a community gain when it removes pain, difference, and choice — and who gets to decide that the trade is worth it?

Novel: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

Setting: A managed community that has adopted Sameness, at some unspecified point in the future

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 6–8, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete 23-chapter novel. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

The Giver invents a mechanism that cannot exist — memory moving between people by touch — and uses it to examine choices that real societies have genuinely made. Your task is to keep those two things apart. Read for source authority, purpose, and the boundary between what a novel can dramatize and what evidence can establish.

ACCURACY SAFEGUARD

The community, Sameness, the office of Receiver, and the transfer of memory are entirely invented; there is no real mechanism by which memories move between people. The community's control over who is born and who is permitted to continue living, however, echoes real and well-documented eugenics programs, including in the United States. Treat that history with the seriousness it deserves, and separately from the novel's invention.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. Real Communities That Chose to Give Things Up

Intentional communities — groups that deliberately restructure how their members live, work, and own property — are a real and well-documented part of American and world history. The Shakers, the Oneida Community, New Harmony in Indiana, and the Israeli kibbutz movement all asked members to surrender significant private choice in exchange for security, purpose, or equality. Two facts matter for reading this novel accurately: adults joined these communities voluntarily and could generally leave, and none of them practiced anything resembling the novel’s treatment of infants or the elderly.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Which real trades made by these communities most resemble the ones this community has made — and where does the comparison break down entirely?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. Eugenics: A Real, Documented History

In the early twentieth century, the United States adopted laws permitting the forced sterilization of people judged unfit to reproduce. In *Buck v. Bell* (1927), the Supreme Court upheld such a law, and dozens of states passed similar statutes; tens of thousands of people were sterilized without meaningful consent, disproportionately poor people, people of color, and people with disabilities. These programs influenced eugenics policy elsewhere, including in Nazi Germany. They are now broadly repudiated, and several states have issued formal apologies. This history is the real-world counterpart to a community that decides which lives it will permit to continue.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What does this documented history let you say about the community's decisions that the novel alone cannot establish?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. How Human Memory Actually Works

Memory is not stored as a recording that can be handed to another person. Human memory is reconstructive: the brain reassembles an experience each time it is recalled, and the reassembly is shaped by what has happened since. There is no known biological mechanism by which one person's memories transfer to another by touch or by any other means. Research on false memory also shows that people can sincerely, vividly remember events that did not occur — which makes the novel's premise scientifically impossible and thematically pointed at once.

INQUIRY QUESTION

The novel treats memory as a substance that can be moved and stored. What does that invented mechanism let Lowry argue that a scientifically accurate account of memory could not?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. Color Vision, Real and Invented

Human color vision depends on cone cells in the retina that respond to different wavelengths of light. Color blindness is real: most forms involve difficulty distinguishing certain colors, usually from an inherited difference in cone function. Complete absence of color vision, achromatopsia, is real but rare, and it is a genetic condition rather than something a society could engineer into a population within a few generations. The novel's Sameness is fiction; the physiology it borrows from is not.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Why does the novel choose color, rather than some other removed sense, as the thing Jonas recovers first?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. Euphemism and the Language of Institutions

The community demands precision of language while using the word release for killing. This is not only a fictional device. Institutions in the real world routinely substitute mild, technical, or abstract terms for actions that would be resisted if named plainly, and this pattern has been studied and criticized for a long time — George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” is a well-known primary argument on the subject. Notice the shape of the trick: the community’s stated commitment to precision is exactly what makes its central euphemism effective.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Find one real institutional euphemism you can source and verify. What does the substitution make easier to do, and for whom?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Pain, Consent, and Real Medical Ethics

Pain has a documented biological function: it signals damage and drives protective behavior. Congenital insensitivity to pain is a real and dangerous condition precisely because people who have it injure themselves without noticing. Real medical ethics is built around informed consent — the principle that a person must understand and voluntarily agree to what is done to them. Debates over end-of-life care and assisted dying are genuinely contested, and where such practices are legal they require repeated, documented consent from the patient. The community's releases involve no consent of any kind, which places them outside that debate rather than inside it.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Where does the novel's treatment of pain match the real biological and ethical picture, and where does it depart from it to make an argument?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
A university or medical-center explainer on how memory is formed and recalled	Accurate mechanism, written for a general audience	A summary, not primary research; check the date
A university or state archive project documenting U.S. sterilization laws and eugenics history	Sourced primary history of real programs	Serious content; preview before independent student use
The text of Buck v. Bell (1927) via a public court archive	The actual legal reasoning used to permit forced sterilization	Dense and dated language; requires framing. The decision has been widely repudiated
A national eye institute page on color vision and color blindness	Accurate physiology of cone cells and real color deficiency	Describes real conditions, not the novel's engineered premise
George Orwell's 1946 essay on political language, via a reputable archive	A real, primary argument about euphemism and power	Written in a specific postwar political context; an argument, not a study
A university bioethics center page on informed consent	Accurate framing of what consent requires	Law and policy vary by jurisdiction and change over time

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I treat the community, Sameness, and the transfer of memory as entirely fictional.
- ☐ I treat the novel's population control as echoing real, documented eugenics programs rather than as pure invention.
- ☐ I describe real memory science accurately, separate from the novel's impossible premise.
- ☐ I describe real color vision and color blindness accurately, separate from engineered Sameness.
- ☐ I distinguish the novel's non-consensual releases from real, contested debates about end-of-life care, which turn on documented consent.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (what happened, what the body does) from ethical claims (what should be done).
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your view of what this community actually purchased — and at what point does the novel stop being evidence about the real world and start being only an argument about it?
