

Mirroring Contemporary Society

A Dystopian Critique of Power Dynamics and Social Injustice in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

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For centuries, visions of the future have been intriguing concepts for scholars and researchers alike, especially during times of crisis. Wars, global pandemics, or natural catastrophes can prompt us to take notice of the inequalities still prevalent in the present, to question the status quo and to imagine alternative futures where such injustices no longer exist. Literature is a suitable resource for experiencing contemporary imaginations of the future, set either in a utopian place, where everything is better than in our society today, or one where everything is worse – the dystopia.

Like most dystopian works, Suzanne Collins's bestselling novel *The Hunger Games* is set in a distant future where "the devastating effects of ... war" (Finnsso 15) have wreaked havoc on civilization and resulted in the birth of a new country called Panem. However, despite being a fictional place, the power dynamics and social injustices are all too reminiscent of contemporary real-life conditions. In previous research, scholars like Geir Finnsso or Andrea Ruthven have argued that Panem's society "mirrors our own" (Finnsso 18) and that the Capitol's

oppressive reign does not primarily serve as a warning of what might happen should humans' current behavior continue, but rather as a wake-up call of what is already happening in the present (Ruthven 48). Clearly, this observation is nothing new – and yet, the way *The Hunger Games* utilizes both utopian and dystopian elements experienced through the eyes of sixteen-year-old protagonist Katniss Everdeen is still worth exploring. Although the reader empathizes with Katniss and is inclined to root for her to struggle against the government, to gain momentum among her peers and to disrupt the status quo by reading *The Hunger Games*, the reader subconsciously aligns themselves with the Capitol – Panem's fictional upper class – who take pleasure in watching teenagers murder each other on screen.

Utopia, Its Origins, Varieties and Implications

The phenomenon of utopia precedes its denomination. Initially, the concept was coined in 1516 by Renaissance humanist Thomas More. According to Lyman Tower Sargent, More's highly influential work *Utopia* (1516) defines the term as a non-existent place in a specific location that is either better or worse than its inventor's place of residence. The word utopia translates to "not place" (Sargent 5, original emphasis). Therefore, More coined the term "eutopia" (5, original emphasis), in popular culture synonymous with 'utopia', to describe a fictional place as a "good place" (5, original emphasis).

The term 'utopia' personifies perfection and happiness for all its inhabitants (Sargent 5). It is a place superior to our current society in the sense that it is "purged of the shortcomings, the wastes, and the confusion of our time" (5), thus enabling everyone to live in perfect harmony. The motivation behind imagining such a perfect place, as Fatima Vieira suggests, stems from the recognition "that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build

the future” (4). Thus, the construction of a utopian society inevitably reflects its creator’s desires, since it reveals what they believe to be lacking in their current society.

However, “social dreaming” (Sargent 3) does not necessarily have to be read as a critique. It can also serve as a motivation. Sargent, for example, avidly supports the notion that utopia “is essential for social change” (24). For a society to develop and grow, it is vital to question the status quo. Imagining a place with perfect living conditions and ensuring happiness for all, helps to expose the shortcomings of the present and figure out what could be done to get closer to perfection.

Instead of depicting a society free of flaws, a dystopia showcases a place where contemporary society’s shortcomings are amplified and negatively impact everyday life (Langer 171). Even though it appears to be utopia’s polar opposite, its function is similar: both utopia and dystopia express their inventor’s dissatisfaction with the present. However, while utopia can inspire and dazzle by showing how wonderful the world could be if it were purged of all that causes pain and suffering, dystopia serves more as a warning. It shows how current human behavior could lead society to end up in a similarly dreadful place unless people realize their mistakes and learn to better themselves (Baccolini & Moylan 2). In a sense, both utopias and dystopias are designed to uncover society’s deficiencies, how those came about, and how they can be prevented.

The Literary Genre

As stated by Sargent, each fictional work is set in a “no place” (5, original emphasis) – a place that does not exist in the author’s reality and, in utopian/dystopian fiction, is either noticeably good or bad (5). The worlds in these novels are usually explored in different ways, depending on whether they are set in a utopian or dystopian

society. In utopian novels, the protagonist usually enters the showcased society from the outside and learns from its residents how they achieved and maintain perfect living conditions for all (Vieira 7).

Subsequently, the “utopian traveller” (7) makes their way back home to inform their fellow citizens of “better ways of organizing society” (7). Dystopian novels, on the other hand, usually plunge the reader into devastation and chaos from the outset (Baccolini & Moylan 5). In most cases, the protagonist does not experience their surroundings as particularly jarring. However, as the story progresses, they begin to understand

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society’s flaws and feel estranged which prompts them to resist whatever force negatively impacts their life and those of others (5). These forces can range from “government surveillance” (Nyman 1) to “totalitarian regimes, brainwashing, concealing of information, class dichotomies” (1) or “a combination of several [of these] problems” (1). In traditional dystopian novels, such as *1984* by George Orwell, the protagonist’s attempts at defying these oppressive forces turn out to be futile (Baccolini & Moylan 7). However, the sub-genre known as

‘critical dystopia’ seeks to “[provide] a picture of the darkest possibilities regarding social, political, and environmental issues, without losing the spark of hope for a better space-time” (Cavalcanti 72). It showcases bleak times to trigger emotions in the reader, such as fear or outrage in the face of the injustice and hardship the characters have to endure while demonstrating that dark times can be overcome as long as there are people prepared to fight for what is right. Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* matches the characteristics of this genre in the sense that the actions of its protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, build the momentum to cause a ripple in the government’s tight reign which eventually leads to its collapse in the series’ conclusion.

In general, literary works within the genre of utopian fiction seek to both educate and entertain the reader (Vieira 17). While a utopian novel suggests “projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real changes” (Vieira 8), dystopian novels intend to “frighten the reader” (17) in order for them to reflect upon their own behavior.

In both cases, the genre’s “relationship with reality” (8) is obvious: utopian fiction aims at influencing the course of real life by prompting the reader to think about the future and how they can contribute to improve human’s overall quality of life.

In 2009, Mark Fisher introduces the term “capitalist realism” (*Capitalist* 6) to describe the widespread belief that attaining an equally successful alternative to capitalism is virtually impossible. Perhaps this is why, as Darko Suvin examines, capitalism pretends to be “a finally realized eutopia” (192). Since no other functional way of organizing the market has yet been found, capitalism appears to be the best possible option. Although, in reality, the majority of humanity experiences the effects of capitalism as dystopian and unjust (192).

However, due to capitalism's steadfast reign, hopes of a better alternative are diminishing. Fisher denominates this phenomenon as "reflexive impotence" (*Capitalist* 21), a sentiment that describes a person's dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, but a perceived incapability to improve it. Fisher deems this lack of faith to be "a self-fulfilling prophecy" (*Capitalist* 21): because people view a utopian future as no longer attainable, they see no point in making an effort to change it.

Contemporary literature mirrors capitalism's widespread dominion and the public's general discontentment with its restrictive and freedom-robbing nature. Suzanne Collins's bestselling novel *The Hunger Games* (2008) is a good example. Panem's government, the Capitol, rules over twelve impoverished districts – each of which are forced to specify in the manufacture of a particular good. These products are, then, directly imported to the Capitol. Similar to a worker within a capitalist system, the districts do not own their products, nor do they benefit from their labor. Everything they produce "is owned or perceived to be controlled by the capitalist" (Yuill 135). To keep the districts complicit, the Capitol asserts its power by hosting an annual spectacle called the 'Hunger Games,' a live television show that is streamed nationwide for the enjoyment of the Capitol and that features twenty-four 'tributes' – a boy and a girl from each district, both chosen randomly during a 'reaping' ceremony. After a short training period in the Capitol, the tributes are sent to a computer-controlled arena with the objective to fight each other until a single survivor remains. Upon their return, the survivor – branded as a victor or victress – receives a monetary prize and a house. Tributes from the marginally wealthier districts 1, 2, and 4 use the promise of glory and riches as an incentive to "train for and volunteer for the show" (Cettl 141). Thus, they "readily participate in being framed as celebrities and success stories in a deadly competitive script" (141). Instead of resisting the Capitol, they

decide to take part in their games. Success appears to be their sole motivation, while the costs – namely the deaths of twenty-three innocent children – are being ignored. Morally, killing others to gain wealth should not sound enticing, but *The Hunger Games* demonstrates that this is the kind of society capitalism breeds: humans who stab each other in the back for their own benefit.

As can be deduced, the Capitol holds its districts in a tight grasp that allows no room for social dreaming. However, as Fisher observes: "[c]ontrol only works if you are complicit with it" (*Capitalist* 22). The system does not persist because it is good but because those that suffer have lost hope in the possibility of change and, therefore, cease trying to fight for a better alternative.

The Hunger Games – A Critical Dystopia

The Capitol's Capitalistic Reign in The Hunger Games

The Capitol's power over the districts is demonstrated in multiple ways, the most noticeable of which is the Hunger Games themselves. For the citizens of the Capitol, the games are framed as entertainment to be consumed without moral qualms (Nyman 2). For the inhabitants of the districts, however, they are not only framed as a punishment, but also as an honor. Narratively, the novel achieves this by employing the traditional journey of the "utopian traveller" (Vieira 7) and inserting it right after the selection ceremony. Once selected, the tributes are sent to the Capitol where, upon their arrival, they are temporarily invited to partake in the Capitolists' luxurious lifestyle. They receive an impromptu makeover, an unlimited amount of delicious food, and spacious accommodation. However, different from traditional utopian narratives, the tributes are not supposed to learn from the Capitol's lavish ways to implement them in the districts. The utopia is

limited to the Capitol and those who are complicit with it. In the case of the victor or victress, they may experience the utopian lifestyle for the rest of their lives. This shows that in a capitalist society a comfortable life is possible if one is willing to cause or accept the dissatisfaction of others – or, in the story world of *The Hunger Games*, their deaths.

In addition to serving as a demonstration of the Capitol's power over their subjects, as well as "entertainment of a bored elite" (Fisher, *Precarious* 33), the games are also intended to keep the districts isolated. According to Rachel Greenwald Smith, the "emphasis on individual competition" (41) is one of capitalism's driving characteristics and it is deeply rooted in the Capitol's ideology. The districts might outnumber the Capitol, but as long as they view each other as enemies, they will refrain from uniting and conquering the government. The spatial separation as well as the act of pitting their children against each other in a deathly tournament results in building resentment between the districts which "keeps them from communicating, organising, and uniting" (Nyman 2).

In fostering sentiments of disunity and antagonism among the districts, the Capitol constantly reminds its subjects of the dystopian conditions they are forced to live under. It robs them of any hope that their situation can be improved as is shown by their inability to stop the Capitol from sacrificing their children. Alone, they cannot conquer the Capitol, so they submit to the inescapability of their lives. Their loss of faith is reminiscent of Fisher's concept of reflexive impotence – the perceived incapability to instigate change. Even Katniss seems to have surrendered to her way of living: "We can't leave, so why bother talking about it?" (Collins 11). However, despite practicing reflexive impotence, Katniss embodies hope. Her actions throughout the novel are not motivated by active defiance against the Capitol, but rather by love. All she does stems

from the desire to keep Prim, her younger sister, safe, which is ultimately what leads to the Capitol's downfall.

Combatting Individualism

The Hunger Games follows the traditional narrative of a dystopian novel in the sense that its protagonist is portrayed as “question[ing] the dystopian society” (Baccolini & Moylan 5), a process driven by her participation in the 74th games. Having already existed for decades, the games are established as a deeply ingrained part of everyone's lives, since the majority of Panem's population may not even remember a time prior to the existence of the games. Experiences from previous games raise expectations of what is to come, as for example, that no one in District 12 will volunteer because it has rarely ever happened. Therefore, Katniss's decision to enter the games for her sister stands out as remarkable. It can be read as her first act of defiance, breaking with the usual pattern of accepting social injustice.

From then on, it can be argued that the majority of Katniss's actions are motivated by sisterly love. Despite having “given up” (Collins 42), Katniss promises her sister that she will try to win (42). It is also her love for Prim that drives her to form an alliance with Rue, the 12-year-old tribute from District 11, who is “very like Prim in size and demeanour” (Collins 52). As Ruthven explains, the games often feature alliances “between the strongest ... to increase their individual chances of survival” (52), but Katniss chooses her ally not based on strength but due to “a feeling of affinity and caring” (52) – a decision that reinforces her compassion.

When Rue is killed by another tribute, Katniss performs a burial ritual, adorning her corpse with flowers. For a long time, the Capitol has succeeded in separating the districts both spatially and emotionally in order to discourage collaborative uprisings. However, in paying her respects to a tribute from

another district, Katniss “effectively brings District 11 to stand in solidarity against the Capitol” (Nyman 3) by showing that the enemies are not the other districts but the all-controlling government that pits them against each other.

Aligning with the Capitol

As a sixteen-year-old protagonist awaiting the cruel fate of having to fight other teenagers to death, Katniss Everdeen presents a compelling figure for the book's predominantly young adult audience. Catherine McDermott explains that “a reader is likely to desire

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a hopeful ending for Katniss” (150), which is emphasized by the use of first-person narration, exposing the reader to Katniss's innermost thoughts, thus strengthening the bond between reader and character. However, despite rooting for Katniss, it is difficult to relate to the injustice and poverty she experiences on a day-to-day basis. Hence, by reading *The Hunger Games*, the reader resembles the citizens of the Capitol, although their behavior might sound appalling.

The Capitol is characterized as a place of lies and deceit. Its citizens dye their hair and skin color or surgically alter their faces, but even beneath the surface, looks can be deceiving. Once Katniss has volunteered for her sister,

she is immediately preoccupied with the image she projects to the world: “I cannot afford to get upset, to leave this room with puffy eyes and a red nose. Crying is not an option. There will be more cameras at the train station” (Collins 39). This shows that she is not only aware of the heightened attention she is given but also how easily the audience can be swayed. The constant presence of cameras forces her to conceal her true emotions. Katniss's internal thoughts revolving around how to best present herself to the Capitol to secure sponsors mirrors the way present-day social media allows its users to manipulate how they appear to the outside world, creating the illusion of perfection by using filters and photo editing tools.

Similarly, the romance between Katniss and her district partner, Peeta Mellark, cleverly adds another layer of social commentary. In the book, Peeta publicly declares his love for her, branding the two as “star-crossed lovers” (Collins 158). Although being hesitant at first, Katniss soon recognizes the pretend romance between the two for what it is: “another way to manipulate her image for the camera” (Ruthven 56), demonstrating that, in a capitalist society, what matters is not what is real, only what is most entertaining.

The first book the trilogy ends with Katniss and Peeta both winning the games after threatening to commit suicide, thus proving to the audience that the games' rules are “an arbitrary construction” (McDermott 142) and that, despite believing themselves to be powerless, the districts do have agency to provoke a change. As a consequence, the romance between Katniss and Peeta is emphasized to distract both the districts and the Capitol from “the emerging social unrest” (Ruthven 57). However, it does not only distract Panem's citizens; it distracts the reader, too, by prompting them to focus on the love story and root for their preferred love interest – Peeta or Gale, her childhood best friend – to end up

with Katniss. Nyman argues that important issues presented in *The Hunger Games* series are often overlooked (3). Rather than focusing on the violence the majority of people in Panem face under their capitalist leaders, the love triangle and the question of whether one is “Team Gale” or “Team Peeta” moves to the foreground, “as if we are looking at the Hunger Games in the same way that the Capitol residents do” (3).

The Hunger Games mirrors the conditions of our current society, providing a “horribly compelling ... image of the privation of solidarity in our world” (Fisher Precarious 33). Similar to the citizens of the Capitol, readers consume *The Hunger Games* for pleasure. Even though they might condemn the actions of the members of the Capitol, readers often mirror their behavior by supporting the violence and rooting for the love triangle, thus failing to understand the criticism. Furthermore, this demonstrates how desensitized to brutality and inequality humanity has become. Panem might be set in the future, but the apathy practiced in the Capitol is already a daily occurrence.

Overall, *The Hunger Games* serves more as a wake-up call than a warning in that it demonstrates how apathy and desensitization to violence and inequality are already deeply ingrained in our society. It reminds us that we do not have to look to the future to see a society that values entertainment over empathy, as these issues already exist in our world today. Only by recognizing and addressing these issues can humanity as a whole hope to create a more just and equitable society for all.

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