You Are What You Cannot Eat

_The Novel The Hunger Games as Social Criticism on the Issue of Hunger_

B.A. Essay

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Abstract:

The novel, *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, can be read as social criticism on the issue of hunger. The novel draws on a wide range of sources, both contemporary and historical, for inspiration, and utilizes effectively the possibilities of the genre of dystopian fiction in order to shed light on the issue. What makes the social criticism of *The Hunger Games* unique is that the theme of power plays a central role in the novel’s treatment of the issue of hunger.

In this paper, the focus is on exploring from a Marxist perspective, the various ways in which the issue of hunger is approached in the novel, looking at how it is related to economical and societal structure of Panem, the relationship between the consumer and the worker, wealth and class distinction, its reflection in the variable food culture and what it reveals about the ideology of the society, how hunger is used as a control mechanism to keep the power balance in Panem unchanged, and what role the main heroine, Katniss Everdeen, plays in the social criticism.

As the novel takes on and effectively handles the issue in its rich and detailed dystopian world, it delivers a fascinating and intriguing exploration. With this, it transcends its role of being only a novel. Instead, it becomes both an absorbing and well-written piece of fiction and carefully crafted social criticism. And in this twofold purpose lies the novel’s greatest strength.
Table of contents

Introduction ................................................................. 1

1. Origins in Greek mythology and Roman society ......................... 3
   1.1 The Influence of Greek Mythology .................................. 3
   1.2 The Influence of Roman Society .................................. 4

2. Dystopian Fiction and its Purpose ....................................... 6
   2.1 Young Adult Dystopian Fiction and Social Criticism ............... 6
   2.2 Young Adult Dystopian Novels as Bildungsromans ................. 7
   2.3 Young Adult Dystopian Novels as a Reflection of a Society Gone Wrong ...... 8
   2.4 The Question of Identity ........................................... 9

3. Hunger and its effects ..................................................... 11

4. Economic, Social, Cultural and Educational Dominance ............... 13
   4.1 The Economy: The Base and the Superstructure ...................... 13
   4.2 Food as a Reflection of Culture and Societal Conditions ........... 14
   4.3 Consumerism versus Keeping Alive .................................. 15
   4.4 The Complexity of the Bliss of Ignorance ......................... 16

5. Food as a Control Mechanism ............................................ 18
   5.1 The Tesserae System and Class Distinction ......................... 18
   5.2 The Role of Wealth .................................................. 20
   5.3 A Shift in Power .................................................... 21
   5.4 Food as an Instigator for Violence .................................. 22

Conclusion ........................................................................... 23

Works cited ......................................................................... 24
Introduction

The novel *The Hunger Games* (2008) is the first book in The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins. The novel follows the story of Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen year old girl who lives in the dystopian country Panem (formerly North-America). A totalitarian government in the country’s capitol, aptly named Capitol, rules Panem with an iron-fist, making it a frightful place. The country is divided into 12 districts which is each devoted to a specific kind of labouring industry. A rich minority, living in the Capitol and Districts 1, 2 and 4, dominates society while the rest of the population is kept living in dire poverty in the other districts. Rigorous control is kept over every aspect of people’s lives in order to minimize the chance of civil resistance. The Hunger Games are a central event to this society. The Games are a yearly event devised by the government where 24 children aged 12-18, two from each district, compete to death in a specially designed arena, in a tournament in which there can only be only one victor. As the Games are televised and presented as a grand spectacle, a gaudy competition, human suffering and brutal murder is turned into a yearly “reality television” event.

Katniss lives in District 12 with her mother Mrs. Everdeen, and her twelve year old sister Primrose. Because of poverty, they have difficulty affording enough food for themselves and hunger has left its mark on them. Therefore, in order to provide for them, Katniss has resorted to hunting and trading illegally. As a result she is a skilled hunter, physically strong, brave and has a keen survival instinct but she is also serious, guarded of herself and harbours a lot of anger and frustration because of her position in life. At the reaping for the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers to go as the female tribute instead of Primrose who is originally drawn. Also going are the male tribute, Peeta Mellark, and their sponsor Haymitch Abernathy. As Katniss experiences life in the Capitol, she notices the glaring discrepancy between classes in her society and how the existing social structure both threatens people’s lives and makes them suffer. Once she enters the Games, her life becomes a matter of desperate survival as she must face great dangers and fight to stay alive as she tries her best to win.

The theme of power — who yields it, how it is used to control and what effects it has — plays a central role in the novel. However, what makes the novel unique is its treatment of the theme. It directs its attention in particular to the difference between power and powerlessness, how this difference is manifested in society and culture and
how it influences people’s lives whether they are in a place of power or not. In this regard, Marxist literary analysis is particularly applicable to the novel as it places emphasis on the struggle for power within society, as social classes compete for “economical, social and political advantage” (Barry 151). It also concentrates on the relationship between the economical base and the ideology of a society and how one affects the other (Barry 151-152).

The focus in this essay is on exploring how the novel’s handling of the theme of power is reflected in its treatment of the issue of hunger and how the novel can be read as social criticism on the topic. The subject will be approached from multiple perspectives, focusing on the influence of Greek mythology and antique Roman society on the novel and its treatment of the theme of power, the novel’s genre of young adult dystopian literature and its relation to social criticism, the issue of hunger and its effect on people’s lives, and what role hunger has played in shaping Katniss’s identity. Particular attention is paid to approaching the issue from a Marxist perspective, looking at the interaction between the base and the superstructure and its reflection in the food culture, the complicated relationship between the worker and the consumer, and finally at how hunger is used as a control mechanism in order to keep people powerless.
1. Origins in Greek Mythology and Roman Society

The novel The Hunger Games draws its inspiration from many sources, both contemporary and historical. It makes use of the literary genres of science fiction and fantasy while also taking on modern society phenomena such as “reality television”, celebrity creation and fixation, fashion gaudiness, and violence as a form of media entertainment. However, like other fantasy novels, it also gets inspiration from historical sources such as various mythologies, religious tales, and the cultures of antique societies. Examples of such novels are the Harry Potter, The Lighting Thief, The Lord of the Rings, and Narnia series. As The Hunger Games is heavily influenced by both Greek mythology and Roman society, especially in regards to how it treats the theme of power, this chapter focuses on these resources.

1.1 The Influence of Greek Mythology

Katniss’s story is based upon the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. According to the myth, King Minos of Crete wanted to punish the people of Athens for the death of his son, Androgeus. He therefore decreed that each year, they were to send seven boys and seven girls to Crete. These tributes were to enter the great labyrinth, a maze built by Daedalus that was reportedly impossible to get out of. There, they were meant to serve as food to the Minotaur (a half man, half bull) that resided within. Later, Theseus came to Athens and when he learned of this tradition he decided to volunteer to go as a tribute as he felt sorry for the children and their families and was certain that he could kill the Minotaur. When Theseus came to Crete, Minos’s daughter Ariadne fell in love with him and decided to offer him help. She gave him a magic ball of thread and told him it would unravel within the labyrinth and that if he followed it, it would lead him to where the Minotaur was. When he wanted to return, all he had to do was rewind the thread and he would be able to go back to the entrance. Theseus followed her instructions, found the Minotaur and killed it. He then wound his way back and was able to get the rest of the tributes out as well. He guided them to the harbour where they managed to escape in a ship into the darkness and back to Athens (Graves 312-315).

In The Hunger Games and the myth of Theseus, power is a central issue: who yields it and how it is used to control people. In both cases, power is exerted through punishment and used as a fear mechanism and a tool of civil oppression in order to keep
The novel shares many parallels with the myth. President Snow, the ruler of Panem, represents Minos and the Games themselves represent the Minotaur. The labyrinth represents the Game arena itself and the twelve districts and their people represent the citizens of Athens. In the myth, King Minos wants to punish the people of Athens for the death of his son and he does so by offering their children as a sacrifice. The situation is the same in the novel. In Panem, the Games were originally devised in order to punish the public for an unsuccessful uprising against the Capitol that had occurred seventy-five years before. But there is another purpose to them as well:

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear: “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you.” (Collins 22)

What is ultimately the purpose of the Games and the ritualistic sacrifice to the Minotaur is to put people in a place of complete powerlessness and to keep them there, no matter the cost.

1.2 The Influence of Roman Society

In the novel, a so called tesserae system is for food distribution. In Roman society, tessera was “a small square of bone, wood” (“Tesserae” 1885) that was passed out by the government and used as a free ticket of admission to public spectacles (“Theater” 532).

The name of the country, Panem, comes from the phrase “Panem et circenses” which translates as “bread and circuses” from Latin. The phrase was created by the Roman satirist Juventus. He used it to refer to how the upper class “sedated” the lower class by providing them with food, public games and spectacles so that they would forget their troubles and disadvantaged position in society (Köhne 8). One kind of such event was the gladiatorial games. Gladiators were armed combatants (professionals, slaves or criminals) that fought with criminals or wild animals in a mortal combat in order to provide entertainment for the public (Jackson 7). In The Hunger Games the
situation is in many ways the same. The Games are turned into a spectacle but unlike in the Roman Empire, the Games are not used to “sedate” the lower classes but instead as a control mechanism by the government. As Katniss explains it: “To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others” (Collins 22). The tributes in the Hunger Games are like the gladiators, armed combatants that fight to the death, but they are only children. The rules of the game are still the same; human suffering and death is in both cases a shocking form of entertainment. The tributes suffer for the sake of giving people something to watch and cheer for.
2. Dystopian Fiction and its Purpose

The Hunger Games is defined as belonging to the genre of young adult dystopian fiction. Dystopian fiction is the 20th century counterpart of utopian fiction. According to Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, a utopia is “a future society, a perfect society – following the pun on the name in Greek (no place, good place – imaginary yet positive)” (1). Gordin, Tilley and Prakash define dystopia however as “a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society” (1). A dystopia is not simply the opposite of an utopia; it is a reflection of a distorted utopia whose societal structure does not work properly or justly enough and where the world is a frightening place (1). Dystopia “places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future” (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2). Dystopia can therefore be described as being the antithesis of utopia, a reflection of its dark side.

2.1 Young Adult Dystopian Fiction and Social Criticism

According to Booker, in his book Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide, what makes dystopian fiction special is that it:

- constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions. (3)

Because dystopian fiction reflects a world wherein things have gone horribly wrong and society has evolved into a sinister place, such literature can be used as a tool for social criticism. By placing societal problems in a dystopian world where the stakes are heightened and the problems are more pronounced, this kind of fiction can be used as a mirror to reflect and address societal issues of modern day society. What dystopian novels have in common is that they all take on specific societal issues and place them in their own dystopian universe where they affect the characters in various ways which may be different to the reader’s own experience. As this type of literature allows for great creativity and imagination in creating a new reality, the author has a chance to reflect and address societal issues in a new way and with an altered focus. Thus, the reader is introduced to and shown these problems in a different way than in real life,
which gives him a chance to reflect upon them from a new perspective. According to Booker, dystopian fiction thus provides: “fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practises that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (3).

_The Hunger Games_ deals with a range of social issues and dilemmas such as hunger, poverty, class distinction, the dangers of “reality television”, the desensitization of violence in media and abuse of authority. The novel takes on these familiar subjects but presents them in a new light, making use of the first-person narration of the heroine of the story. Katniss occupies a unique place in the social criticism of the novel. As the narrator of the story, she is the one who gives the reader a first-hand account of the world of Panem and what her life is like. Katniss is a strong, brave and resourceful heroine who tries her best to rise above her circumstances and improve life herself and others. She is a victim but also a fighter, someone to be admired. As the reader sees the world through her eyes and gets to know her, he comes to care about her. What Katniss suffers and what she goes through becomes personal to the reader as the subjects of the social criticism are humanized through her experience. With this, it is made clear to the reader that those who suffer are not merely faceless names but real people in the fictional world.

### 2.2 Young Adult Dystopian Novels as Bildungsromans

Young adult dystopian fiction has grown very popular as a genre over the past few years and now constitutes a large body of work. These books are read by adolescents and adults alike. What is central to this genre is the factor of “personal agency, the capability to initiate and direct one’s actions for specific purposes” (Hill 102). The adolescents become the heroes as they act in order to improve live for themselves and those around them (Hill 102). According to Hintz and Ostry, what makes this genre so popular is that: “The ‘growing pains’ of a society moving toward utopia or away from dystopia are framed as synonymous with adolescent growth itself, and the development of agency” (10). In these novels, the young adult readers see their own fears, hopes, challenges and struggles as they journey from childhood to adulthood represented in the land of fiction and are able to relate to the characters.

What sets this kind of fiction apart from dystopian novels for children is that the
Dystopian world tends to be far more elaborate and the system that is the basis of the world is described and analysed in detail for the reader (Hintz and Ostry 9). In *The Hunger Games* an entire dystopian world has been carefully crafted. Panem has its own societal structure and economical system with the districts and the Capitol, a unique technology with things such as flying hovercrafts, mockingjays (birds that are a mix of natural birds and a genetically modified species) and the sophistically designed Game arena, but most importantly, Panem has a distinct culture and ideology wherein the Games play a central role. As the story unfolds a rich and multi-layered world is revealed and the reader is introduced to the complexities and nuances of the society of Panem.

Dystopian novels for young adults also reflect a loss of innocence for the characters and a personal awakening for them as “the adolescent comes to recognize the faults and weaknesses of his or her own society, and rebels against it” (Hintz and Ostry 9). In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss has led a difficult life and she is well aware of the faults of her own society and how it has affected her. What makes her stand out as a heroine is that she acts of her own accord and follows her own convictions; her actions propel the story forward. Katniss volunteers to go as a tribute instead of Primrose, knowing well that her participation in the Games might mean her death. During the Games she tries her best to fight on her own terms, killing only when necessary and doing her best to survive. In her ultimate act of rebellion, she defies the Capitol by pretending to eat Nightlock berries (poisoned berries) with Peeta, forcing the Gamemakers to change the outcome of the Games and declare them both as winners. In the novel, Katniss plays simultaneously the role of a victim and a revolutionary as her actions instigate a rebellion. Thus, she becomes the hero of a story that is bigger than her own.

**2.3 Young Adult Dystopian Novels as a Reflection of a Society Gone Wrong**

Dystopian young adult novels reflect different worlds in which the attempt to fix societal issues has gone horribly wrong, resulting in a society where the original issues have become more pronounced and new problems have arisen. The attempt to create a utopia has resulted in a frightening dystopia.

Some recent dystopian young adult novels by American authors serve well as an
example of this. The novel *Divergent* (2008) by Veronica Roth deals with a world in which society has been split into five different factions — each dedicated to a certain kind of virtue and serving a specific kind of purpose — in order to ensure that people will be able to work together in peace. However, the society is rigorously controlled and there is great discontent between factions as they battle for dominance. In the novel *Matched* (2010) by Ally Condie, an ideal society has been reached by not giving people the possibility of making a choice but by instead letting the government control everything. People are given food, housing, education, jobs, and marriage partners according what the government deems as fit for them. There is no room for self-expression and people’s lives are dictated to suit the needs of society, leaving them with no control over their own existence. The novel *Legend* (2011) by Marie Lu offers a dystopian view of the United States, where it has been divided into two separate countries, The Republic and The Colonies, following an ecological disaster. The Republic is a military dictatorship while The Colonies are ruled by large corporations. In both countries, people’s fates are decided based on what class they belong to and how well they perform on a single exam at a young age. Rigorous control is kept and people are given no choice over their own lives. *The Hunger Games* (2008) is in a similar vein with these novels as it shows a society that is austerely ruled by the government and where people are left powerless and unable to control their own lives.

What these novels all have in common is that power plays a central role in the structure of their dystopian world: who holds it, how it is used and what effect it has. In each novel, the main battle revolves around taking control away from the government and giving it instead to the people, thus placing them in control of their own lives.

### 2.4 The Question of Identity

The search for an identity plays a central role in young adult dystopian novels. According to Basu, this is because:

> heroes of young adult fiction – and by extension their readers – are eventually asked to consider the two great questions of adolescence: “Who am I now? And who do I want to be when I grow up?” As they do so, they inevitably embark upon a quest for identity, an apparently innocuous pursuit that lies at the very core of the genre. (19)
In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss’s identity has predominantly been shaped by the fear of hunger. This fear can, in general terms, be understood as: “The psychological attitude of individuals and also, above all, as a culturally shared reality, a collective preoccupation reflected in actions, choices and behaviour” (Montanari 115). Katniss has faced true hunger and the desperation that follows and because of that experience, she does everything possible to avoid facing it ever again. In order to survive, Katniss has had to adjust to the limited food supply on offer in her district and she is used to having to work hard in order to have enough to eat. She has learned how to live off the earth, supplementing her diet with both edible plants and wild game she hunts in the woods outside her district. As her family depends on her to provide for them, most of Katniss’s time is consumed with hunting and food acquisition. She has become so used to it that she finds it difficult to imagine doing anything else:

What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by? What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment? (Collins 79-80)

Her devotion to hunting and bringing home food has become an integral part of her identity. It is what she defines herself by. But this also places her in a difficult position. By winning the Games, Katniss can ensure her own and her family’s safety and that they will never go hungry again for the rest of their lives. But she is not certain about that possibility:

I allow myself to truly think about the possibility that I might make it home. To fame. To wealth. To my own house in Victor’s village. My mother and Prim would live there with me. No more fear of hunger. A new kind of freedom. But then . . . what? What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I’m not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me so. (Collins 378)

Katniss craves the freedom from hunger but is at the same time afraid of it. For better or for worse, hunger has made her who she is.
3. Hunger and Its Effects

The force and threat of hunger and what it can make people do in order to survive can only be fully understood by those who have faced it. The writer Elie Wiesel, who survived the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, said about hunger:

There is no romanticism in hunger, there is no beauty in hunger, no creativity in hunger. There is no aspiration in hunger. Only shame. And solitude. Hunger creates its own prison walls; it is impossible to demolish them, to avoid them, to ignore them. (1)

Hunger as a concept can be difficult to define within specific parameters as there are many factors that influence it such as class distinction, socio-economic status, occupation, access to reliable food sources and specific cultural (such as ethnicity and race) and geographical factors (such as landscape and place of living). Lewit and Kerrebrock suggest defining hunger within the wider concept of “food insecurity” in their article “Childhood Hunger” from 1997: “Food insecurity is a condition in which families or individuals are unable to afford enough adequately nutritious and safe food from socially acceptable sources for an active, healthy life” (129). As people face a lack of food they resort to various ways in order to obtain it and increase their chances of survival. Lewit and Kerrebrock discuss some of these methods:

Families or individuals may experience food insecurity in varying degrees of severity, with less severe food insecurity showing up in coping behaviors such as borrowing money for food, obtaining food from charity, or reducing the variety and quality of their diet. (129)

The obtaining of food becomes the focus of people’s existence. Food becomes their only chance of survival and the way towards leading a better life. Hunger has proven to have a wide-ranging effect on people’s lives. It can lead to a weakened immune system which increases the likelihood of people suffering from stunted growth and physical malformation, contracting and dying from mild diseases, and becoming lethargic and thus being less able to participate fully in daily life and to provide for themselves (DeRose, Messer, Millman 7-15).

Hunger is also a sign of severe injustice and powerlessness and has a great emotional impact on people. In their book World Hunger: Twelve Myths, Lappé et al. connect hunger to four human emotions in order to explain its substantial emotional
impact on people’s lives. The emotions they connect it to are: grief, as people are forced to watch those they love pass away; humiliation, as people blame themselves for their hunger; anguish as they need to make difficult choices in order to survive; and fear as they become afraid of the effects of hunger and whether they will survive (3). Lappé et al. also state:

When have we experienced any of these emotions ourselves? Hasn’t it been when we have felt out of control of our lives – powerless to protect ourselves and those we love? Hunger has thus become for us all the ultimate symbol for powerlessness. (3)

This can all be well applied to *The Hunger Games*. In the poorer districts of Panem, people are in a vulnerable position. They see first-hand the devastating effects of hunger on their fellow citizens and thus, the threat is ever-present in their lives. Their world starts revolving around the need to avoid starvation. But since they are poor, they are at an even greater risk of becoming hungry. Thus, the threat starts dictating their lives as they become focused on avoiding it. This is what the government in the Capitol capitalizes on. Hunger and food become control mechanisms to keep people weak and powerless and to show them that the government holds all the power.
4. Economic, Social, Cultural and Educational Dominance

As was previously stated, any discussion about power relationship within the novel — who is the ruler, who is the subject and how power is maintained — can be analysed from a Marxist viewpoint. In *The Hunger Games*, hunger plays a key role in preserving the power structure. Looking at what role the economic structure of Panem plays in upholding the existing power structure, how it is reflected in the varying food culture between the districts, and the complex relationship between the consumer and the worker reveals a nuanced and intricate societal organization that works for the benefit of only a few but to the detriment of many.

4.1 Economy: The Base and the Superstructure

According to traditional Marxism, society in its simplest form consists of:

- the *base* (the material means of production, distribution, and exchange) and a *superstructure*, which is the ‘cultural’ world of ideas, art, religion, law and so on.

... [the superstructure is] ‘determined’ (or shaped) by the nature of the economic base. (Barry 151-152)

The reason for the base affecting the superstructure is that “the production of the material preconditions for human life – food, shelter, clothing, and so on – takes analytical or logical priority over more secondary aspects of social life like politics, law, art and ideology” (Law 20). This belief is known as economic determinism. The societal structure in Panem works according to this principle with the districts serving as the base and the Capitol as the superstructure. Panem is divided into 12 districts which are each dedicated to a specific kind of industry — District 1 (luxury items), 2 (masonry), 3 (technology), 4 (fishing), 5 (electricity), 6 (transportation), 7 (lumber), 8 (textiles), 9 (grain), 10 (livestock), 11 (agriculture) and 12 (coal mining) — with the Capitol serving as the centre of power. It is the government that controls the superstructure and the base as it dictates what kind of industry each district is to focus on and how much it should produce and it decrees the laws and ideology of the society as well. However, the culture has also developed individually within in each district to reflect its focus of production. The culture of Panem has thus developed as interplay between the government and the districts. This cultural difference is for example reflected in their food production.
4.2 Food as a reflection of culture and societal conditions

According to Montanari, food is culture, because when it is produced, prepared and
eaten, man “chooses his own food, according to criteria linked either to the economic
and nutritional dimensions of the gesture or to the symbolic values with which food
itself is invested” (xi-xii). Thus, what kind of food people eat reflects their own society.
In *The Hunger Games*, the variation in food culture between District 12 and the Capitol
reflects not only their different values but also where the centre of power lies within
Panem. In District 12, people cannot afford to be choosy about what kind of food they
eat. For them, the most important thing is that they eat, not what they eat. Eating is not a
matter of enjoying but a matter of surviving. They therefore eat food such as squirrel,
katniss tubes (a plant), dandelion salad, mint leaves, wild dog and pine. They even
resort to eating food such as: “Greasy-Sae’s concoction of mice meat, pig entrails, and
tree bark – a winter speciality” (Collins 54). The food is simple and crude. Anything
that can possibly be digested is eaten as there is never enough food. Katniss is no
stranger to this; she is used to living on a limited diet and never getting all the food she
needs. The situation is very different in the Capitol. There, food is a matter of delicacy,
richness and abundance and there is always enough of it.

This diversity in food culture is reflected in the different ways in which Katniss
describes the food in District 12 and the Capitol. When she talks about the food of her
home, the descriptions are plain and sparse, reflecting the simplicity of their diet: “We
drink milk from Prim’s goat, Lady, and eat the rough bread from the tesserae grain”
(Collins 19). However, once Katniss encounters the lavishness of the Capitol food, she
starts describing what is offered in great detail, noting every dish:

> While they make small talk, I concentrate on the meal. Mushroom soup, bitter
> greens with tomatoes the size of peas, rare roast beef sliced as thin as paper,
> noodles in green sauce, cheese that melts on your tongue served with blue
> grapes. (Collins 93)

She seems in awe of the variety of foods she is presented with and how food is not
regarded merely as a means of survival but instead as a delicacy, something to be
enjoyed. For the first time, she has the freedom to choose what kind of food she wants
to eat. Through Katniss’s descriptions, the culture of the Capitol society is revealed; a
culture where food is in such abundance and variety, that it has been turned into a
presentation, a work of art. As art is a part of the ideology of the superstructure this becomes a reflection of the Capitol’s values. The public of the Capitol is safe from the threat of hunger and does not need to worry about where their next meal will be coming from, or even if they’ll be having it. The people of District 12 however do not have this privilege.

4.3 Consumerism versus Keeping Alive
Panem as a country has a well-defined basis of economy. On the surface it looks like an ideal system wherein things are well controlled and organized and sufficient food and products are produced for all the people to live well. But the fact is that the vast majority of the production is meant for the Capitol. In other words, the Capitol outsources the production of what its residents need, thereby making others do the work for them. As an example of this, District 1 is solely dedicated to producing luxury items for the Capitol. What this has led to is that the majority of the population, the workers, have been relegated to the position of being nothing but cheap labour. What this results in, according to Karl Marx’s beliefs, is that the workers become alienated from their work and “de-skilled” as they perform menial and repetitive tasks of “whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp” (Barry 151). With this, the workers undergo the process of reification in which they lose their humanity so to speak as they become thought of only as a part of the labour force instead of as people (Barry 151). As Katniss describes it:

Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country has its advantages. Such as being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas. (Collins 245)

As a part of the reification process, it is also made sure that the workers are not “systematically trained in the ideology of consumerism” (Spivak 275). It is guaranteed that they do not have the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their toil:

“I’d have thought that, in District Eleven, you’d have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,” I say.

Rue’s eyes widen. “Oh no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.”

“They arrest you or something?” I ask.

“They whip you and make everyone else watch,” says Rue. “The mayor’s
very strict about it”.
I can tell by her expression that it’s not that uncommon an occurrence.
(Collins 245)

With this, the workers are kept outside of the consumer culture that dominates the Capitol and the relationship between the Capitol and the districts becomes one where the consumer holds all the power and the worker is left powerless.

4.4 The Complex Bliss of Ignorance

Ignorance plays a central role in establishing the consumer culture as the purchaser turns a blind eye to the suffering of the person that produced the item that fills his need. In *The Hunger Games*, this ignorance is revealed in how the people in the Capitol use food. At a pivotal time after Katniss and Peeta have won the Games, they are lifted into an aircraft where Peeta is instantly operated on while Katniss screams for him in desperation:

Everyone ignores me except for some Capitol attendant who appears behind me and offers me a beverage. I slump down on the floor, my face against the door, staring uncomprehendingly at the crystal glass in my hand. Icy cold, filled with orange juice, a straw with a frilly white collar. How wrong it looks in my bloody, filthy hand with its dirt-caked nails and scars. My mouth waters at the smell, but I place it carefully on the floor, not trusting anything so clean and pretty. (Collins 421-422)

What this displays is the significant lack of understanding the people in the Capitol have of the seriousness of the Games and the lives and suffering of other people. In this instance, it is their treatment of food and how they use it that reveals an important part of the psychology of their society — the ignorance towards the needs of others extends beyond their role as workers to their humanity.

The people in the Capitol also have little knowledge of the effects of starvation and the government is intent upon keeping them oblivious. When the Games end, Katniss is both weak and starving and it shows on her body. But when she has been safely transferred out of the arena, the process begins of erasing all the marks of her suffering and hunger: “There’s usually a lag of a few days between the end of the competition and the presentation of the victor so that they can put the starving, wounded
mess of a person back together” (Collins 425). The process even goes as far as to use her clothes to mask her hungered appearance:

I immediately notice the padding over my breasts adding curves that hunger has stolen from my body. My hands go to my chest and I frown.

“I know,” says Cinna before I can object. “But the Gamemakers wanted to alter you surgically. Haymitch had a huge fight with them over it. This was the compromise.” (Collins 430)

When the majority of the public is in a place of powerlessness and those who are in a place of power in the Capitol and the richer districts do not know the real extent of the troubles in their society and thus do not reach out to help their fellow citizens, civil resistance is only a distant possibility. This is exactly what the government wants. An interesting juxtaposition also happens under these circumstances. As the truth is hidden away from people and they are kept from knowing what is truly going on in their own world, they are kept away from making changes to their own society. The status quo is kept and, in a way, everyone is put in a place of powerlessness by the government in the Capitol.
5. Food as a Control Mechanism

In the novel, The Hunger Games, power is taken away from the public and instead put into the hands of only a few that are able to yield it as they please. As the public is left without any means of asserting control over their own lives and society, they inevitably fall victims to the whims and desires of their rulers, whatever they may be. In the novel, power is established over people’s lives in many ways but in particular by limiting their access to food sources, thereby making it difficult for them to provide enough food for themselves. As people face the constant threat of hunger and the need to survive, they become focused on food acquisition with little room for anything else. Life becomes a matter of desperate survival and people are left weak as they are never able to get enough food:

Starvation is not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn’t seen the victims? Old people who can’t work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines. Straggling through the streets. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or lying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and the Peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It’s always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one. (Collins 33-34)

According to Marxist beliefs, progress comes about “through the struggle for power between different social classes” (Barry 151). In Panem, societal advancement would be reached through a struggle between the people of the districts and the government. But since it is to the Capitol’s advantage to keep the existing societal structure in place, they arrange things in such a way that it becomes nigh impossible for people to rise against them. Hunger and the need for food become rigorous control mechanisms in order to keep the status quo.

5.1 The Tesserae System and Class Distinction

One control mechanism the government of Panem uses is the tesserae system. While the system looks beneficial on the surface, it is structured in such a way that the leverage is given to the rich while the poor are disadvantaged. Generally, within the tribute system for the Hunger Games, a child’s name is entered once the child is twelve, two times when the child is thirteen and so on until the child is eighteen when its name is entered
seven times. But as Katniss explains:

There is a catch. Say you are poor and starving as we were. You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae. Each tessera is worth a meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for each of your family members as well. So, at the age of twelve, I had my name entered four times. Once because I had to, and three times for tesserae for grain and oil for myself, Prim and my mother. In fact, every year I have needed to do this. And the entries are cumulative. So now, at the age of sixteen, my name will be in the reaping twenty times. (Collins 15-16)

A comparison can be made between the tesserae system and the American food stamp system known as SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. In the SNAP program, economically deprived families and individuals are given food stamps by the government in order to help them buy food for themselves. This system helps alleviate poverty and hinders food insecurity and hunger. It benefits the poor and they do not pay a price for using it (SNAP and Public Health 1). The tesserae system is the exact opposite. As the poor are forced to sign up for tesserae in order to live, the likelihood of them being chosen as a tribute for the Games increases. So, a desperate measure they take to survive, in turn increases their chance of dying. It is a vicious cycle with little chance of escape: only meagre luck.

The tesserae system also serves another function. While District 12 is the poorest district in Panem, there is still class distinction within it. Katniss belongs to the poorest class which lives in a neighbourhood called The Seam. There, people must scrounge for food every day and starvation is common. People who do not work as coal miners in the district are generally better off and can afford having food on their table. Their children are not forced to take out tesserae like the children from poorer families. The situation is similar within the other underprivileged districts of Panem. As a result of this difference, anger is bred within the districts themselves between those that are able to feed themselves and those who struggle. This is a clever ploy by the government. Because of the effects of the tesserae system and the sharp class distinction, discontent is bred between people which in turn keeps them from uniting and staging a rebellion:

The tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally
count on supper; and thereby ensure we will never trust one another. “It’s to the Capitol’s advantage to have us divided among ourselves,” (Collins 16)

5.2 The Role of Wealth

In Panem, there is a sharp distinction based on wealth between the districts. The Capitol, Districts 1, 2, and 4 are economically well off while the rest of the districts are economically deprived. While the districts depend on each other for material wealth, the relationship between them is unequal because the rich class dominates (Johnston and Dolowitz 133). What this has resulted in is the fact that there is a great difference between the tributes from the richer districts and those from the poorer districts. Katniss notes this difference when she first sees the rest of the tributes up-close:

It’s the first time we’ve been assembled, on level ground, in simple clothes. My heart sinks. Almost all of the boys and at least half of the girls are bigger than I am, even though many of the tributes have never been fed properly. You can see it in their bones, their skin, the hollow look in their eyes . . . The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier districts, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. The tributes from 1, 2 and 4 traditionally have this look about them. It’s technically against the rules to train tributes before they reach the Capitol, but it happens every year. In District 12, we call them the Career Tributes, or just the Careers. And like as not, the winner will be one of them. (Collins 115)

For the Career Tributes, competing in the Games is a great honour but for the rest of the tributes, it is a sure death sentence. In this instance, the difference in access to food marks the line between life and death: “In District 12, the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse” (Collins 27).

This is another way in which the Capitol holds the power and uses it to control people. By ensuring that there is a physical difference between the tributes, the Capitol also ensures that the results are, for the most part, predetermined as the tributes from Districts 1, 2 and 4 are far likelier to win. The people in the other districts lose hope that someone from their own district may win the Games. Thus, the Games remind them of their own hopeless position in society and that they are powerless against the government.
The award for winning the Games also reflects this. In light of the fact that the majority of the public is poor and starving, the award price becomes painfully ironic:

The last tribute alive receives a life of ease back home, and their district will be showered with prizes, largely consisting of food. All year, the Capitol will show the winning district gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation. (Collins 22)

As the Career Tributes are far likelier to win, the advantage is once and again given to those well-off. Those who suffer no lack of food receive the price they do not need while those who truly need it are left suffering.

5.3 A Shift in Power

During the Games, an interesting power shift happens between the Career Tributes and the others that can be looked from the viewpoint of narratology, more specifically using Aristotle’s terms of hamartia (sin), anagnorisis (point in the narrative where the protagonist realizes the truth) and peripeteia (reversal of fortune) (Barry 216). The hamartia occurs when after the Games have started, the Career Tributes take over the Cornucopia (horn of plenty) and ration all the food from there for themselves. In this case, the hamartia is not only their sin of keeping the food away from the others but also their error in judgement. They continue to be well fed while the other tributes must live off the ground and with next to no food. If the other tributes do not know how to do so, this is a sure death sentence for them. Thus, the Career tributes control the food source and it becomes a display of their power over the other tributes.

The anagnorisis occurs when Katniss realizes that if she destroys the Cornucopia, the Career Tributes will be left without any food. As they have always been used to having enough to eat, they do not know how to live off the ground. The tributes from the other districts on the other hand would know how to do so. Having grown up in hunger and poverty suddenly becomes an advantage for them. The peripeteia follows when Katniss destroys the food supply by making it blow up. At this point, the switch in power happens. The Career Tributes lose the advantage and control they had and are instead on more equal ground with the other tributes, perhaps for the first time in their lives.
5.4 Food as an Instigator for Violence

The Hunger Games are a media spectacle, a competition, of which the displaying of violence is an indispensable part. It has become a vital factor of what keeps the Games going; it is what the audience craves. According to Miller, violence sells because:

commercialization and consumerism of violence . . . has escalated to a point that it has become a commodity for sale . . . it is something they [the viewer] can relate to; a desire is created, which can escalate to an insatiable craving. (90)

The government of Panem capitalizes on this need of the audience and uses the control they have over the water supply in the arena to satisfy it. The only constant source of water in the arena is a lake close to the Cornucopia, the rest are small streams that can be drained by the Gamemakers when it suits them. Water is paramount to the survival of the tributes because, if they do not drink, they will quickly suffer the severe effects of dehydration and a painful death. However, in order to have a chance of remaining alive, the tributes scatter away from the Cornucopia as soon as possible after the Games begins and try to make it on their own. The further apart they are, the less likely they are to run into each other and having to kill in order to survive. They can prolong the inevitable.

However, the audience has no interest in watching individual teenagers trying to survive in nature; the Games become a drag if there is no action, no killing going on. But, the Gamemakers have an answer to that. By controlling all the water supplies in the arena, they can manipulate the Game so that if they are getting dull, they can drain all water sources. Then all the tributes are driven to the lake in search of water and the Games become exciting once more as they fight to kill each other in order to have a chance of making it: “You’re right. They’re driving us to the lake,’ I say. Where they’re guaranteed a bloody fight to the death with nothing to block their view” (Collins 397).

This is devised as a very exciting part of the Games and the killings are both brutal and merciless. Just like with the gladiatorial games in ancient Rome, murder is used to keep the people entertained and the Games thrilling. What this represents is the government’s use of food as a control mechanism in its most appalling form. Desperate to get water, the tributes resort to murdering each other in order to survive and thus, food becomes the instigator for horrific violence. All this is done in order to remind people of who is in control and to show them that they are powerless.
Conclusion
Using Marxist literary analysis to examine the theme of power and how it is reflected in the novel’s handling of the issue of hunger in *The Hunger Games*, reveals that the novel’s treatment of the subject is both multi-layered and rich. Collins approaches the theme from multiple angles, finding firm ground in Greek mythology and Roman society and utilizing the possibilities of genre of dystopian fiction for social criticism. The theme is developed and elaborated on as it is related to the economic structure of Panem, the complex relationship between the consumer and the worker, class distinction and the question of wealth, the varying food culture and what it reveals about the ideology of the people and the use of food as a direct control mechanism in order to uphold the existing societal structure of Panem. The character of Katniss also provides a vital part of the novel’s social criticism with her unique perspective and wry commentary on the society of Panem. Because of the novel’s detailed and elaborate treatment of the theme in a complex dystopian world, it makes for a thought-provoking and penetrating read. It is not only a novel but also a social criticism. And in that dual purpose lies the novel’s greatest strength.
Works Cited


