



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

A Comedy for the Rich, a Tragedy for the Poor

Political Satire in Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games

B.A. Essay

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May 2014

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Abstract

In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), the fictional future state of Panem has, for at least three quarters of a century, used the annual Hunger Games as a control mechanism to maintain the uneven power balance between the rich and the poor. The country's history, for which Collins draws on a range of real-life historical sources, has proved this to be a pervasive method for the totalitarian regime to monitor and diminish its masses as well as to enforce Panem's dictatorship status.

This essay is a literary analysis of Collins's young adult novel, exploring social criticism as it is presented by the author and examining the faults of society through the relationship between democratic deficit and the common people in a totalitarian state. Offering Marxist and post-colonialist perspectives of *The Hunger Games*, the essay brings forward the main arguments concerning the true horrors of totalitarianism by means of political satire and effective polemic. It analyses and evaluates the main character's role in the social criticism through the eyes of the narrator and heroine, Katniss Everdeen, thus raising questions about the injustice forced on the poor through oppression and violence. Finally, the essay investigates the theme of suffering as entertainment from the point of view of the Capitol, by which the Hunger Games tributes are taught to embrace the schadenfreude aspect of the show. In order to cast a light upon these matters, Collins ensures that *The Hunger Games* transcends its status as a young adult novel with an impressive and compelling social message that further exerts the importance of democracy and the full adherence of human rights.

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Introduction

“Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Gamemaker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second” (212). So describes Suzanne Collins one of the many manifestations of totalitarianism in her science fiction novel *The Hunger Games* (2008). Totalitarianism, which is often described as a more extreme version of its counterpart, authoritarianism, was the subject of many science fiction novels written in the 20th century. Numerous writers have employed the element of totalitarianism in their writings, most notably George Orwell and Aldous Huxley in their dystopian classics *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Brave New World* (1931). In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins takes the totalitarian element to a new level by placing it in a world created for young adults. In this noteworthy novel, Collins depicts the dangers of totalitarianism and maintains that commoners of an undemocratic state are mere puppets in a setting which leaves them vulnerable and at the complete mercy of the ruling class.

The Hunger Games is the first novel in a trilogy and was published in 2008 by Scholastic Press. It has since been translated into 26 languages and sold in 38 countries (Zeldin-O’Neill). A film adaptation was released in 2012, further increasing the popularity of the trilogy and making Collins the best-selling Kindle author of all time (Amazon). The plot of the novel takes place in two very different worlds: in the destitute, dystopian world of District 12—home to the novel’s narrator, main character, and heroine, Katniss Everdeen—and the districts’ administrative unit, the utopian Capitol. The book’s major themes, the gap between the rich and the poor and suffering for the entertainment of others, allow Collins to explore the shortcomings of a society that propagates violence and maintains the poverty of its citizens.

The purpose of the following essay is to examine the elements Suzanne Collins uses to criticize the faults of an undemocratic society. I will explore totalitarianism as a political system by means of satire and discuss the consequences of inequality within a state led by an unchecked government. The first chapter is dedicated to Collins’s social criticism by way of setting and characterization. The second and third chapters represent Collins’s depiction of political satire by way of the undemocratic state of Panem and the annual Hunger Games as a spectacle of public humiliation and complete submission.

I will be looking at the text from a Marxist point of view to show how Collins treats the contradictions between the proletariat's labored production and the bourgeoisie's private profit from said labor. I will also connect the subject matters and themes of Collins's work to post-colonialist elements such as ideology and hegemony. I rely on secondary sources about literary theory (e.g. Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*) as well as dystopian novels set in totalitarian regimes.

Chapter I: Social Criticism through Setting and Characterization

From the very first chapter, Suzanne Collins sets the stage and tone for her novel by introducing the state of Panem. The setting of *The Hunger Games* is a post-apocalyptic universe that has emerged from the ashes of what we presently know as North America. The United States and Canada are no more and these once-free nations have become Panem, a country that stretches from the Appalachian Mountains in the East to the Rocky Mountains in the West. Through the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, we learn that rising sea levels have resulted in large areas of land being flooded as a consequence of global warming. Hence, the size of Panem is not as large as modern-day North America.

The rest of Panem's geography is left to the reader's imagination; however, Collins goes into more detail to describe the country's political structure. In Panem, the powers that be reside in the Capitol, a wealthy city in the Rocky Mountains and the seat of the nation's power. Seventy-four years before *The Hunger Games* is set, the area outside of the city was divided between thirteen separate districts. In a great rebellion, which Collins calls the Dark Days, the districts waged war against the Capitol. District 13, a major belligerent in the rebellion, was obliterated and all but wiped off of the world map, leaving twelve districts under the domination and oppression of the Capitol. In this future world of Panem, each of the now-twelve districts is responsible for providing specialized goods for the Capitol, thus fueling its wealth and ensuring its superior status. Without the forced labor of the districts, the Capitol would not receive their desired resources and would therefore cease to exist in its ongoing form, its citizens left without a single clue as to how to survive. The district workers, on the other hand, receive no benefits of their drudgery, and so their dismal situation will never earn them their fair share of the nation's bounty.

Just as Collins sets her novel in a future North America, she also employs scenes and scenarios from the American colonial period. In this way, the living conditions maintained by the Capitol in the once-thirteen districts recall those of the Thirteen Colonies of North America. By the time the Seven Years' War had come to an end in 1763, Great Britain had monopolized much of the trading and commerce in North America for its very own prosperity. The colonies were ordered to pay taxes directly to the British Empire, and with time and perseverance their struggle and "experience had slowly formed a people who felt themselves separate and distinct" from their ruler

(McKay 614, 662-663). In comparison, the Capitol in Collins's universe has its antecedent in the British Empire; both are distant, tyrannical world powers willing and able to do anything to further increase their affluence.

Through this parallel between the two corrupt empires, Collins proposes an analogy between the past and the unwritten future. The American colonists of the 17th and 18th centuries were forced to make a living of what little the British Empire did not strictly ration for its own benefit. For decades they struggled under the tyranny and restrictions of the British. Similarly, the inhabitants of the colorless and gloomy districts of Panem wage a never-ending battle with poverty and boundless misery. This is especially true for District 12, the poorest of the districts, where, according to Katniss, "you can starve to death in safety" (Collins 6-7). The victims are mostly children from large families and elderly people who are unable to work anymore. In District 12, famine is in fact such a widespread occurrence that achieving old age is considered a true accomplishment. Still, despite the fact that most of those who die actually starve to death, starvation is never the official cause of death. "It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one" (Collins 34).

Collins presents the staggering contrast between the rich and the poor with lush descriptions of the urban environment in Panem. From Katniss's viewpoint, upon reading about all the things she finds strange and unfamiliar about the Capitol's ways, the reader is able to empathize with the district citizens by realizing the extreme social class divisions between the rich and the poor. Upon their arrival to the Capitol, Katniss and Peeta Mellark, her male counterpart in the Games, are stunned by the city's "grandeur" and "magnificence," the buildings as "glistening" outside as they are inside and the paved streets and the shiny cars just two of the things that neither of them has seen with their own eyes (Collins 72). Katniss, for one, has also never taken a shower in her life, and her quarters in the Training Center are larger than her entire house back home in District 12. With an equal amount of curiosity and scorn, she wonders what it would be like to be born and raised in this technological, thing-oriented society "where food appears at the press of a button" (Collins 79).

Collins depicts the hierarchical disparity between the upper and lower classes not only through setting and structure but also through characterization and character development. Katniss Everdeen is a resourceful and stubborn sixteen-year-old girl. For five years she has been taking care of her mother, who remains unnamed, and her

younger sister Primrose, who is usually referred to as Prim. Katniss's area of District 12, informally known as the Seam, is also the poorest. As there is little nourishment to be had for the inhabitants of the Seam, Katniss, whose father taught her how to hunt with a bow, has been putting food on her family's table ever since her father was killed in a mine explosion five years earlier. Katniss's mother, having fallen into a severe state of depression, shows no signs of her elder daughter's survival instincts and has since her husband's death given up on taking care of her daughters. Ultimately, her mother's "dead eyes" and Prim's "hollow cheeks and cracked lips" drive Katniss to desperation, preventing her from showing up at the house with her "hands empty of any hope" (Collins 34).

Since her father's passing, Katniss has developed a strong sense of stoicism, which works in her favor as she grows up in the poorest quarter of the poorest district in Panem. Pressured to provide for her family since childhood, she has mastered the art of hunting for bare survival at the expense of her feelings and learned that lamenting the injustice of life in the Seam "doesn't change anything," nor does it "make things fair" or "fill our stomachs," and so she aims to focus on other, more helpful things (Collins 17). Taking one day at a time, Katniss now thrives on taking care of people by putting their well-being before her own.

Katniss's mask of indifference also becomes one of her greatest assets in the Games, during which she is able to withhold her emotions for the sake of finding inner strength. As every event related to the Games is recorded and televised, she resolves to do her utmost to maintain her pride and compassion while trying to survive the brutality of the Games. This is where Katniss turns her stoicism to her advantage. Keeping your humanity and staying alive while battling poverty and austerity requires a great strength of character and spirit. When Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place in the 74th annual Hunger Games, Prim's objections lead Katniss to rein in her emotions, because any sign of weakness will downplay what little advantage she has over the other tributes. "When they televise the replay of the reappings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I'll be marked as an easy target. A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction" (Collins 27-28). Ironically, one of the greater plot twists in the story, when Peeta announces on live television that he has been in love with Katniss for years, turns out to be the first thing that makes her, in fact, feel like a true weakling.

Katniss's defiant and independent nature is strong as manifested by her refusal to reveal her true character to most everyone she knows. The only person with whom Katniss can really be herself is her hunting partner and best friend, Gale Hawthorne. As depicted in the novel's first chapter, he is also the only one who can make her vulnerable. Although Gale alone holds this power over Katniss, her naked display of emotions and despair are no signs of weakness. While her distinctive perseverance and ingenuity may seem to make up the substance in her character, her true strength comes in the form of vulnerability, a susceptible quality which she has a hard time acknowledging. With Gale, she finds the courage to break down her emotional armor from time to time, and it is through this representation of Katniss that the reader comes to identify with her. Collins insists that Katniss is more than a fighter and a hunter "in a sort of brave way" and, from this point onward, her empathy can only amplify her character's wholesome image (Collins 147).

As Katniss's involvement in the Games becomes the focal point of the story, the reader notes a change in her character. In the beginning of the novel, Katniss feels and shows nothing but contempt and disgust towards the "artificial candy Capitol" (Collins 126). The city's elite citizens form a group of people who spend their money on the tributes through gambling, i.e. providing necessities for them in the arena. Of course, Katniss realizes that she has a better chance of surviving the Games if she performs to her greatest potential during training and shows off her charisma in the live interviews before the Games. Thus, the opportunity to ever return to her district is, for the better part, in the hands of the gambling sponsors. However, despite the fact that her life is in part dependent upon complete strangers and their money, Katniss is never tempted to side with the Capitol. Instead, as the novel progresses, she becomes afraid of losing her identity in the fast-paced, technical, and hedonistic world of the Capitol and struggles to hold on to her humanitarian side while fighting in an event that calls for the emergence of inhumane characteristics. "I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not" (Collins 450). Later, however, with her growing connection with Peeta, Katniss's stoic demeanor begins to break, piece by piece, no longer masking her feelings. A large part of her journey through the frenzy that is the Hunger Games is learning to embrace her emotions through progress and change.

Chapter II: The Dangers of Undemocratic Regimes

The societal and political image of Panem and its citizens presented in *The Hunger Games* delivers the idea that the poor have no say in decisions that affect their daily lives. In Suzanne Collins's novel, the omnipotent and all-powerful Capitol administers its twelve outlying districts with a heavy hand, thus paralyzing them against the power of dictatorship and installing in them a constant fear of the state.

The society described in *The Hunger Games* is a degenerate, totalitarian world in which conflict and dissidence have been eradicated in exchange for order and discipline. The state sustains a crooked yet elaborate ideology, "a system of values, beliefs, or ideas" that are "taken for granted as natural or inherently true," namely a practice of concurrence with the Capitol (Mitchell). In the novel, the nation of Panem has been under the absolute tyranny of President Coriolanus Snow, a ruthless, despotic dictator, for at least a quarter of a century and is "marked by certain misery such that everyone is an unhappy slave to the state" (Tamny). Formerly, before the events of the Dark Days, Panem was a land of prosperity and plenty. In the war, the districts fought for individuality and freedom, much to the Capitol's dismay as this rebellious act stood as a threat to the city's image. As a result, the ruling powers resolved that any sort of uprising pursuant to the rebellion must never happen again. Consequently, the Hunger Games were created with the Treaty of Treason as an attempt to keep the peace as well as an eternal reminder of the Capitol's absolute powers, declaring that only by punishing the districts can the Capitol maintain order. Seventy-four years later, the Capitol, led and administered by President Snow, still maintains propaganda about the harm and evil of insurgence. Any adversity or propensity to rebel against the state is forbidden and will lead to retribution in one form or another. Ostensibly, Collins suggests, the highest power forges its way through the walls of defiance with absolute violence.

The Hunger Games establishes that totalitarian regimes are manipulative devices, willing and able to treat its citizens as if they are puppets in a play, "the people there being anonymous masses, rather than individuals" (Barry 193-194). Through the Treaty of Treason, Collins emphasizes the regime's immeasurable cruelty against its lesser citizens. The annual Hunger Games are a warlike televised tournament in which twenty-four children, two from each of the twelve districts, are forced to fight to the

death until only one remains as victor. In a yearly drawing called the reaping, all district children between the ages of twelve and eighteen must enter their names into a glass ball and thus they become eligible as tributes in the Games. Once in the arena, no one is safe, anyone can be killed, and the contenders must do whatever it takes to survive. Winning bestows the victor with fame among the citizens of Panem, a more bearable life for his or her family back home, and a lifelong duty of mentoring future tributes of the respective district. Losing brings about pain, torment, and the inevitable outcome of death for ninety-five percent of the tributes. This act of brutality and torment at the hands of the Capitol is authenticated by Katniss, who verifies that “taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch [...] is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy” (Collins 22). Katniss even stresses that the arena makes her feel more helpless and impotent than she has ever felt before. Her disaffection is then corroborated by Peeta who worries that his involvement with the Capitol will change him and hopes to find a way to establish that he is “more than just a piece in their Games” (Collins 172).

Collins satirizes the dystopian fate of humanity through the socioeconomic subjugation of the districts and the exploitation and sacrifice of innocent children. To illustrate this message, Collins takes advantage of the many different aspects of the word tribute. As the Capitol views the tributes’ competing in the Games as a sign of appeasement and willingness to cooperate in exchange for peace, Collins utilizes the word in its traditional sense, i.e. as an homage or mark of respect. Similarly, ‘tribute’ can be interpreted as the districts’ obligation to elevate and glorify the worth and virtue of the Capitol. Lastly, Collins makes use of the historical meaning of the word, which, in this case, is undoubtedly the most significant representation, indicating a “payment made periodically” to the Capitol in acknowledgement of submission, “especially as a sign of dependence” (“Tribute”). For the people in the districts who are perpetually subjected to abuse and manipulation at the hands of their leader, it is not a question of ‘if’ but a question of ‘when,’ and so the Hunger Games continue to stand as a threat of imminent terror and violence to the poor.

In like manner, the application of the word reaping is laced with irony and polemic. Collins implies that, to the Capitol citizens, the offering up of children tributes from the districts is chiefly a payment of debt. Accordingly, the rich, who have nothing to lose, see the reaping and the subsequent Hunger Games as the Capitol’s annual

harvest of produce. In contrast, the poor people of District 12, having lost over hundred-and-forty children to the Games, cannot afford to lose any more pieces of their community. Despite being the future pillars of society, their children are deprived of any chance at a normal life. This yearly sacrifice is one of the key motifs in the novel, as keeping at bay the population of the poorer societies will certainly guarantee the Capitol's dominance and its capability to carry on the coercion of the districts.

As a primitive lottery system, the procedure of the reaping is in many ways reminiscent of that employed in Shirley Jackson's short story *The Lottery*. Both Collins and Jackson set their rituals up as annual, traditional ceremonies that end in slaughter, through which both practices reveal the severe hazards of blindly holding on to customs. The district citizens subjected to the reapings are, of course, fully conscious of the inequity brought about by sending innocent children to virtual slaughter. In spite of the constant threat of duress placed upon the districts, there is never complete acquiescence to the drawings. This is made evident when Prim's name is reaped from the glass ball and the crowd begins "murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair," yet "there's nothing you can do" (Collins 26 and 22). This, in turn, corresponds to the "general sigh" of relief that passed through the residents of the village in *The Lottery* upon learning that the chosen victim is not a little boy (Jackson 291). All the same, the oldest character in *The Lottery*, Old Man Warner, justifies the bloodshed by stating that "there's always been a lottery" and therefore sees no reason as to why it should suddenly cease to exist (Jackson 288). In this way, both Jackson's lottery and Collins's reaping prevail as invidious deciders of who will be dispatched and who will be spared for another year.

The art of survival rightfully stands as the first and foremost theme of *The Hunger Games*. While a given commodity for the richer citizens, the sole act of trying to stay alive is more often than not the poor people's main ordeal. For example, in the Seam in District 12, there is no hot water unless boiled, and electricity is only available a few hours a day. "A plump person is envied because they aren't scraping by like the majority of us" (Collins 151). These destitute and starving people can choose to have their names entered into the reaping ball additional times in exchange for tesserae, a yearly supply of grain and oil for one person. However, in return, their chances of being drawn are very high compared to those who live outside of the Seam. Appropriately, the reaping system proves to be highly discriminatory, invariably hitting the poor in the

worst way possible and reminding the reader that even the poor stand divided. Through Katniss's musings on what Gale thinks of the Capitol, Collins argues that tokens such as tesserae are yet another device to uphold agony and despair in the minds of the poor, "a way to plant hatred" between the thoroughly deprived and the middle class who can regularly make ends meet (Collins 16). To such a degree, it is "to the Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves" (Collins 16).

The Capitol elite read as the bourgeoisie in contrast to the poverty-stricken proletariat of the districts. Collins turns the attention of the reader from her fictional universe and onto the society we know and live in today. As the Capitol citizens in the ruling city of Panem are both rich and free, they are completely unfamiliar with the concepts of struggle and fear. For all of their lives, they never have to see their own names placed in the reaping balls. Their children's lives are never at risk as payment for a past rebellion. Despite their advantage over the district citizens, they are presented as obtuse as well as completely blind to the famine and hardship that prevails outside of the excessively wealthy Capitol. Furthermore, they seem oblivious to the Capitol's oppression and manipulation of the poor people of the districts, who are powerless against the empire's might. By gaining the largest share of the resources provided by the districts, the rich never need to lift a finger in their lives. Additionally, "so many of Capitol citizens rise late," which further suggests that the majority of them do not work at all (Collins 167). Their main concern lies with their luxurious standard of living and the lack of responsibility that comes with enjoying their lives to the fullest.

In this sense, Panem operates as a parallel to inverted totalitarianism, a term established by contemporary political philosopher Sheldon Wolin in his 2003 article of the same name. The Capitol, an "ideologically driven party," maintains a system in which the wealthy dominate the poor with their financial superiority and "the dwarfing of the citizenry" is a common practice in all twelve districts (Wolin). Even more unsettling is the Capitol's strategy of anti-democracy, what with its prohibition of communication between districts and the citizens' complete lack of participation in the development of laws. As long as the Capitol is present as Panem's seat of government and competent enough to exercise its powers, the district citizens will continue to be undermined by their major.

Panem also reads as a parody of modern-day consumerist culture, in which, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "machines and computers, profit motives and

property rights are considered more important than people” (M. King). The behavioral patterns and attitudes of the Capitol citizens at first appear strange and grotesque. However, as the reader becomes familiar with the Capitol’s ways, the elements and descriptions put forward by Collins reason that Panem is a clear and extreme version of contemporary societies that are driven by economic power and a fondness for all things material. This image of sensational consumerism allows Collins to juxtapose *The Hunger Games* with present-day economies in developed and highly developed countries. The Games themselves serve as a parable of modern elections in which candidates, along with their campaign groups and representatives, become engulfed by the unethical, malicious world of politics. “Survival is harrowing, and hate is unleashed as would never exist in normal life” (Tucker 59-60). Understanding that only one can win, the candidates must meet and battle out their differences until a single one prevails.

To preserve the relatively peaceful state of affairs in the districts, the regime of the corrupt police state of Panem exercises the hegemony that the Capitol’s beliefs and “interests are the interests of all, often not only through means of economic and political control but more subtly through the control of education and media” (Mitchell). Collins develops this indoctrination by way of Katniss, whose defiance against the Capitol grows as the story darkens and terrifies with every page. The reader learns that the children of District 12 receive education as programmed and ordered by the Capitol in the form of reading, math, and instruction on coal-related matters, as coal is District 12’s sanctioned responsibility to the Capitol. Each week, however, the children learn about the history of Panem—or at least what they are told is the regime’s true chronicle of events. By indicating a sort of memory hole, Katniss senses that “there must be more than they’re telling us” (Collins 50).

Collins actively uses the head of state’s character traits to account for the unmerciful ruling of Panem. President Coriolanus Snow, the trilogy’s main antagonist, runs his state with manipulation and oppression of the districts. His first name inevitably bears a reference to William Shakespeare’s interpretation of the Roman general Caius Marcius Coriolanus in his tragedy *Coriolanus*. Like President Snow, Coriolanus defended the power and rights of the aristocratic ruling class against the common people, “for whom he feels contempt” (“Coriolanus”). Despite his lack of political endowments, President Snow holds a limitless psychological need to present himself and his self-indulgent Capitol with impeccable flawlessness. This, Collins

suggests, emerges from his all-consuming obsession with image and perfection. While he is perfectly aware of the district citizens' sentiment towards the Capitol, he is and has never been concerned about their mental and physical well-being. For this reason alone, he continues to take the lives of twenty-three children every year merely for his own profit, which in turn allows him to be observed as a real enemy of his people.

Collins demonstrates how very little it takes to instigate the beastly brute that is the Capitol. Of course, even though they are constantly threatened by the Games, the district children are not the only ones whose lives are in danger. It must be considered an alarming fact that any member of society can at any given moment put himself and his family in danger if only because of a difference of opinion. For instance, President Snow has no qualms about punishing—and even executing—people for anything that makes the Capitol look foolish. Katniss's ally in the 74th Hunger Games, a twelve-year old girl named Rue, reveals that even so much as thinking about eating the crops grown in District 11 will result in a public whipping. This can be further associated with the idea of thoughtcrime, the act of engaging in aberrant and socially unacceptable thoughts. The term, one of many originating in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, denotes this particular mindset which is defined as a criminal offense by the totalitarian regime. Not only is insubordination and nonconformity of any kind forbidden; it is also condemned and physically punishable by law.

On top of the extended and repeated penalization of the Games, President Snow is known for using district citizens to his personal advantage. Criminals, traitors, and other disobedient citizens are, when discovered, enslaved by the Capitol for treason, turned mute via surgical removal of their tongues, and forced into eternal slavery in the form of domestic servitude and, in the more severe cases, prostitution. These offenders are officially referred to as Avoxes—in Latin, a person who is avox has no voice—and are in Katniss's view submissive and very watchful. Their “knowing reproachful eyes [...] call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol” (Collins 143-144). Katniss also cannot seem to fathom why they would ever rebel against the Capitol for the single reason that “they had everything” and therefore there would be “no cause to rebel” (Collins 102).

Life in the districts is not only characterized by starvation and what seems like imperishable misery but also by fear of the state. In the seventy-four year history of the Hunger Games, the Capitol has controlled the districts by imposing upon them a

continuous state of fright and anxiety. Collins connotes the unspoken motto of the Capitol that people who are fearful of their ruler are much more manageable than those who are not, as used by the regime as a means of menacing and terrorizing the population. Through the presence of a police and military force known as Peacekeepers, as well as the contingent reliance on high-technology surveillance cameras complete with dictaphones—this again brings to mind Orwell and, in particular, his introduction of telescreens, which “received and transmitted simultaneously” and could never be turned off completely (Orwell 2-3)—the Capitol ensures that its presence is permanently sensed and acknowledged, and so the district citizens have little choice but to stay apprehensive and alarmed at all times. Both at home and outside of the electric fences of their district, Katniss and Gale must take great caution before voicing their thoughts. “Even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you” (Collins 7). The regime is at the same time completely alien and ubiquitous to the poor.

The Capitol’s readiness and ultimate inclination to stake its claim over every living soul in Panem is presented through the existence of mutated animals. These altered creatures, dubbed muttations or simply mutts for short, can appear in any shape or form and are capable of causing excruciating physical and mental pain. The most egregious of the mutts in *The Hunger Games* are undoubtedly tracker jackers, genetically modified wasps that are “carefully created to target the place where fear lives in your brain” (Collins 236). Engineered by the Capitol, their stings can cause severe hallucinations and eventually death. Tracker jacker venom not only plants confusion and true despair in the heads of its victims; it makes the person doubt reality as much as his or her physical vicinity. Collins once again manifests the draconian cruelty of unchecked governments and their pervasive need to control all aspects of human life.

Chapter III: The Theme of Suffering as Entertainment

One of the most fundamental themes explored in *The Hunger Games* is the public spectacle of suffering. The story portrays the tributes' experience and their involvement in the Games as pure entertainment and pastime for the masses of the Capitol. Through her representation of the Capitol citizens, Suzanne Collins reveals to the reader their increasing immunity to the violence of the Games, their mockery of the tributes, and the pleasure they gain from the children's misery.

To make her story exceptional and captivating while emphasizing the gravity of the plot, Collins fills her novel with descriptions of the annual reappings, the opening ceremonies, and, of course, the actual Hunger Games. The Games are the yearly highpoint in the Capitol, a live-event competition broadcast for the entire nation of Panem as a celebration of the Capitol's supremacy over the districts. In Collins's world of war and televised killings, the visual side of the show is nothing if not fascinating in the eyes of the Capitol citizens, who regard the Games as a true spectacle to behold. On her first day in the Capitol, Katniss wonders what the people there spend their days doing, "besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment" (Collins 80). For the opening ceremonies, stylists design costumes for the tributes to wear in the tribute parade, where each pair of tributes rides in a chariot drawn by four horses, each costume pair reflecting the resource provided by the respective district to the Capitol. With her depictions of the events surrounding the Hunger Games, Collins stresses the importance of image and appearance in the Capitol and how it masks the city's true, inner colors, namely their ignorance of what goes on outside the Capitol walls. For the Games, everything should look as sycophantic and grandiose as possible.

Not only does the Capitol try its utmost to glamorize and sugar-coat the impending bloodshed of the Hunger Games; it also places this particular task in the hands of the tributes. On the last night before the Games, the tributes appear on television for live interviews with Caesar Flickerman, a famous television host in Panem and the face of the Capitol. Like his namesake Julius Caesar, Flickerman is favored by many and known for being "an eloquent and lively orator" as well as "a clever self-publicist and showman" (Wyke). Having watched the Hunger Games her whole life, Katniss knows that "if you appeal to the crowd, either by being humorous or

brutal or eccentric, you gain favor” (Collins 141). Before the interviews, Katniss and Peeta’s mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, speculates about how Katniss is to be presented to the Capitol. Worried that she may reveal her true feelings towards the Capitol, Haymitch wants her to commend the audience and mention “how nice the people are” and “how the city amazes” her (Collins 143). However, since she is well aware that the Capitol is already depriving her of her future, Katniss does not want the audience to know anything about her, and so at first she refuses to let them have anything from her past. Angered, she can only think of the absurdity of the show as she wonders why she is “hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people” she hates (Collins 142). After a lengthy discussion between the two, Haymitch finally tells Katniss to simply reply to whatever question she is asked and conceal her hostility towards the Capitol from the cheerful and anticipative audience. The less they know about her aversion, the safer she is in the Capitol.

The Capitol goes to great lengths to ensure that the audience stays captivated and dazzled by what they see on the screens. The Gamemakers use different kinds of supplies to make the Hunger Games as entertaining and memorable as possible. According to Gale, “there’s almost always some wood” to build a fire, as there is not much amusement in watching someone freeze and starve to death—ironically, this continues to be the fate of many citizens of the poorer districts (Collins 47). The Gamemakers also utilize technology to humiliate the tributes and threaten them even further. For instance, each of the wolf mutts that appear in the final battle of the 74th Hunger Games resembles one of the tributes who had previously been killed. Each wolf has a collar with their respective district number marked on it, and while Peeta wonders if “those could be their real eyes,” Katniss cannot help but think of what else the Capitol must have done with them, even going as far as to surmise that they have “been programmed to hate our faces particularly because we have survived and they were so callously murdered” (Collins 406).

Ironically enough, the spectators who get the most out of the Hunger Games and truly enjoy the show are those who need never become a direct part of it. Naturally, as the Capitol citizens are free, they are also free to watch the Games if and whenever they like. Most, if not all of them, await the show with great anticipation on a yearly basis. At the same time, the regime imposes a “forced viewing of Capitol propaganda” on the districts, thus leaving them with no choice but to endure the perpetual presence of the

Games (Tamny). In strong accordance with this affliction and the confinement of the districts is the novel's testimony of how a single event as unfair as the reaping can change a life forever. Even if a tribute manages to survive the Games and return as a victor, his or her family's situation is forever altered—and all by random selection. Every year “at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come” (Collins 12). To somewhat mitigate the fear of being drawn at the reaping, Katniss, Gale, and Peeta at least feel some relief in joking about their ludicrous situation “because the alternative is to be scared out of your wits” and “petrified of being turned into human torches” (Collins 9 and 83).

The Hunger Games are the Capitol's tool to bring out the ultimate humiliation of the fully exploited tributes. With the glamour and magnetism of the opening ceremonies, the drama of the live reapings and talk-show-style interviews, and the conflict between tributes during training, the Games possess every characteristic of typical reality television. “To laugh at someone, to mock or ridicule a person is an exercise in power and control” and Collins's Capitol closely follows this model of suffering as entertainment (Canning). In a way that is both disgracing and torturous, the district citizens are forever required to treat the Hunger Games as a festive tournament or a sports championship where each district is matched against the others. Once again, the Gamemakers take advantage of the Capitol's advanced technology by randomly killing tributes in the arena, which simply serves as yet another reminder that they can, without repercussions, do with the children as they please.

To further accentuate the political and social gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ of Panem, Collins describes the Capitol as unsusceptible to the violence, suffering, and multiple deaths occurring every year in the districts and in the Games. Over a period of almost seventy-five years, the Capitol citizens have become partly immune to watching the children fight in front of their eyes year after year, their desensitized nature having rendered them somewhat unaffected by the real-life slaughter. They relish in the savagery and bloodshed of the Games, which again reminds the reader of the villagers in *The Lottery* and their lack of qualms about taking virtually anyone's life. At the same time, the Capitol citizens are highly infatuated with the tributes' lives and, over the course of the Games, take turns betting on them, which allows Katniss to realize that the Capitol will never become her friend (Collins 140). Complementing the

model of the fleeting high school experience, Collins makes it known to the reader that no one in the Capitol is truly concerned with the tributes' feelings or how they feel about their lives and the choices they are given at birth. Even the emotional connection that the Capitol citizens form with the tributes is hardly enough to remind them that "those are real people on the screen, and they're not going away when the commercials start to roll" (Margolis).

Collins also incorporates elements of *schadenfreude* into her story, giving the Hunger Games the warlike aspect of a gladiatorial contest. As expressed in the novel, the idea of *schadenfreude*—the German word literally translates to harm-joy and indicates "a feeling of enjoyment that comes from seeing or hearing about the troubles of other people" ("*Schadenfreude*")—is bound in two main concepts: the pleasure of regarding other people's suffering and misfortunes mixed with the gratitude of not being the one who suffers. Collins makes this evident by the Capitol's blatant and unabashed exploitation of the children's bodies. Like the gladiators of Ancient Rome, the Games are the tributes' "*munera*, or obligations" to recognize and honor the past, i.e. the Dark Days, "with displays of courage and bloodshed" (Dersin 141). In the 74th Hunger Games, after a mine explosion is set off at the Cornucopia, Katniss finds that she cannot hear out of her left ear and from here remains temporarily deaf. On top of that, Peeta is unable to walk due to a bad infection in his leg and is from this point onward forced to walk with a prosthetic leg and a cane.

In keeping with the idea of *schadenfreude*, Collins explores what makes innocent children turn on each other and what enables them to commit what in a different world would be considered a solemn crime. As the Games gain ground, Collins's choice of the first-person narrative starts to feel even more critical than before. The *schadenfreude* aspect of the show is no longer merely at the hands of the Capitol and it is no longer a question of simply being brave enough to compete. After the customary bloodbath at the Cornucopia—the giant, horn-shaped container is filled with food supplies and weaponry and is located at the starting point in the arena—the tributes start to alter their way of thinking, their most challenging task being to realize the rest of the tributes as their temporary opponents. This element in the story shares many similarities with Koushun Takami's thriller novel *Battle Royale*, which reviewers have compared to *The Hunger Games* (S. King). In consonance with Takami's psychology, the tributes can only protect themselves and must therefore fight "according to our

opponents' ability, not their intentions." Ideally, they would want "to leave this world quietly before they got sucked into this horrible massacre" (Takami). Nonetheless, the tributes' awareness of the Capitol and the Gamemaker's powers over every living creature in the arena is enough to make the children comply with the rules. Even prior to the Games, Gale's reassurance that the Games are "just hunting," which Katniss does on a daily basis, gives her the disconcerting notion "that if I can forget they're people, it will be no different at all" (Collins 48). Finally, Collins's apparent assertion that the most important matter is survival offers a resemblance between Katniss's never-ending hunt of game outside of District 12, the Capitol's incessant pursuit of the district children, and the tributes' sudden disposition to kill just to stay in the Games for one more second.

Collins showcases the regime's insistence that the privileged and wealthy earn their happy ending. Every Hunger Games must have a victor—no matter what happens, the show must go on. Towards the end of the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss and Peeta are the only tributes left alive in the arena. The Gamemakers had previously announced a rule change stating that two tributes from the same district could become victors; however, the rule was later revoked, if only for entertainment purposes. Upon learning that there can truly only be one victor, Katniss takes advantage of the charm that the Games hold over the Capitol citizens, i.e. their emotional investment in the tributes, and resolves for her and Peeta to attempt suicide with poisoned berries that he had previously collected in the arena. As planned, the very second that they pop the berries into their mouths, the voice of the announcer shouts for them to stop and Katniss and Peeta are both hastily declared victors. Had they been allowed to carry out their intentions, the ultimate suffering would have transformed the Hunger Games from a show of pure entertainment to an honest tragedy. Deep down, Katniss knows that without presenting the Capitol with a single victor, the Gamemakers would neglect their duties to the Capitol. Ironically, the Gamemakers "might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country" (Collins 418). As resentful as she was when Peeta first revealed his crush on her, Katniss suddenly finds herself in a foreign position. Having played up the act of star-crossed lovers, she realizes that Peeta's live declaration of love is what allows them to return back home—far away from the arena, yet invariably under the close scrutiny of the ever-contiguous Capitol.

Conclusion

At the same time that Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* is a work of fiction, it clearly comprises many elements of real-live contexts. Through characterization, setting, and intricate satire, Collins provides an important argument about the many perils of totalitarianism. Of course, in an ideal world, the concept of totalitarianism as a political system would not exist. However, in today's society, such a world can only be mentally constructed and is therefore immaterial. With her development of one of the most haunting fictional universes of our time, Collins has managed to create a microcosm of the world as we know it today. In her rendition of totalitarianism, the slowly but surely devolving districts are pitted against the fast-evolving Capitol in a way that renders them weak and defenseless. While this elaborate yet distorted future world of Panem may at first seem purely fictional, it directly appears as an alarming analogy to Western societies. The notion that totalitarian governments may still exist in the far future is equally disquieting. To that end, the reader quickly comes to identify with the district citizens who must continually fight for their right—or lack thereof—to govern themselves.

Collins must be considered among the best science fiction authors who are able to transmit concrete social criticism through such a gruesome story. It is important to understand that *The Hunger Games* is not merely a tirade against those who have money and excessive belongings in abundance; it is a compelling satire of societies that have existed in time and continue to exist in the twenty-first century. Moreover, it is a dynamically powerful symbol of already-occurring events that we know and live in today. Collins's approach of presenting her criticism in a political, relatable setting aids the reader to see the true drawbacks of society. As if following David Bowie's uncanny lyrics to *The Supermen*, in which there is "no death for the perfect men" and for whom "life rolls into one" with their peculiar games, Collins proves to the reader just how lucky the lucky people are with their wealth and lack of concern about another tomorrow. Meanwhile, the poor continue to be unable to escape the harsh reality of their homes as they search and hunger for some kind of meaning in the meaningless universe of Panem. As a result, these significant elements of sacrifice and survival are easily applied to modern societies, as the current state of the world forces the lower classes to withstand the difficulties they continue to be granted year after year. Collins's message

cannot fail: While there is still class division and inequity among citizens of the same country, the rich will always be spared, for life is but a comedy for the rich and a tragedy for the poor.

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