

The Dystopian Elements in Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games

Nikoloso, Andrea

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i
hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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Distopijski elementi u *Igrama gladi* Suzanne Collins

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Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2019.

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Andrea Nikoleta 01222230299

Ime i prezime studentice, JMBAG

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Abstract

Suzanne Collins's most popular work *The Hunger Games*, published in 2008, is the first novel in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Although the entire trilogy contains the elements of dystopia, the first novel in the trilogy best explains how the dystopian universe that Suzanne Collins created works. The aim of this paper is to single out the dystopian elements in *The Hunger Games* and to explain how they work in the narrative space of the novel. The dystopian elements that are going to be discussed are: inequality, the abuse of advanced technology (especially throughout the reality show), the pessimistic outlook on life, oppression, the loss of free will and identity, the control of information, scapegoating, and distraction.

Keywords: Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, dystopia, reality show, control

Introduction

In 2008, Suzanne Collins published the first novel in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which is named after the trilogy – *The Hunger Games*. It follows a story of a 16-year-old girl Katniss Everdeen after she volunteers to participate in the Hunger Games, an annual pageant held by her country Panem to show their power, to save her little sister from going. This novel, the first in the trilogy, best explains the dystopian world that Suzanne Collins created in this story. The depiction of dystopia is pretty explicit, letting the reader know how horrible the world where the protagonist lives is. The elements of dystopia are firstly observed through brutal fights children are put through every single year. Secondly, the order in which districts live is oppressive, with District 12, where Katniss comes from, as the poorest region in the entire country of Panem. Thirdly, there is Capitol, which controls the rest of the country (twelve districts) and uses its wealth to show the rest of the country how insignificant they really are to them. Lastly, there are the Games that Capitol uses to show their strength and to treat other people as subordinates (putting them into the arena to fight for their lives).

1. Suzanne Collins and the Driving Forces Behind *The Hunger Games*

Suzanne Collins is an American author born in Hartford, Connecticut, in August 1962. Having a father who served in the US military, she moved a lot and lived in many military bases across the United States and Europe. Combined with the images of the Vietnam war she saw on TV, this experience later became one of the driving forces behind *The Hunger Games* trilogy. She graduated in 1980 from the Alabama School of Fine Arts. At the Indiana University, she majored in theatre and telecommunications. After moving to New York City, she attended the New York University where she got her master of fine arts degree in dramatic writing. In 1991, she started working on children's cartoon and young adult shows, which gave her experience that she later used in writing *The Hunger Games*: "I was very tired ... and I was flipping through images on reality television where these young people were competing for a million dollars or whatever, then I was seeing footage from the Iraq war, and these two things began to fuse together in a very unsettling way, and that is the moment where I got the idea for Katniss's story" (Armitstead). Collins also drew much inspiration from the stories that her father told her when she was a little girl (Griffin Llanas). It is also important to mention that the novel is highly intertextual. It is believed that *The Hunger Games* is based on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* story, or at least that Collins has taken some elements from it, as well as on "the Greek myth of Ariadne and the Minotaur and the historical figure of Spartacus" (Soncini 101). The novel's intertextuality is greatly founded on "reworking of the hunger paradigm in Shakespeare's late Roman play, here re-functioned as a scathing cautionary tale about the social and political order of today's global age" (Soncini 102).

2. The Concept of Dystopia

Every dystopia is a history of the future. (Lepore)

Dystopia is a concept that is, according to Oxford Dictionary, “an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic” (*Lexico*). On the other hand, Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes dystopia as “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, and fearful lives.” These two definitions strongly indicate that dystopia is a term opposite of utopia as it is used to describe a horrible world where people live in fear and whose lives often end in death.

When it comes to dystopian literature, it dates back to the eighteenth century (the 1740s). It has roots in utopian history and literature¹ and it started as a response to it. It usually follows a protagonist fighting against an oppressive system or society. *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1726) can be taken as one of the first examples of dystopian literature because it mocks utopia and utopian ideals. According to Gregory Claeys, “the contemporary dystopian genre is mostly a 20th century phenomenon, inextricably linked to the failures of the first half of the 20th century totalitarian state ideals” (qtd. in Cettl 140). Cettl traces the origins of modern dystopia to British fiction and H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell and gives

a number of the most common features which dystopias are preoccupied with: a one party state with total control over the police and technology, especially media and surveillance techniques; a willingness to destroy domestic enemies in the name of the regime; an ideology which demands absolute loyalty and sacrifice; a cult of leadership, etc. (140).

In its modern form, a dystopia “can be apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic, or neither, but it has to be anti-utopian, a utopia turned upside down, a world in which people tried to build a republic of perfection only to find that they had created a republic of misery” (Lepore).² This

¹ While Moore’s *Utopia* is considered to be the most representative text of the genre, Plato’s *The Republic* is mostly regarded one of the first pieces of utopian writing (Ludwig 56).

² The (sub)genre of feminist science fiction is often dystopian as well. “In a feminist dystopia, the inequality of society or oppression of women is exaggerated or intensified to highlight the need for change in contemporary society . . . Feminist science fiction is often seen as more concerned with societal roles and power dynamics than the

means that the dystopia's focus is not on the bad but rather on the good things gone bad. Dystopian literature often describes the bleak future and how people destroyed Earth. One of the best examples of this type of dystopia is *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells. The novel clearly shows the pessimistic approach dystopian literature is characterized by, with its purpose being a warning for readers that something is bad or might go bad. Another element of dystopian literature is the concept of a planned society, meaning that a society was created to be utopia but has actually turned into dystopia. Collins's *The Hunger Games* greatly exemplifies this trait. Furthermore, dystopian literature is often futuristic, with its post-apocalyptic and pessimistic mode functioning "as a window on, and critique of, the present, as Fredric Jameson has argued in his study of science fiction and utopian fiction" (Schmidt). Another trait of dystopian literature is the preservation of the oppressive class system: "Very often, and at first glance unblemished society turns out to have a strict social hierarchy in which a rich upper class isolates itself from the majority which vegetates away in poverty and starvation" (Ludwig 56-57). This implies that the upper class considers itself "better" than other classes and uses this attitude to make itself richer and more powerful; in doing this, the upper class disregards how its behaviour affects other classes, thus creating an unbridgeable gap between them and other classes and establishing the oppressive hierarchy that fits only them.

In addition, dystopian literature often has a closer connection to reality than its utopian counterpart. This occurs because dystopian literature is based on the principle of extrapolation: the author "identifies a questionable element in his or her own culture, then projects it in exaggerated form into the future, in order to emphasize the danger that is implicit in the trend" (Maloney qtd. in Ludwig 57). By presenting social, cultural, economic or ecological issues as systemic, dystopian literature "invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions" (Maloney qtd. in Ludwig 57).

Lastly, dystopian literature tends to emphasize individual responsibility. By addressing the issues such as

the role of technology in society, political expropriation in times of (political) instability, the restriction of civil rights for the safety of citizens, or particular groups of

technological advances and space travel of 'typical' science fiction" (Napikoski). Dystopia is here then utilized to change gender roles and raise awareness about the unequal rights of men and women.

citizens, the degradation of the environment or the overall degeneration of the quality of life connected to it (summarised under the terms Ecopedagogy and Ecodidactics), dystopian fiction invites learners to engage with global cultural, social, political and environmental issues, debates and contexts. (Ludwig 57)

3. The Dominant Themes and the Protagonist Development in *The Hunger Games*

The Hunger Games depicts, among other things, “economic inequality, but, like all YA dystopian fiction, it also addresses readers who feel betrayed by a world that looked so much better to them when they were just a bit younger” (Lepore). Other critics, for example Christopher Schmidt, point out that “in *The Hunger Games* state, church, and market are intertwined into monarchic authority. Katniss is, debatably, a reborn militia woman, a feminist hero combined with the mythology of the American revolution. Because of this, it is not a surprise that *The Hunger Games* resonates to young and to old.”

The novel also tackles the issues of gender, sex, and family identity. With Katniss, Collins has introduced a new type of female protagonist into contemporary literature as her “ambivalent desires and ambiguous gender identity open up possibilities for girls beyond the traditional patriarchal constraints of wife and mother” (Oliver 676). This occurs in part because Katniss’s parents – presented in the novel through the “repeated images of suffering fathers and catatonic mothers” (Oliver 676) – “give rise to the strong girl figure” (Oliver 676). Collins also explores the ways in which Katniss draws her strength “from loving bonds with sibling figures. In the case of Katniss, these figures include Prim, Rue, Gale and Peeta. These sibling bonds appear in excess of patriarchal roles traditionally open to girls and women as wives and mothers” (Oliver 676).

For Kelly Oliver, Katniss is also “a survivor fighting to live [who] . . . prefers chasing animals to chasing boys. Unlike other love triangles wherein the girl simply cannot decide between the two boys because she has strong feelings for both, although she cares about them, Katniss does not seem to have strong romantic feelings of attraction for” (677) either Gale or Peeta. This points out that Katniss is not a usual heroine of romance or YA novels. This ambivalence is present in all the relationships she enters “except perhaps her relationship with her little sister, Prim, whom she cares for as a surrogate mother when their own mother is rendered ineffective by grief over their father’s death” (Oliver 677). When the sisters are separated, Katniss’s need to protect her sister Prim transfers to Rue. The ambivalence is also part of Katniss’s self as all her actions are a mixture of strength and vulnerability, “love and defiance. It is usually her heart that leads her to defiance, rather than some deep-seated belief in a cause or in rebellion for its own sake” (Oliver 678).

In addition, Katniss can be seen as a redefinition of a tragic heroine, as a rebel fighting against “the authority that controls her poor society [, as]. . . a person who highly praises the individual freedom and refuses the rules set by the authority which imprisons her life” (Chusna and W.A.F. 126). Eventually, not only does she fight for her own right to live free but also for the rights of District 12, and by extension all the districts in Panem, which transforms her into a heroine of the minority, or rather the majority if we take into consideration the number of districts, group. This occurs because she is painfully aware of how difficult it is to live in the district(s) that no one cares about. Used to being a part of “the least important” district in Panem, Katniss fights hard to prove everyone wrong, showing in the process that she is strong enough to fight for what she believes in. She draws her strength from her pain, which is exactly what makes her powerful, and what later on makes her stand out from the crowd and become the symbol of revolution. Thus, she embodies “a new image of American popular heroism as she displays certain qualities that American people welcome and expect in this era” (Chusna and W.A.S. 124-125). All this eventually helps her to win the Hunger Games. “Being the winner of the deadly game, Katniss Everdeen also shows her strong will and the capacity to work hard to achieve the goal. She does not partake in manipulation, betrayal or other wrongdoings to gain her victory” (Chusna and W.A.F. 126). In the Games, Katniss creates her image by being honest, straightforward and good and, although this is not common in Panem, her fellow citizens start to respect her for it. Their respect is also rooted in the sense of hope they connect with her – the hope that everyone can achieve his/her dream if s/he invests all his/her might into it. That is why Katniss can also be seen as a representative of the (American) dream.

4. The Dystopian Elements in *The Hunger Games*

It can be argued that a great deal of *The Hunger Games* popularity lies in its use of quite a few dystopian, postapocalyptic, and science fiction elements. Those elements are: inequality, oppression, the abuse of advanced technology (especially throughout the reality show), the pessimistic outlook on life, the control of information, the loss of free will and identity, scapegoating, distraction, etc.

Of all the afore-mentioned elements, inequality is most pronounced in the novel, which is visible not only in relations between Capitol and twelve districts but also among the districts themselves. Even though all the districts are disciplined through labour and technological threat, not all districts, however, stand in the same in relation to the Capitol politics of “bread and games.” In the richer districts, also known as the “career districts,” the participation in the Games is considered a chance for wealth and success. In those districts, it is not unusual for children to volunteer as tributes in the Games. Their participation, however, does not entail just the promise of fame and importance if they win the Games because reality is not as nice, or as simple, as that. They might win the Games, but the consequences that follow are severe: nightmares, alcoholism, mental breakdowns, suicides as well as the hatred of other districts. Not only does inequality permeate the inter-district but the intra-district relations as well:

by allowing only one victor, the Games also breed deadly enmity between co-tributes from the same district. The reaping system itself has been conceived as a way of sharpening social divisions: as Katniss explains, those who are eligible for the draw can choose to add their name multiple times to the lottery in exchange for a tessera, the equivalent of a meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person. Thus, the system penalizes the children of poorer families, who are led by hunger to avail themselves of tesserae several times over the years, and in this way significantly increase their chances of being reaped. (Soncini 109)

The Games, therefore, start unequally and end in the same way.

Secondly, *The Hunger Games* takes a pessimistic outlook on the world by looking at it through the camera lens, or the reality show form, which “deploys such strategies as success and competition to frame its contestants and manage the audiences” (Cettl 143). However, the reality show is not broadcast to entertain the Panem citizens but to induce fear and anxiety into the

people of Panem, to preserve “the overall oppressive status quo, an order in which indeed everyone is potentially killable. This is exemplified when the President at the end of the first film decides to kill the game producer who failed to control Katniss’s acts of defiance in the arena” (Cettl 143). The Games should remind people that rebellion, or failure to act as it is proscribed and prescribed by the oppressive government, is not acceptable and that every attempt at it will be put down, with even greater consequences to follow. The general atmosphere of fear, terror, and pessimism is further enhanced by the fact that the children from 12-18 are turned into killers in the Games as a reminder that no one, except the President, is untouchable by the system. For this reason, graphic images of pure violence are purposely broadcast to force upon people a thought that there is no hope for something better. People are thus constantly reminded that they are the slaves of Panem and that there is nothing they can do to change that.

To create the atmosphere of fear, hopelessness, and pessimism but also to entertain the wealthy Capitol, the Hunger Game reality show is held annually. It ruthlessly

forces the players, or the candidates of each district, to kill each other and survive in this TV program. Various threats and terrors are created to increase the tense of the game. The spectators are thrilled at watching the tributes battle each other to survive and claim victory. The conflicts and tense happened in the game add the popularity and success of the program. The more popular the game, the more sponsor it gets. In the end, money matters. (Chusna 127)

It matters how much money you have before you make it to the Games, it matters in the Games, and it surely matters after the Games, because Capitol is supposed to provide for the winners forever.

The Hunger Games reality show also addresses another dystopian element – that of the abuse of advanced technology. In Collins’s novel, the advanced technology is used to manipulate both the spectators and the participants in the Games, to turn them into animals: preys or predators. Holograms, television, computers, tracking devices, genetically modified animals, etc. have multiple purposes in the dystopian world of the novel: they serve as (1) a means of oppressive control, (2) an entertainment device for the privileged, and (3) a showcase of innovative technological wonders misused by the government. In this unnatural world of misused technological wonders, only Katniss and Peeta (attempt to) refuse to kill others, to be animals: “Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games” (Collins 142). True to the concept of

dystopia, *The Hunger Games* thus uses advanced technology to oppress people, to put them down, and to make them feel like slaves of technology, too.

Next to inequality, the pessimistic outlook on life and the abuse of advanced technology, *The Hunger Games* also introduces oppression as the dystopian element. It is mostly visible in Capitol forcing Panem's inhabitants (Capitol, of course, excluded) to participate in the Games, pushing them to kill one another, forcing, and even encouraging other citizens to watch it all... Most people in the districts live poorly and in fear of their lives being taken away sometimes for no justified reason. Capitol has instilled fear into its people because it is easier to control them in that way, the power thus being used for evil purposes and to take away even little freedom people in the districts were supposed to have. All this is then justified by saying that the Games are the best thing for the country as they prevent further wars and anarchy.

Interwoven with other afore-mentioned dystopian elements is the element of the loss of free will and identity. In the novel, this element is again brought into being through the Panem government's use of the reality show/surveillance technology/the restricted access to resources to control what the people in the districts are doing, where they are going, who they are seeing, etc. Through all those instruments of control, an individual in any district loses his/her identity. S/he cannot do what s/he wants, or go where s/he wants. S/he cannot do any of the things that define him/her as a person that s/he wants to be. S/he is, instead, a person that the Panem government wants him/her to be – an obedient slave that does not think for himself/herself. The loss of freedom of speech goes along with it.

Closely connected to the previous dystopian element is that of the control of information. It is more than obvious that, if the Panem government controls everything that people in the districts say and do, it most definitely controls what they see, read, or hear. People are given the pieces of information that the Panem government considers they should have, or even false information that might somehow benefit the government. Capitol collects pieces of information wherever they can and then decides when and how to use them against their citizens. For example, it is almost certain that Capitol had known about Katniss and Gale leaving the property of District 12 and going into the woods behind the fence, but they let it happen because they knew they could use it against them later on, as they eventually did.

Furthermore, the novel exhibits the dystopian element of scapegoating as well. The idea of scapegoating relies on the government manipulating people into identifying themselves against a specific marginal group (Booker 72). This element is exemplified through the Games

themselves. The Panem government persecutes twelve districts because it needs the Other to further solidarity among the privileged members of the society (the citizens of Capitol) and to exercise its power against twelve districts (Booker 158). By willingly sending twenty four children from twelve districts into death each year, Panem “maintains peace” among the Districts and Capitol.

Lastly, the novel utilizes distraction – something that keeps the masses busy and far away from power – as the element of dystopia. The Hunger Games serve as a distraction – a forced, shallow entertainment, aimed at keeping the Districts away from power, the entertainment that people accept just to keep their minds off the horrible reality they live in. People are promised good and safe life if they win the Games, they are promised financial security. However, the promised safety and good life are only illusory and a means to hide horrible truth what is really happening. Fame and money cannot replace horrific nightmares and memories of what happened to the tributes, yet the society and authorities are telling them that they should be happy because, after all, they have survived. This way the Panem leaders guilt-force the tributes to feel happy for all the fame and money they might receive, even though they cannot erase the horror that happened to them.

Conclusion

Dystopian literature started developing as a response to utopian literature in the eighteenth century and has been developing to this day. The term refers to literature depicting an imagined oppressive world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, and fearful lives. *The Hunger Games* is a 2008 dystopian novel written by Suzanne Collins and the first novel in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Suzanne Collins got an idea for *The Hunger Games* by watching reality shows and seeing the disturbing images of the Iraq war on TV. Throughout the novel, Collins builds her dystopian universe by relying on the dystopian elements such as (1) inequality that permeates both inter- (Capitol and twelve Districts) and intra-relations (among twelve districts) in Panem; (2) the abuse of advanced technology, especially throughout the reality show; (3) the pessimistic outlook on life enforced by the society of fear and hopelessness in which even children are forced to kill in order to survive; (4) oppression visible in the Panem government forcing the districts to participate in the Games as an act of both loyalty and prevention of anarchy and rebellion; (5) the loss of free will and identity imposed on the Panem population through the obligatory participation in the Games, surveillance technology, the limited (and privileged) use of resources, etc.; (6) the control of information with the Panem leaders deciding what, when, and how of the information flow; (7) scapegoating where the districts operate as the Other against whom Capitol identifies and thus allows the Panem leaders to manipulate the whole Panem, and (8) distraction in the form of the Games whose aim is to consolidate the power of the Panem leaders and keep the rest of Panem away from it. Given all this, it is easy to understand why *The Hunger Games* can be seen as one of the best examples of dystopian literature.

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