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”TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN”:

An Analysis of the Utopian and Dystopian Aspects
in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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Title: “*Two Sides of the Same Coin*”: An Analysis of the Utopian and Dystopian Aspects in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games Trilogy*

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Abstract: Suzanne Collins’ young adult novels *The Hunger Games* trilogy present a dystopian tale told through the eyes of the protagonist Katniss Everdeen. While the novels lift several topics that are common in dystopian fiction, this essay will focus on the controlling power of the governments introduced in the novels, one led by President Coriolanus Snow and the other led by President Alma Coin. I use Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and John Gaventa’s theory of power as frameworks to discuss and compare the Presidents’ ruling powers over their respective societies. Furthermore, I also use Gene Sharp’s theory of nonviolence as a foundation to examine a nonviolent approach to the rebellion presented in the novels. The aim of this essay is to illustrate that the trilogy makes readers question the governing powers at play. I argue that Collins is problematizing our understanding of what a good and bad governing power is by blurring the thin line between the dystopian and utopian societies in the trilogy.

Keywords: *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins, utopia, dystopia, hegemony, ideology, violence, nonviolence, power, control

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1. Introduction

Dystopian literature often tells a tale of a corrupt futuristic society, in which the society itself is most often the antagonist and is ruled by a controlling government. War, death, hopelessness, oppression and manipulation are only a few aspects of this demoralizing genre. Yet, dystopian fiction is immensely popular today, but why that is might be hard to pinpoint. I believe it is because of these unsettling issues that make the genre popular, it presents a moral observation about society and even offer solutions to current problems. In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins is not afraid to show the harsh reality of the societies that are represented, which can be the reason for its popularity. Dystopian literature always has something to tell its readers about the society being represented in the novel. I intend to illustrate that the blurring of utopia and dystopia that occurs in Collins' trilogy, consisting of *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010)¹, is a method utilized to show what she has to say about the governing powers in a society. This will be done by discussing how Collins has chosen to represent Presidents Coriolanus Snow and Alma Coin's ruling over Panem and District 13 respectively to illustrate that the readers' understanding of a bad and good government is not always correct.

1.1. Utopia and Dystopia

In order to comprehend what young adult² dystopian literature is, and why it is relevant for this essay, there is a need to first have an understanding of utopia. Utopia, coined by Sir Thomas More in his prose fantasy of the same name (1516), "is a future society, a perfect society – following the pun on the name in Greek (no place, good place: imaginary yet positive)" (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 1). Utopias project a better world that is set in the future and is set up as an ideal world, but Freud believed that "there can be no ideal society, and any attempt to establish one is likely to do more harm than good" (Booker, *Dystopian* 10). More often than not, the utopian society presented in novels goes wrong, making it resemble a dystopia more than it does a utopia (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 1).

Dystopian literature today can be seen as the equivalent to nineteenth-century utopian fiction. Utopias have gone out of fashion and have been replaced by nightmare scenarios due to the horrors that we in modern day societies have endured over the past decades. Thus, negative texts have been far more prominent in modern literature (Booker, *Dystopian* 17), since we have, in present day, grown used to distrusting the ideals that are present in our contemporary world.

¹ Hereafter cited as *HG*, *CF* and *MJ* respectively

² Hereafter referred to as YA

The word dystopia is derived from the Latin prefix *dys*, meaning bad, and the Greek word *topos*, meaning place; therefore, dystopia means “bad place” (OED). The term was devised by John Stuart Mill in 1868 and was initially defined as something “too bad to be practical” (Garrison 56). Devin Ryan states that bad place, is, however, a mild way to describe it, since the connotative meaning is darker and has multiple aspects and implications (3). There are usually alarming elements that contribute to this darker futuristic world. The author wants its readers to understand that something terrible has happened by exaggerating traits taken from their contemporary society. A defining characteristic of the genre is a warning to the reader that something must and can be done in the present to avoid the future (Lyman 6). There are several types of dystopian novels: some deal with a government gone corrupt or a society breaking apart. Others tell a tale of poverty, or a manipulating government with absolute power. The subject may vary, depending on what the author is trying to criticize and what he or she wants to draw the readers’ attention to.

Although utopia and dystopia can be seen as each other’s opposite, there is still a correlation between the two. Both are often subjective, even though they have their own definitions, since what one person considers an ideal might be another person’s nightmare (Booker, *Dystopian* 3). In fact, many dystopian worlds have derived from utopic ideologies that have gone awry; thus dystopian and utopian visions are not only regarded as each other’s opposites, but are part of the same project (Booker, *Dystopian* 15). A dystopian world is not merely a contrast to utopia, but a reflection of a distorted utopia, something that has emerged from the ideals of one society and created a new frightening place³. It can therefore be hard to see the difference between the two, since there can be a thin veil between a dystopian and utopian society, making readers question what differentiates a good or bad society.

Exactly how long dystopian fiction has existed is hard to state, but one can argue that an early example is Plato’s *The Republic* dated around 380 BC (Booker, *Dystopian* 5). It has, nevertheless, been part of our literary world for centuries and the concept has been used in literature for numerous decades. Some well known dystopian novels are Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), which have influenced the dystopian literature genre. During the nineteenth and twentieth century it became more common for authors to write in the genre. It has experienced a boom over the past few years alone; in fact, more dystopian novels were published between 2000-2010 than in any other decade (Garrison 56, 69).

³In Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993), we encounter a society which is first presented as a utopia, but as the story progresses is revealed to be a dystopia, in which the society strives to convert its population to “sameness” and has eliminated pain, strife and eradicated emotional depth from their lives.

1.2. YA Dystopia

Not only are dystopian novels extremely popular today, but their popularity has also reached the YA readers' market and it may actually be one of the largest markets in the history of publishing (Morrison). YA literature is not only for younger readers; adults can also enjoy tales told from an adolescent's viewpoint. Why YA dystopian literature is so popular today may be hard to identify, but it could be because the protagonist and the tale they are telling promote hope in the readers. Since YA dystopian novels tell readers something about their society, that something wrong has occurred, it could be that young people are the only hope we have for a better future. By creating a story set in a dystopian future for YA readers, the authors are addressing those who have to live with the consequences of decisions made today.

YA dystopian literature began making an appearance in 1978 when Monica Hughes released her novel *The Tomorrow City* (Ryan 4), which helped set the trend and was followed by numerous novels in the genre. It was not, however, until Collins released *The Hunger Games* in 2008, that YA dystopian literature created a spike, not only in the dystopian genre, but also in YA literature as a whole (Ryan 5). This has led to that Collins' trilogy, which has received much attention, has become one of the biggest franchises in YA history (Ryan 5). The attention was furthered when the first movie in the franchise was brought to the cinema in 2012 as a motion picture and was followed by two blockbusters. The fourth and last movie is expected to hit the theaters in November 2015.

1.3. Dystopia in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

The Hunger Games trilogy tells a tale about a society which has become corrupt and a government that is horrific in its ruling. The trilogy is set in the future nation of Panem, modeled on a post-apocalyptic North America. Times have been rough, and after droughts, storms, floods, fires and wars, Panem rose through the ashes (*HG* 21). The trilogy has several factors that are common in dystopian fiction: the authoritarian power of the government, class society in which the poor suffer from famine and where there are great gaps between the rich and the poor.

The Capitol controls the twelve districts into which the nation has been divided. While the twelve districts are poor, the Capitol is a large and extremely rich city. The districts provide the Capitol with resources, each district supplying it with different necessities that keep the Capitol operating. Without the hard labor of the twelve districts, the Capitol would not work. The districts are, however, kept in firm check by endless poverty and starvation, but also by the annual Hunger Games, that force each district to sacrifice their children for the Capitol's amusement and reminder of the Capitol's power.

1.4. Theory

In this essay, the focus is on exploring the distortion of the utopian and dystopian societies presented in the novels to show the difficulty to differentiate between a bad and good government. This will be done from a Marxist perspective, more specifically by applying the concept of hegemony, to illustrate the various ways in which the issue of the governing power is approached in the trilogy. First, however, why Marxism is essential for this essay must be clarified. Marxist literary criticism is principally inspired from the work of Karl Marx and his model of human society, which “suggests that culture reflects economic, political and social conditions as a whole” (Booker, *Practical* 73). Raymond Williams further emphasizes this and the important role of literature in the development of society (Booker, *Practical* 83). The topics an author chooses to bring up can be seen as both a mirror, which reflects and reveals our own society, and a light, that can guide us to how we could live.

The concept of hegemony is particularly associated with Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist theoretician and politician, and gained its significance from his work. According to Williams, a critic who has worked with Gramsci’s concept, “the true condition of hegemony is effective self-identification with the hegemonic forms: a specific and internalized ”socialization” which is expected to be positive (Williams, *Marxism* 118). This is the most common usage of the definition when looking at hegemony and will be utilized in this essay when discussing President Alma Coin’s ruling over District 13. Williams continues this definition by stating “if [the self-identification] is not possible, [it] will rest on a (resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary” (Williams, *Marxism* 118). Williams’ second part of the definition will be applied to the discussion of President Coriolanus Snow’s governing over Panem.

Hegemony illustrates how the worldview, the view of the society and ideology that the governing power has, becomes a part of a society’s everyday practice. The society is governed based on a power relationship between the dominating power and the dominated, which involves manufactured consent that the ruling power has gained. People within a hegemonic society believe this consent to be normal, true and correct. In other words, there is a status quo that no one questions. Sometimes, however, the consent is solely based on powerlessness, because the citizens have given up on the prospect of change, or they do not have any hope to begin with. The people within a hegemonic society do not think that they have any chance to influence change, so they go about their lives as normal and the governing power remains in charge.

John Gaventa has elaborated further on this in his theory of power, which is also influenced by Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. In his theory, Gaventa discusses and clarifies the governing power’s control over the dominated classes and focuses

on the fact that the dominated can, through a process of socialization, be put into a condition of powerlessness. The governing power has shown the dominated classes that they cannot influence their situation, no matter what they do, which in turn leads to a learned helplessness (Gaventa 15-16).

Furthermore, Gene Sharp's theory of nonviolent resistance is also relevant for this essay as he discusses power struggle and resistance from a nonviolent viewpoint. Sharp's theory answers the question about the possibility of nonviolent action by talking about the nature and control of political power. The nature of his theory is based on the foundation that nonviolent action "has always been the same: the belief that the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled, who by withdrawing that consent, can control and even destroy the power of the opponent" (*The Politics* 4). The theme of power and how it is treated in the trilogy, therefore, plays a central role. The treatment of the theme directs its attention to the difference between power and powerlessness and how these two aspects influence people's lives. In this sense, a Marxist literary analysis is relevant to the trilogy as it puts emphasis on the struggle for power within the society, as the social classes compete for "economical, social and political advantage" (Barry 151).

1.5. Aim, Method and Previous Research

In this essay, I intend to argue that the trilogy makes the readers question the governing powers at play. I aim to illustrate that Collins is trying to problematize the readers' understanding of what a good and a bad governing power is. She does this by making it difficult to tell apart a dystopian and utopian society, by blurring the thin line between the two. This understanding is, however, dependent on the readers' previous experiences, so it could therefore not be said to be a generalized understating, since all people do not experience the same things. From this essay's point of view, however, the trilogy shows both dystopian and utopian tendencies in which I believe the corruption of the governing powers is being criticized as a means to make the reader understand the difficulty to differentiate between the two. The focus of this essay will be the ruling powers and their effect on the society they govern. This will be done through close reading of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where I will compare the two societies that are presented in the novels, one governed by President Coriolanus Snow and the other by President Alma Coin.

In order to give a wider perspective, previous research done on trilogy will be examined to give further evidence to the essay and the topics discussed. Interviews with Suzanne Collins will also be used to show her intention with the trilogy. Since the novels are depicted from a first person narrative, told through the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, her thoughts and emotions will be used as it is through her we experience the two societies illustrated in the trilogy.

The essay will be divided into three sections of analysis. The first section will focus on Panem as a dystopia, where I will address President Snow's power and control. The critical trend amongst many literary critics concerning Snow's power over Panem has since the first novel's release in 2008, been concentrated on his absolute totalitarian power (e.g. Pavlik, Wezner). There have also been critics that have opposed this view, particularly Michael Macaluso and Cori McKenzie who claim, "the Capitol's power is never absolute" (103). This essay will look at Snow's ruling through both perspectives. His absolute power will be discussed in the first section, whereas the last section, which will examine the hope and resistance in the trilogy, will focus on the opposing claim. Rodrigo Rodriguez is only one of many critics who believe that a new social order needs to be envisioned in order to replace the old one (162), and has in his critical essay started to map out how this could look like. This essay will, however, look at Rodriguez' statement from a more critical viewpoint, to see if there is any meaning in rebelling against the corruption we meet in both societies. It will also look at a rebellion from a nonviolent viewpoint based on Gene Sharp's theory to shed light on an alternative approach to the violence Collins chooses to use in her trilogy.

Furthermore, there has been plenty of research done on the similarities between President Snow and President Coin's ruling (e.g. Henthorne, Clemente), claiming that the citizens are trading one version of absolute power for another (Macaluso and McKenzie 104). The previous research done on the similarities between the two rulers has, however, led me to the conclusion that there is a blurring between a good and bad governing power, which in turn can be connected to the distortion of utopian and dystopian societies, which will be discussed in the second section of this essay. Moreover, the second section will focus on District 13 as both an illusion of a utopia and a utopia gone wrong in relation to the dystopian society found in Panem under Snow. These focal points will be analyzed to see what Collins is trying to say about governing powers to readers, because she wants them to question their governments, to "think about the choices [their] government, past and present, or other governments around the world make" (Collins qtd. in Tanenhaus).

2. Panem as a Dystopia

A dystopian society is usually set in an imagined futuristic world where something has gone wrong and resulted in a corrupt and horrific society. A government that has total control often rules over a repressed society. They give the society an illusion that their power is never total, but the illusion is, however, maintained through absolute control over the people within that said society. Throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy President Coriolanus Snow uses different means of violence and manipulation to control Panem. Snow believes that his actions as a leader prevent Panem's destruction, keep it united and protect the people within the nation. His view of a united Panem is, however, only an illusion, since the Capitol and the districts do not work together. Snow, on the other hand, wants to reinforce this illusion through his power and control over Panem. This leads to a sense of powerlessness amongst the districts and the illusion can further be seen as an ideology, to keep the people within Panem in check and to maintain his power.

In this chapter I will look at Snow's power over Panem to illustrate that his way of governing could be seen as total. This will be illustrated through his techniques of government control, which is seen in his policy of scarcity, the panoptic structure over the districts, his use of propaganda and the Hunger Games. In addition to Snow's ruling being seen in a dystopian view, I will also look at an alternative perspective by examining Snow's governing power from a utopian viewpoint to illustrate that there can be different readings found in Collins' trilogy.

2.1. Power and Control

Those with power do not give it up easily; history has taught us that and Snow is no exception. He is the ruler of Panem, and is first described as "a small, thin man" (*HG* 87), but is in fact a ruthless leader, who will do anything to maintain his position in society with any means necessary. This can be seen when we learn that he uses poison to kill off his adversaries and allies who might potentially become a threat (*MJ* 200), in order to suppress any alternative to his existing government. This is to make the society believe that his way of governing Panem is the only way, enforcing his intention to keep the illusion of a united nation. Snow does, however, believe he has total control over the nation, which is seen in his use of propaganda, the annual Hunger Games, surveillance tactics and the fact that he lets most districts live in total poverty. The districts are at his mercy, since they are in a state of powerlessness and have no hope or see no solution to their condition. Snow has the authority to enforce power and control in Panem on a structural level and he makes sure that it is carried out in order to keep his power over the nation. In other words, Snow, as the hegemon over Panem, has been able to win consent to his rule from those he subjugates.

2.1.1. Inequalities in the Class System

By dividing the society into class systems, Snow shows an effective way of implanting control over the citizens of Panem. This leads to that the citizens see inequalities amid themselves both within and between the districts, making them resent each other instead of Snow and his ruling government. This could be seen as a strategic move from Snow, since if the focus of the citizens is on themselves instead of the government, then Snow's ruling power is safe. From a Marxist point of view, the caste system that the Capitol creates through their policies produces and maintains inequalities within the districts (Connors 95). One of the main tools used by the Capitol is producing scarcity, as Henthorne points, "[c]ontrolling food supplies can be a particularly effective means of social control during times of unrest" (115). The Capitol produce scarcity to divide people amongst themselves, as it promotes social and economic division within the districts. This illustrates Snow's goal to show unity in Panem is only an illusion. The merchant class within the districts hold themselves above the poor and rather than sympathizing with those who are even poorer, the merchants are hostile towards them. This is evidenced when Peeta's mother drives a starving Katniss away from her garbage can (*HG* 35). The poor, in turn, "resent those who don't have to sign up for tesserae" (*HG* 16), a system, which gives supplemental rations of grain and oil in exchange for extra entries in the "reaping". This support Gaventa's theory, as the resentment seen within the districts, divide the people and decreases the likelihood of them working together, leading to a sense of helplessness. This in turn shows how the Capitol has implanted a sense of individualism in the districts, proving that there is no unity in the districts, which in turn tightens Snow's grip of power.

2.1.2. Surveillance Through a Panoptic Structure

Panopticon, a term coined by Jeremy Bentham in 1791, is a prison in which the prisoners are uncertain whether they are currently being watched by an unseen guard (Wezner 149). This causes prisoners to modify their behavior, believing that they are always being watched. Michel Foucault, however, believes that it is not necessary for people to know with any degree of certainty that they are being watched for them to practice self-discipline (Connors 95). The modification of behavior is seen in how the Capitol is successful in controlling personal communication, making people fear talking openly. The Capitol has surveillance cameras throughout the districts, something that allows the state a constant window into the lives of the people of Panem. They are so successful in instilling fear that Katniss is afraid of being critical of them even before she becomes victor (*HG* 7). This is further enhanced when she

becomes almost paranoid that Snow is continuously watching her (*CF* 28-29), reinforcing Bentham's theory.

Foucault further elaborates on Bentham's concept, suggesting that the panoptic structure reveals how something real depends on something fictional, in this case the inescapable idea of punishment (Wezner 149). The Capitol generates fear by punishing people for even the most minor offenses, implanting a sense of powerlessness. This is further shown by the fact that electrified fences, topped with barbed wire and surveillance, secure the districts, something they are told is for their own safety (*HG* 5). This makes the citizens believe that the Capitol is providing them with protection, when, in fact, it is to the Capitol's "advantage to have [the districts] divided among [themselves]" (*HG* 16), strengthening the ideological beliefs the Capitol wants to instill in the districts. According to Lukács, an individual perception in a capitalist society is limited by class-consciousness, which enables members of a certain class to understand the world only in ways allowed by their class position (Booker, *Practical* 74). This ensures Snow's rule over the districts, since the people's awareness of the world beyond their own fences is limited.

2.1.3. Propaganda

Collins presents a dystopian society in her trilogy, where the media has become corrupt. The Capitol has monopolized the media and it is mainly used for propaganda to promote war, in order to create manufactured consent. This shows that the Capitol's ideological view is a part of the districts everyday practice, illustrating the hegemony behind the propaganda. Walter Lippman believes that the manufactured consent can be accomplished by controlling a person's "pseudo-environment", in which "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintances," thus constructing individualized models of reality (Lippman qtd. in Henthorne 74). One way of achieving this is through the control of information, which the Capitol does by isolating districts from each other and monopolizing mass communication. The Capitol makes it mandatory for the population to watch the only channel available. By controlling that channel and the broadcast they limit what people know about other places, making organized resistance impossible.

Additionally, the Capitol also uses misinformation to shape people's pseudo-environments (Henthorne 74), as seen by repeatedly showing District 13 in ruins and smouldered in toxic bombs (*HG* 101) as a tool to instigate fear and a way for them to manipulate the districts. The citizens of Panem cannot escape the propaganda the Capitol continuously propagate them with and by reinforcing their position of power over the people, they, in a way, hold them responsible for participating in their own oppression. This is evidenced by the fact that parents are forced by the Capitol to watch as their children are being slaughtered to show Panem that it is the Capitol

who has power. Rodriguez believes that, “The Capitol uses propaganda and entertainment to oppress people. That it does so effectively is evidenced by the fact that the residents of the districts regard themselves as having little to no control over their futures” (162). This shows that the Capitol knows that in order to maintain control, they only have to strip the districts of their social consciousness.

2.2. The Ideological Functions of the Hunger Games

Ideology, as we understand it today, is rooted in the writings of German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who defined ideology, as “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. [...] The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production” (Engels and Marx qtd. in Brooker 111). In other words, the system of ideas of the ruling class would be the ideology of that said society.

The ideology the Games create for Panem is an idea of individualism. They think that it is every man for himself, so they fight each other for their own survival. The Capitol exercises power over Panem and the Capitol affects Panem in a manner contrary to their interests (Gaventa 11). According to Pavlik the Games “are used as a tool to be seen as both a symbol of an ideology of oppression and a means of controlling the populace through a stylized act of violence” (30). The Games are a way for the government to show their absolute power over the people, and as a result they feel a sense of powerlessness, which is central to the regime’s maintenance of power. This is evidence when Katniss, who feels a sense of responsibility towards her little sister Primrose to protect her, knows that she is “powerless against the reaping” (*HG* 18). By constantly reminding the districts of their powerlessness, the Capitol makes it next to impossible for the citizens to escape Snow’s grip of power.

2.2.1. The Hunger Games

In the trilogy, the Capitol, with Snow at its head, determines the Games’ ideological content, and therefore the Games serve as a form of state propaganda. The origins and the creation of the annual televised event known as the Hunger Games was created after a rebellion, known as the Dark Days, and led by the 13th district against the Capitol, causing District 13’s “destruction” and the defeat of the other twelve districts. As a punishment and a reminder of the Capitol’s power, each district must sacrifice one boy and one girl, between the ages of 12 and 18, who are forced to fight each other to the death, leaving only one survivor to claim victory and to live out the rest of his or her life in peace and luxury, or so they are told (*HG* 21).

The Games are a televised event and the rest of the nation is forced to watch as their kids are being killed for the entertainment of the Capitol. As the Games are a

tool of state propaganda, the citizens of Panem have no chance of escaping them. This can be seen when Katniss points out that “It’s too bad, really, that they hold the reaping in the square – one of the few places in District 12 that can be pleasant” (*HG* 19). This shows that the Games are always a part of the citizens’ lives and by constantly reminding them of the Games, the government has absolute power over them. The Capitol even highlights the ideological importance of the Games before they begin by having the mayors of each district recount the history of Panem and the rebellion that led to the Games as a reminder of their power (*HG* 21). Katniss sees the real message behind the words, however, “[l]ook how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen” (*HG* 22).

The districts are fully aware of the fact that the Games are wrong, but they also know that they cannot do anything about them, since the Capitol has limited their mental horizons. Terry Eagleton believes that “if people do not actively combat a political regime which oppresses them, it may not be because they have meekly imbibed its governing values. [...] It may be because they are too fatalistic or apathetic to see the point of such activity. They may be frightened of the consequences of opposing the regime” (34). I agree with Eagleton, I, on the other hand, believe that it also has to do with the lack of hope. The districts do not have someone or something that is the driving force that they can put their faith in, so they decide to do nothing at all. They are not willing to risk opposing the regime if no one else is prepared to do the same. They need someone to light a spark in order for them to follow. This leads to that Snow’s governing power is strengthened, and the citizens remain powerless, which in turn supports the ideology behind the Games.

2.3. Panem as a “Utopia”

Despite the obvious facts that Panem is a dystopian society, there is a possibility to see the novels from a utopian perspective, at least if you look at it from President Snow’s viewpoint. He believes that his actions are justified based on the fact that he wants to protect Panem’s destruction. This is evident when he tells Katniss that a revolution would mean, “the entire system would collapse” (*CF* 15). Snow is the bodily representation of oppression, violence and fear all embedded in patriotism (Koenig 44). Pavlik even goes as far as to believe that “there is some sense that Snow understands and knowingly authorizes great wrongs because he intrinsically believes in the rightness of his actions, the notion of the greater good of the Capitol, and the preservation of the (peaceful) status quo” (32). Snow wants to create a united Panem, or an illusion of a united nation. It is as if he believes that his view of a utopic society is shared among the rest of Panem, while it is in fact he himself that buys into the illusion of the ideology he has created for the districts and the Capitol.

3. District 13: More than Meets the Eye

In More's work *Utopia*, he sets out a vision of an ideal society, and this has been the foundation for many utopian novels. A utopian society symbolizes people's hopes and dreams, but an ideal society is just that, a dream, because what this type of society offers more often than not seems to be out of reach. In Collins' trilogy, in contrast to Panem and the ruling of the Capitol, when we first encounter District 13, we know little about it and it seems like a perfect utopian society. This is something Henthorne seems to believe as well, "[i]ronically District 13 first seems to be more of a utopia than a dystopia in the sense that people have a shared sense of purpose and have their basic needs taken care of during a time of crisis by a government that has broad popular support" (120). These are aspects that would give anyone who have lived in under a totalitarian regime some sense of a promise for a better life.

This chapter will focus on Coin's governing over District 13 and as a leader in the resistance movement that is aiming to overthrow Snow's regime. I will look at how District 13 and Coin's ruling first seem like the solution to Panem's problems, but little do people know that underneath the perfect appearance lies a dystopian society brewing, more similar to the Capitol than first meets the eye, ready to come out of hiding. This is done to illustrate that dystopian and utopian societies are more similar to each other than one is first lead to believe, and the thin veil between the two sometimes makes it hard to separate them.

3.1. District 13 as a "Utopia"

District 13 is ruled by President Alma Coin, who, like Snow, is a strong president, but seems very different from Snow, since her ruling, at first, looks like a democracy. For the refugees who have manage to escape their own homes, District 13 is a safe have and in a sense, District 13 can be seen as their saviors. What makes District 13 stand out early on is the fact that the citizens are allowed to freely criticize their government without the fear of retribution. This can be seen when people express their dissent openly when Coin announces that her government will not prosecute Peeta and the other former tributes once the war is over (*MJ* 68). Henthorne believes, however, that Coin must allow a certain level of dissent so that she can present her government as an alternative to the repressive Capitol (75). Coin must make her government more presentable for both District 13 and the rest of the nation, in order to make herself seem like the best candidate to run the nation once the war is over. This shows how Coin's way of governing is hegemonic and that she tries to present District 13 as the best ideal society. Booker believes that "the view of a utopian society as being the ideal to strive for has many thinkers becoming suspicious of utopian thought, fearing that such visions can ultimately work only to the advantage

of the status quo” (*Dystopian 3*). This shows that the goals that a governing power has for a society to become utopian, is only for individual gain, and more often than not this leads to a dystopia. District 13 is not a dystopia that is a true opposite of a utopia, but rather a utopia that has gone wrong. This can be seen in Coin’s attempt to make herself and her government look more utopic than it actually is. In fact Coin is just as manipulative as Snow, she is just better at hiding it, which only shows that she is a better master of ideology and reflecting this in her supposedly hegemonic ruling.

3.2. Coin’s Manipulative Nature

In opposition to the Capitol, District 13 provides a rallying point for rebel sympathies (Pavlik 33) and the resistance movement first seems like the perfect solution to the problems Panem is facing with Snow. District 13 has turned self-sufficient in the 75 years it was allegedly destroyed, and Katniss even goes as far as describing District 13 as “militaristic” and “overly programmed” (*MJ 34*), working as a well-oiled machine (*MJ 70*). They have turned its citizens into an army where Coin is their General and she works to ensure that those she oversees are kept on a tight rein, supposedly for their own safety. They are expected to make sacrifices in the present, for the greater good and for the hope of a better future. In fact they seem to believe that democracy will resume once the war with the Capitol is over, as evidenced by Plutarch, who declares “[w]e’re going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representative to be their voice in a centralized government” (*MJ 99*). Like Snow, Coin feeds the citizens with lies, an illusion of a perfect society, to make herself look better, in order for her to gain more power. This illustrates how Coin is better than Snow in mastering hegemonic ruling and how she is able to manipulate District 13 to put their trust in her ideology.

3.3. Coin as a Ruthless Leader

Henthorne seems to believe that Collins named Coin to show the resemblance to Snow, both being two sides of the same coin (121). Katniss quickly learns that Coin, even though she claims to be a democratic president, is in fact a dictator who reserves final say in everything concerning District 13 and the resistance. Katniss’ first observation of Coin is that she is an observer, and that she has flawless hair (*MJ 13*), something that can be connected to the pretense of Coin’s character. Her appearance is too perfect to be true and she wants people to see her in a certain way, but underneath the surface she is just as controlling and ruthless as Snow. In fact, Pavlik’s view of Coin is that she “is not beyond her own brand of ruthlessness (33), showing similarities to Snow and his regime. While crimes against humanity and torture are expected of Snow, Coin’s own government is not above such practices.

As seen when Katniss finds her prep team, who have been abducted from the Capitol against their wishes, abused and imprisoned in a sublevel of District 13 for taking a slice of bread more than allowed (*MJ* 58). Katniss accurately interprets it as Coin's warning about who is in control and what will happen to those who disobey (*MJ* 60).

Coin further resembles the very enemy she denounces when she employs similar tactics and strategies as Snow. This can be seen in District 13's willingness to kill combatants and non-combatants alike during the siege of the Nut, an important Capitol base in District 2, to gain the upper hand in the war. They do not care that it involves the sacrifice of innocent lives, as long as it prevents further attacks. Katniss notes, however, that with "that kind of thinking... you could turn it into an argument for killing anyone at any time. You could justify sending kids into the Hunger Games to prevent the districts from getting out of line" (*MJ* 259). I believe that the rebels are blinded by their goal to have a better life for themselves that they cannot see that they are putting blind trust in someone who is only looking out for herself and the power she will gain once the war is over. Brian McDonald also seems to have this view; "The rebels are willing to follow Coin unquestioningly, which can be compared to the Capitol's willingness to follow Snow in the same manner (77). This shows how successful Coin is in her hegemonic ruling, as they seem to accept her way of governing and leading a rebellion.

Coin's ruthlessness reaches its climax after Snow uses Capitol children as a human barricade in front of his mansion after the rebels have invaded the Capitol and a hovercraft bearing the Capitol's seal drops sets of bombs disguised as gifts on the children. Katniss' sister, Primrose is killed and she believes that it is a last desperate act from Snow to win the war. When Snow tells her that Coin instigated this horror to end "whatever frail allegiance [his] people still felt for [him]" (*MJ* 417), she takes his word for it, since she knows the kind of military tactics the rebel leaders like Coin are willing to use in pursuit of their own supposedly justified ends (Pavlik 34). This only gives further proof that Coin and Snow are two sides of the same coin.

3.4. The Blurring of Dystopia and Utopia

Collins wants to problematize the readers' understanding of what a good and bad government actually is and she does that by blurring the dystopian and utopian lines in her trilogy by depicting Snow and Coin in a way that makes readers question where evil actually lies. When the war is won by District 13 and the resistant movement, or more importantly by Coin, who rules Panem now, her true nature is revealed. The plan all along, according to Snow, was for the districts and the Capitol to destroy each other, leaving District 13 in control (*MJ* 418). By overthrowing the Capitol by using violence, the citizens of Panem trade the Capitol's version of absolute power for District 13's version of it (Macaluso and McKenzie 104).

Additionally, Snow warned Katniss against the rebellion's intentions when he stated, "even the strongest cannot overcome the Capitol" (*CF* 208). Whether it is blind faith in his own authority and the strength of his political system that makes him state this or if Collins is suggesting that whether Snow lives or dies, nothing will change, is hard to say. Maybe the whole system is inescapable and someone as thirsty for power and as abusive will replace him (Elfassy Bitoun). This is exactly what happens in the trilogy and is seen when Coin even goes as far as proposing that the children of important Capitol citizens should be forced to play the Games one last time. She wants them to believe that she is providing the districts, which have suffered so much, with closure. What she is truly offering, however, is the same rationale as the Capitol has used. I suspect that this has been her plan all along. She is as ruthless as Snow when it comes to controlling the population of her own society, what says that their mindsets are not similar as well? Orwell once said "What meaning would there be, even if it were successful, in bringing down [a] system in order to stabilize something that is far bigger and in its different way just as bad?" (Orwell qtd. in Williams, *Orwell* 63). Eventually Katniss realizes that she has traded one violent regime for another, both showing the same dystopian tendencies.

Moreover, after Katniss has had her final conversation with Snow and he has enlightened her of Coin's true nature, commander Paylor from District 8 asks her if she has found what she was looking for, and in a sense she has. I believe that Katniss' suspicions about Coin have been there all along to warn her of this outcome. She only needed one final reminder, albeit from the last person she might have expected it from, to make her realize that the warning signs were there for a reason and underneath Coin's perfect exterior was an equally tyrannical leader that would replace Snow. Koenig further believes that Katniss finds the truth through memory, not a fabricated memory that the leaders have fed her, but rather truth in an unfabricated memory of events and people. Katniss recognizes that she cannot live in a world that "sacrifices its children's lives to settle its difference" (*MJ* 440), and she refuses to tolerate a new state built on the same foundation as Snow's Capitol (46-47). Katniss knows that "nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now" (*MJ* 432) and when she hesitates about whom to throw the arrow at, we can see that Collins symbolizes the blurring of utopia and dystopia, and that she has subverted our image of what a good and bad governing power is. Anna Soter thinks that, "[p]erhaps it is discomfoting to discover that neither side is pure; neither side has total merit; and, neither side is excluded from potential manipulation of facts, people, or agendas" (32). Therefore it might not come as a surprise that Katniss ends up assassinating President Coin instead of executing President Snow, because it only shows that she does not want the system to repeat itself in an endless circle.

4. Is There a Point to Rebellion?

Knowing that utopia and dystopia cannot be significantly told apart and that the rebellion ended in failure, we have to ask ourselves, is the rebellion presented in the novels really futile? If the new government under Coin is going to end up as corrupt as Snow's government that they are trying to overthrow, why rebel at all? Conditions are going to end up being just as bad, making the prospect of rebelling useless and disappointing. Knowing this, however, does not erase the fact that there are positive aspects to a rebellion. It is therefore important to know that rebelling can cause change, but maybe not always the change that set out to achieve from the beginning.

Collins' writing is unquestionably violent, as evidenced by the previous two sections, but it is violent in a way that is necessary and it does not disguise the reality of the world she has created. Collins has said, "I don't write about adolescence. I write about war. For adolescence" (Collins qtd. in Dominus). She wants to educate the readers about the realities of warfare, "If we wait too long, what kind of expectation can we have? We think we're sheltering them, but what we're doing is putting them at a disadvantage" (Collins qtd. in Dominus). Pretending that violence does not exist or trying to lessen its impact in the novels would defeat the purpose. Collins does, therefore, not present the revolution as something glorious or honorable. The trilogy ends with Katniss exhausted, broken and haunted by all that has happened, even 20 years into her future, causing her to consider suicide at one point (*MJ* 438). The violent revolution did result in a new world order, but at what cost? What would have happened if instead of using violence, the rebels continued to build on the groundwork of a nonviolent resistance that is present in the novels?

4.1. Is Violence Really Necessary?

A violent revolution clearly did not work for the rebels and what makes the revolution even more of a failure is the fact that within Collins' trilogy were the foundations of nonviolent alternatives that could have had great chances of succeeding as a revolutionary alternative to the violence the rebels offered. This foundation can be seen in the citizens' small acts of collective resistance that are formed from dissent towards their government over decades of injustice, which will be discussed in this chapter. Gene Sharp states, "[v]iolence against violence is reinforcing. The nonviolent group not only does not need to use violence, but they must not do so lest they strengthen their opponent and weaken themselves" (*The Politics* 112). Sharp continues to argue that nonviolent tactics are strategically superior and are more likely to "contribute to the diffusion of effective power throughout the society" (*The Politics* 802), which is necessary for a non-violent

revolution to be successful. First, however, it is necessary to have knowledge of what these nonviolent alternatives might be.

Sharp's understanding of political power is that it "depend[s] on acceptance of the regime, on the submission and obedience of the population, and on the cooperation of innumerable people and the many institutions of the society" (*From Dictatorship* 19). This acceptance could, therefore, be revoked and the power the governing regime has over the society would cease to exist once the population realizes this. Katniss shows this understanding when she states; "The Capitol's fragile because it depends on the districts for everything. [...] If we declare our freedom, the Capitol collapses" (*MJ* 198). One of the most powerful ways to accomplish this downfall of the oppressive government is through "courageous mass actions of political defiance" (Sharp, *From Dictatorship* 22) and there are several moments throughout the trilogy where defiance occurs and where individual actions serve as a spark to inspire Panem to take these actions.

4.1.1. A Small Act of Resistance

One of the most significant moments in the trilogy that serves as a spark for the resistance movement comes when Katniss holds out the nightlock berries for herself and Peeta to eat as a suicide pact at the end of their first Hunger Games (*HG* 418). She cannot imagine the ripple effect she will cause in the nation, but it is, in fact, this moment of rebellion that sparks a revolution across the districts. Her first thought is survival, but Katniss also knows that the Capitol must have a victor in their Games. She wants to be "more than just a piece in their Games" (*HG* 286), and a suicide would defeat the ideological purpose of the Games. By undermining Snow's control of the nation, Katniss makes the Capitol look like fools (*HG* 418; *CF* 22) and since the Hunger Games are the Capitol's weapon, no one is supposed to be able to defeat it (*HG* 435). But Katniss' small act of resistance gives the rest of Panem hope. If a girl from District 12 of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop everyone in the districts from doing the same? (*CF* 25).

4.1.2. Defiance

Moreover, just as a spark cannot light fires without fuel, Katniss' act of defiance would not have the same impact without a rebellious spirit already being present. Clemente states that the society of Panem is "a society overripe for the revolution" (24) and Collins includes several moments in which the people of the districts challenge and defy the Capitol nonviolently. In the trilogy even the smallest act of defiance shows great significance in the movement, since it illustrates that resistance against the Capitol is a possibility. This can be seen when District 12 stands in

silence when Katniss volunteers for her sister Primrose at “the reaping” in order to protect her: “So instead of acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong” (HG 28-29). This is the first act of collective resistance in the trilogy and it clearly demonstrates that the citizens of Panem are not happy with their circumstances. It illustrates that the people are willing to take a stand against the cruel and unjust system they are living with. Sharp describes this act of collective resistance as symbolic challenges, which are “political actions that are limited in scope and are designed to test and influence the mood of the population and to prepare them for continuing struggle through noncooperation and political defiance” (*From Dictatorship* 60). This act is amplified when the people of District 12 salute Katniss’ bravery by touching three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and hold them out to her (HG 29), an act of solidarity, something the Capitol has been trying to prevent.

4.1.3. Solidarity

Throughout the trilogy the actions that ultimately could be influential in bringing down the Capitol are those where people are willing to work together to achieve their goals. The message Collins is trying to give her readers is clear: in order for change to be effective, people have to be prepared to act together in unison. Through solidarity they will be able to overthrow the tyranny that is the Capitol and replace it with a new regime. In the middle of the second novel, a symbolic challenge takes place that is so powerful that it makes Panem and the Capitol call for change. The previous victors, feeling betrayed for being forced by the Capitol to enter the arena for a second time in the 75th Hunger Games, also known as the Quarter Quell, “join hands [...] all twenty-four of [them], stand in one unbroken line in what must be the first public show of unity among the districts since the Dark Days” (CF 311). Panem witnesses an act of solidarity amongst the tributes as “[the] victors staged [their own] uprising, and maybe, just maybe, the Capitol won’t be able to contain this one” (CF 312). Collins makes it clear that it is unlikely that the original creators of the Games wrote the rules to the third Quarter Quell; it is more likely that this is a reaction to the current rebellions that have been occurring as an aftermath to Katniss’ defiant act (CF 211-212). To the Capitol’s dismay, instead of instilling a sense of subjugation amongst Panem, their policy of repression backfires and gives the rebels something they can use to gain support amongst both the districts and the citizens of the Capitol.

With these acts of defiance and symbolic challenges Collins has shown us that Panem is ready for revolution and if they had only continued with these nonviolent tactics they might have had a more successful revolution.

4.2. Envisioning a New Social Order – Could that be?

If the rebels had continued on the nonviolent path as presented in the previous section the outcome probably would have looked different, but Collins chooses to present violence instead, to make her point come across. According to Clemente, “Collins’ progressive novels urge this difficult commitment to avoid the repetition of past error” (28), so maybe Collins’ use of violence is her urging readers not to do the same. This can be seen as contradictory, since she utilizes violence to fight violence, but maybe it is the only way, since we have become desensitized by all the horrors we have endured over the past decades. Collins wants to educate us, and by using violence she is showing readers how their world operates in these types of situations.

Moreover, if the rebellion under Coin is as corrupt and limited as the governing under Snow, then what is the blueprint for a better society? Collins has chosen not to give the readers one, as every system is flawed. Foucault repetitively argues the need to oppose the existing order of society, but, like Collins, refuses to propose an alternative order as a goal of this opposition. For, “to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system” (Booker, *Dystopian* 14-15). Collins does not give a political solution because it is impossible to create a perfect system. That would be a utopia, and Foucault seems to believe that in a sense by rejecting the status quo, the rejection leads to a continual change, a sort of alternative utopian model with no final “vision of happiness or liberation, a brand of permanent revolution, because it seeks to realize no image of an ideal society” (Booker, *Dystopian* 15). So by continuously questioning the government and not looking for an ideal society we can reach a vision of happiness and liberation.

The final picture in *Mockingjay* is of a new social order, where Panem’s children are, instead of being sent to their deaths, rather sent to school to learn from their nation’s violent history (*MJ* 454). I believe that children need some sense of normalcy in their lives and the everyday life that has been presented in the trilogy has only given them a life filled with poverty and horror. By teaching children about their own history it could prevent history from repeating itself. This in turn further hints that hope for a better future lays in the hands of children, which supports the fact that YA dystopian novels promote hope. This is an optimistic picture, and Collins seems to believe that it falls to the young to create a better future, “I think it’s crucial that young readers are considering scenarios about humanity’s future because those challenges are about to land in their laps” (Collins qtd. in Tanenhaus).

However hopeful this idea sounds, the words of Plutarch echoes in the end and work to undermine the glimmer of hope that children might provide. While he acknowledges the fact that people might recognize that the horrors of the past should not be repeated, he also understands that humans are “fickle, stupid beings” possessed of “poor memories” and with “a great gift for self-destruction” (*MJ* 442).

5. Further Research and Conclusion

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy covers several different topics that could lead to further analysis, such as identity, politics and environmental issues. This shows that the trilogy could be approached from other perspectives. One such approach could be to do an analysis of how Katniss develops as a strong female heroine throughout the novels from a feminist perspective. Further research could also be done on the government's control over the media, as a means to look at reality television and compare it the consumerism of these types of programs today. This in turn could lead to a more in depth analysis of the trilogy as social criticism by investigating Collins' commentary on the contemporary society, which could be used to educate people. There are numerous of choices for further research on the trilogy, since the issues that are presented raise discussions on many different levels.

By using a Marxist literary analysis to examine the theme of power and how it is mirrored in the trilogy, this essay reveals that the approach to the subject of government power and its ruling is multi-layered. Collins treats the theme from many different angles and by placing the governments in a dystopian setting she criticizes the corruption of the governing powers as a means to problematize readers' understanding of a good and bad government.

A comparative analysis of President Coriolanus Snow and President Alma Coin has illustrated that it is hard to differentiate between a good and a bad government at first glance. Collins shows this through blurring the line between the dystopian and utopian societies presented under these two absolute rulers. Snow's ruling demonstrates an absolute power and a ruler who wants to maintain control of his society through means of violence, restriction of basic resources and manipulation. The trilogy does not simply offer an account of how a government that uses these strategies loses validity, it offers a tale that asks its reader to recognize and resist oppression. In a way, the trilogy is didactic, since it wants to teach its readers about government control. Its own message of peace and hope is, however, subverted by offering no logical or practical way to remove oppressive regimes from power other than through militaristic means. Coin's governing and her approach as a rebel leader demonstrates these tactics, while she at the same time reveals her true self. Coin resembles the very enemy she denounces, utilizing similar methods and thus showing that the system repeats itself in a vicious circle. By eliminating the problem before it has a chance to truly arise, Katniss shows that the rebellion ended in somewhat a failure, making readers question whether rebellion really is futile.

Furthermore, I have also illustrated that a nonviolent approach to overthrowing the regime under Snow could be plausible and the foundation for this is found within the writings of the trilogy. The nonviolent approach has show an

alternative reading of the trilogy, in which I have tried to give a more peaceful way of dealing with an unjust regime, an approach that could have lead to a more successful revolution. Collins, on the other hand, chooses to present a violent revolution in order to fight violence and maybe this is the only way to make her point come across in our society today.

In conclusion, my main concern in this essay is that *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a dystopian trilogy that raises awareness of the power that governments have, criticizing its corruption in order to make readers see that maybe it is not easy to spot a good government from a bad one. Collins leaves us readers with cautionary words that serve as a reminder that destruction looms near if people are not careful with maintaining their history and their sense of social cautions (Rodriguez 164). Whether the ending leaves us with the hope for a better future or not is hard to tell, since the ending is ambiguous, as we do not know what the future holds. Collins has chosen to leave it up to us readers to envision both the ending of the trilogy and the future. It is up to us to keep going as we are and hope for a better future or to take matters into our own hands to prevent our future to be turned into the dystopian society we have just experienced in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*. May the odds be ever in our favor.

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