

Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Scope and Spectrum in English Classrooms

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Abstract

From novels to films to video games, Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction is consistently one of the hottest genres in entertainment. Dystopian novels first appeared in the 19th century, and writers have continued to explore this unique genre ever since. Dystopian fiction for young adults has grown as a genre, and become increasingly popular in recent years. These novels have been adapted into popular films and have reached a million of audiences. These novels and films have a distinct flavour to them that has made them extremely popular in today's society. The popularity of YA dystopias has led researchers to investigate why adolescents find this genre so compelling and how academics can incorporate it into educational contexts. This article analyses the print and screen versions of *The Hunger Games* (2008), (2012) to identify the essential elements that make YA dystopias significant and relevant in English classrooms.

Keywords: YA dystopia, Critical literacy, Adolescent development, English classrooms.

Defining YA Dystopia

According to the editors of *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, YA dystopian fiction is writing that addresses pressing global issues such as “liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self” and the text is “directed at young readers, who are trying to understand the world and their place in it” (Basu et al., 2013, p. 1). YA dystopias introduces the readers to an imaginary world, frequently set in the far future, where “the dream has become a nightmare” (Booker & Thomas, 2009, p. 65), where “technical and political authoritarianism had caused the near obliteration of humans” (Aughterson, 2016, p. 99). These dystopian warnings are condensed into thrilling quests with compelling stories and “accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood” (Basu et al., 2013, p. 1).

The Hunger Games Critique Analysis

Dystopian worlds are called the “histories of the present” (Gordin et al., 2010, p. 1). YA dystopian fiction depicts fictitious worlds and the authors' visions of the future. Yet they talk far more about the contemporary world of their creation. YA dystopias are used to critique the social,

economic, and political issues that the authors observe in their present. Despite its mythological inspiration, *The Hunger Games* seeks to be a mindful reflection on today's world. Author Suzanne Collins asserts that “the sociopolitical overtones of *The Hunger Games* were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events” (Blasingame & Collins, 2009, p. 726). Collins credits an incident in which her drowsy mind combined a newsreel with a reality show as the root of the idea (Blasingame & Collins, 2009, p. 727). The influence of modern reality television can be seen throughout the novel and its film adaptation, where much of the world's fate is determined by how the media manipulates one's perception and how the government manipulates the media.

The Hunger Games takes place in the post-apocalyptic dystopian world Panem, a future nation built on the ruins of North America. Panem consists of a capital city, called ‘The Capitol’, located in the Rocky Mountains and surrounded by twelve outlying districts. The Capitol is a technologically advanced, utopian city where the nation's most wealthy and powerful citizens reside. The Capitol is also the colloquial name for the ruling government of Panem and it symbolizes oppression and control. The Capitol exercises its political control over the twelve districts with fear and harsh punishments. Every year,

children from twelve districts are chosen to compete in a televised death match called the Hunger Games.

The tesserae system and the way the tributes are chosen for the Games are perhaps the finest examples of the Capitol reinforcing socioeconomic differences among residents of a single district. In theory, the reaping, the lottery by which tributes are chosen is random, and anyone could be chosen. In reality, the impoverished are far more likely than the wealthy to be forced to pay as tributes. Those children who are eligible for the Hunger Games can enter their names into the reaping multiple times in exchange for additional rations of food and oil, known as tesserae. Because most poor children must take tesserae to survive, they have more entries in the reaping than children from wealthy families who do not require tesserae. As a result, they are more likely to be chosen: "Gale, who is eighteen and has been either helping or single-handedly feeding a family of five for seven years, will have his name in forty-two times. You can see why someone like Madge [Mayor's child], who has never been at risk of needing a tessera, can set him off" (Collins, 2008, p. 13). As a consequence, the Capitol not only imposes socioeconomic disparities among residents of a single district, but it also creates an emotional divide.

Furthermore, the Hunger Games favour Career Tributes—tributes from wealthier districts who have spent their whole lives preparing to compete in the Hunger Games.

The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier districts, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. . . . It's technically against the rules to train tributes before they reach the Capitol but it happens every year. . . . And like as not, the winner will be one of them. (Collins, 2008, p. 94)

The Careers frequently volunteer for the Games, and they usually win owing to their training and physical fitness. Districts One, Two, and Four can afford to generate Career Tributes due to their considerable riches compared to other districts. Because the Career Tributes frequently win, they bring even more money and prestige to their home districts, as well as additional Victors who serve as mentors for future generations of tributes. They attract

more sponsors as a result of their chances of winning. As a result, their odds improve with time, while the possibilities of other districts' tributes diminish. This not only sustains the social and economic divides between the districts, but also fosters jealousy and animosity between them.

Throughout the Games, the tributes are labelled with their district of origin to further emphasize the differences between the districts. The tributes' costume for the Games' opening ceremony exemplifies this: "For the opening ceremonies, you're supposed to wear something that suggests your district's principal industry. District 11, agriculture. District 4, fishing. District 3, factories" (Collins, 2008, p. 66). Katniss, the protagonist, learns about District Eleven's livelihood in the Arena, during a talk with a fellow tribute named Rue. Despite the fact that their talk is innocent and about their lives and experiences, it may be censored in order to keep the districts apart. Katniss says, "It's interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don't want people in different districts to know about one another" (Collins, 2008, p. 203). Outside of the Arena, the less they know about each other, the less likely they are to form alliances.

The Capitol desensitises its own people to the deaths of those in the districts by turning the Games into a reality show. The Hunger Games arenas "are historic sites, preserved after the Games. Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths took place" (Collins, 2008, pp. 144-45). While the Capitol audience has their favourites and is engrossed in the Games, they see it as a show in the end. As a result, if the districts revolt against the government, they are unlikely to provide support. People who live in the Capitol are also less likely to regard the government's statements as deceptive and the media as manipulative. "Collins suggests that the citizens living in the districts are aware of the ways they are oppressed, while those living in the Capitol are not" (Green-Barteet, 2014, p. 48). In this sense, the Games, a reality show, seek to prevent the

districts from rebelling against the Capitol by instilling fear, hope, and division among them, as well as poisoning its own people and reducing the likelihood of an alliance. Collins portrays the reality show, a concept familiar to the younger age, as a tool used by the oppressive government to keep its citizens subservient.

The Hunger Games is a televised event that takes place in both the Capitol and the districts, and it includes all of the typical elements of a reality show: the casting (the Reaping ceremony), the preliminary rounds in which the tributes are judged, an interview in which the tributes are introduced and questioned, and the final event, in which the tributes can earn supplies from sponsors if they are likeable enough. The film adaptation's criticism of modern reality television is demonstrated from the first scene, in which Caesar Flickerman and Seneca Crane debate the Hunger Games. The show begins with Flickerman standing in front of massive screens on a set that looks identical of *Big Boss*, and *The Biggest Loser*. A crowd of well-dressed, smiling people appears as the camera pans across the audience. Later in the film, when Katniss arrives in The Capitol, viewers are treated to another glimpse of the sadistic television show as the hosts celebrate the occasion: "Over one hundred thousand people craning to get a glimpse of this year's tributes. And the sponsors get to see the tributes for the first time. The importance of this moment cannot be overstated" (Ross, 2012). The Hunger Games is, in many aspects, a critique of modern reality television, which pits participants against one another in humiliating and often degrading competitions for the entertainment of the public. As Haymitch asserts, "You really want to know how to stay alive? You get people to like you. . . . When you're in the middle of the games and you're starving or freezing, some water, a knife . . . And those things only come from sponsors. And to get sponsors, you have to make people like you" (Ross, 2012). There are strong parallels between the Hunger Games and modern reality television, in which viewers frequently vote for participants to survive.

The Hunger Games portrays the tributes' suffering as mass entertainment, and the more they suffer, ideally in combat with one another, the more exciting the Games become. The main attraction for viewers of the Games is

voyeurism, specifically watching the tributes—who are, of course, young adolescents or teenagers—fight and perish. Katniss mentions prior Games and what made them popular at various moments, and a recurring idea is that viewers want to see tributes fighting one another and not dying too quickly, to prolong the entertainment. Cato's slow death epitomizes the principle: "I don't know how long it has been, maybe an hour or so, when Cato hits the ground and we hear the mutts dragging him, dragging him back into the Cornucopia. *Now they'll finish him off*, I think. But there's still no cannon" (Collins, 2008, p. 337). The muttations do not murder Cato right away after defeating him, and Katniss learns that the Gamemakers want Cato to live because it provides an exceedingly gruesome display. They want to give protracted misery that the spectators at home will not be able to turn away from because it is the Games' final act. The suffering, on the other hand, does not have to be solely physical. It can also be psychological. Katniss and Peeta's romance, for example, is the subject of so much interest because it is assumed to be doomed. They are dubbed "star-crossed lovers," (Collins, 2008, p. 247) which means ill-fated lovers, and the threat of pain adds drama and makes them entertaining to watch.

Throughout the Games, Katniss and her team influence how others see her by controlling her external image, which includes what she says and how she acts. At the reaping ceremony, for example, she does not cry in front of the cameras because she does not want to give the idea of being weak and thus an easy target. Furthermore, by focusing a considerable deal on Katniss's preparations for the Games' opening ceremony, the novel and its film adaptation emphasize how important appearances are for reality television. The dress Cinna makes for her is the focal point of this emphasis. It is covered in synthetic flames, earning Katniss the label "the girl who was on fire," (Collins, 2008, p. 70) and it sets her apart from the other tributes. In the Games, attracting attention is more than just a matter of vanity. "One year, our tributes were stark naked and covered in black powder to represent coal dust. It's always dreadful and does nothing to win favor with the crowd" (Collins, 2008, p. 66). The most spectacular tributes tend to attract sponsors,

who can offer gifts that will be useful throughout the Games. Similarly, Katniss covers her tears throughout the Games because self-pitying tributes are unappealing to sponsors. As a result, a tribute's appearance and demeanour play a crucial role in their survival strategy on reality television.

In the Hunger Games, the victor is the last living tribute. "There's usually a lag of a few days between the end of the competition and the presentation of the victor so that they can put the starving, wounded, mess of a person back together again" (Collins, 2008, p. 350). The victors of the Hunger Games usually receive a house in the Victory Village as a reward for their victory. "If we win, we'll each get a house in the part of town reserved for Hunger Games' victors. . . . the Capitol had built a dozen fine houses in each district. Of course, in ours only one is occupied. Most of the others have never been lived in at all" (Collins, 2008, p. 304). Needless to say, most victors suffer from PTSD, nightmares, insomnia, or addictions following the Games. Haymitch, for example, is "drunk every year" (Collins, 2008, p. 46), and he drinks not to feel, but rather to forget the horror he witnessed in the Arena.

In essence, the Games are a televised sporting event in which multiple competitors compete for rewards. When discussing the previous years' Games, Katniss even calls the tributes as "players" (Collins, 2008, p. 39). The majority of the players, on the other hand, are unwilling, and the only way to win is to outlive the other tributes, which is done largely by fighting and killing them. In each of these respects, the Hunger Games are reminiscent of Ancient Rome's gladiatorial games, in which armed participants battle to death, some voluntarily and others not. The fact that the Games are constantly televised and discussed in Panem's media, of course, harkens back to today's reality television, and the Hunger Games thus draws a connection between the gladiatorial games and modern reality television. This connection suggests that, while not quite as barbaric as the gladiatorial games, modern reality television still presents real life as entertainment, turning real people into commodities. Their worth is defined by the amount of entertainment they produce, and as a result, they lose their own identities. The narrative contends that modern reality television is a form of objectification.

The Hunger Games is a story about an insurrection and a battle, but it is not about fighting and bloodshed, despite the fact that it is frequently at the core of the plot. The focus is on politics and how information is used and exploited in order to acquire and maintain power, as well as how media is created and manipulated. Collins makes the younger generation look at notions that they are familiar with, such as reality shows and media broadcasting—in a fresh light by presenting them in the unexpected context of a future dystopian world.

Didactic Benefits of YA Dystopias

YA dystopias are designed not only to entertain readers and viewers, but also to educate them about the concepts and characteristics of a dystopian world or society. A dystopian society is characterized by human sufferings in the form of deprivation, oppression, technological control, loss of freedom, fear, squalor, disease, overcrowding, environmental destruction, or war. These characteristics are shown through today's society but at a more drastic level. Readers and viewers gain more knowledge by understanding the ways in which the themes and topics are relevant to the modern environment.

Based on *The Hunger Games* critique analysis, the themes and elements of YA dystopias have a definite significance for adolescents, and they also provide a wealth of material for literary and language studies. According to Gadowski (2014), YA dystopian literature has developed into a "powerful tool for young readers to tackle cogent cultural ideas" (p. 145). Basu et al. (2013) claim that YA dystopian fiction have educational value because "their wildly fantastic premises may provide young people with an entry point into real-world problems, encouraging them to think about social and political issues in new ways, or even for the first time" (pp. 4-5). Additionally, Williams (2021) calls modern YA literature "an outstanding valuable resource for the EFL classroom" because they "enrich learning and enjoyment in learning" (p. 141). Given that many EFL students, especially in higher grades, have inadequate ability to express themselves in English and grasp authentic English materials, showcasing these works in educational contexts would be prudent. Even linguistic obstacles can be overcome if the educational material is engaging and tailored to the students' tastes. Furthermore,

screening these works in classrooms will increase students' motivation, leading to an interaction with the literary work and, as a result, a growth in their language understanding, reading ability, and creativity.

Moreover, other researchers have found that YA dystopian fictions tailored well with adolescent development. For example, Scholes and Ostenson (2013) claim that "the settings, themes and characters in dystopian fiction are an appropriate fit with the intellectual changes that occur during adolescence" (p. 14). Similar to this, Appleyard (1991), with regard to YA literature in general, claims that: "these books fit the teenagers' way of making sense out of the world" (p. 100). Besides, he describes that adolescents admire literature for three specific reasons. First, the experience—"involvement with the book and identification with the character", second, they appreciate "the realism of the story", and third, they consider that "a good story makes them think" (p. 100). All of these elements are present in YA dystopias, which encourage critical thinking in adolescents and invite them to reflect on social, political, and ethical issues as well as personal development by identifying with the protagonists and drawing parallels between the fictional worlds in the books and the real world. Thus, despite being fictitious literature, YA dystopias address highly pertinent topics for the adolescents.

YA dystopias are often inspired by true events or places, and then extended to a futuristic scenario from the far reaches of the imagination. Even if these stories are often located in the future, the world around the characters and even the characters themselves may feel quite similar to those of the present. Moreover, if the students are motivated by an exciting and relatable story, they are also more likely to communicate with their experiences, thoughts, and feelings and it will be easier and more enjoyable for the students to get involved in the language learning process. Additionally, screening these film adaptations in classrooms may encourage students to critique today's reality and consider complicated political and societal concerns. YA dystopias can be used in the classroom for a variety of reasons, including inspiring students to get involved in social projects (Simmons, 2014), fostering the development of their critical literacy

(Marshall, 2014), educating them about the drawbacks of consumerism (Wilkinson, 2010), and promoting political engagement (Ames, 2013). As a result, YA dystopias have a solid argument for application in the educational context, notably in English classrooms.

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