

COLLINS “ON FIRE”: TEACHING CULTURAL LITERACY THROUGH THE HUNGER GAMES

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Abstract

This essay examines the growing need to provide students with the opportunity to study young adult literature with a scholarly eye through implementing the latest literature craze, Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games, in the English classroom. While the first book of The Hunger Games series may be controversial in the classroom due to its troubling content, this paper argues that the book which carries the series title provides a basis for academic discussion on par with classic dystopian novels commonly taught in the high school English classroom. In addition, unlike the common notion that young adult literature cannot contribute to cultural literacy, this paper argues that The Hunger Games provides a springboard to fostering cultural literacy in young adults.

General Introduction

Using the theories of English educators and well-known researchers in the field of education such as Paulo Freire, E.D. Hirsch, and Leila Christenbury, this paper explores cultural literacy in the context of the new culture of young adult literature, particularly focusing on how the first book of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* belongs in the high school English curriculum as both an engaging and academic text. This essay contributes to the field of literary studies by examining such a cultural phenomenon with an academic eye; it also contributes to the field of education by arguing its usefulness in a high school English classroom.

1 Introduction

What do George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, William Golding, and Suzanne Collins have in common? For one thing, they see a world that is headed for disaster, and write novels to send a warning to humanity. They see a future where Big Brother watches you in your sleep, where books are burned to prevent you from gaining knowledge, where war breaks out among children, and where, perhaps most shockingly, children fight each other to the death as a form of entertainment for audiences. Each of these novel features a dystopia, which is characterized as “a society that is a counter-utopia, a repressed, controlled, restricted system with multiple social controls put into place via government, military, or a powerful authority figure” (Spisak 55). While *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Lord of the Flies* all currently have their place in English curriculums across the country, Suzanne Collins’ *New York Times* best-seller, *The Hunger Games* of *The Hunger Games* series, has yet to gain broad acceptance by high school educators. Collins’ young adult novel belongs at the top of the list as one that fosters both student engagement and cultural literacy.

1.2 About the Novel

The protagonist of *The Hunger Games* is a 16-year-old girl named Katniss Everdeen – a fearless heroine and a breath of fresh air compared to other popular young adult female characters of recent years, and appropriately referred to in the novel as “the girl on fire.” She is the opposite of *Twilight*’s “famously drippy, love-obsessed” Bella, and where the “clever and self-possessed” Hermione of the *Harry Potter* series is a sidekick, Katniss is a rare breed who takes center stage and chooses to control her own destiny (Pollitt 10). The novel takes place in a futuristic version of North America called Panem, where the enemy of the state is in fact the state itself – the Capitol. Like the ever-watchful eyes of Big Brother or the incendiaries governing Guy Montag, the Capitol is a “savage satire” of late capitalism: “The 1 percent rule through brute force, starvation, technological wizardry and constant surveillance” (10). The Capitol created the Hunger Games as punishment for a past rebellion; each year, each of the twelve districts of Panem must send two teenagers, a boy and a girl, to fight to the death until only one remains. When it comes to the checklist of what makes a good young adult dystopian novel, *The Hunger Games* certainly makes the grade, with “a setting so vividly described that it becomes almost a character in itself; individuals or forces in charge who have legitimate reason for being who they are; protagonists who are shaped by their environment and situations; and a conclusion that reflects the almost always dire circumstances” (Spisak 56). While the tributes – the title given to those called to fight in the Games – seem destined to become savages much like the boys on the deserted island in *Lord of the Flies*, Katniss keeps her moral compass in check and only kills in self-defense.

1.3 Relation to Students

Students may be drawn to Katniss because like students today, she has to decipher between what is true and untrue in her world. Students today are so absorbed in so-called reality television that it seems “you have to sit down with them on a case-by-case basis and say, ‘You know...this is made up’” or “This is news footage, this really happened” (Hudson 53). In Katniss’ world, “it is not in the Capitol’s interest that she know anything about politics...even though hers is an extreme case...all of us have to work to figure out what’s going on” (54). Teenagers today are entranced by reality shows such as *Jersey Shore* or *Bachelor Pad*, which feature young people making fools of themselves and exploit their mental, emotional, or physical pain; as more teenagers become drawn into these programs, they begin to believe that such behavior is culturally acceptable. By using a dystopian novel such as *The Hunger Games* in the classroom, it allows a “freedom to explore things that bother you in contemporary times...issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth, the power of television and how it’s used to influence our lives, the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon...the issue of war” (52). Although the novel has received some criticism for its violence, Collins explains that the idea stemmed from flipping the television channels between reality shows and war footage – a disturbing combination that translates perfectly in the novel, and though this may be shocking to many, the premise is not entirely fictional.

1.4 Historical Context

Thousands of years ago in ancient Rome, gladiator combat was a popular form of entertainment. Like Katniss and most of the tributes in the Games, gladiators were not given a choice. Every year, “thousands of people were butchered in these grisly spectacles...the hordes of bloodthirsty fans...mostly just expected a good show – and that meant plenty of gore” (Lewis 18). Although now gladiator combat is viewed as barbaric, history proves that Suzanne Collins was not the first to think of such a gruesome

affair as a form of entertainment. In the novel, Katniss describes how “to make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others...All year, the Capitol will show the winning district gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation” (Collins 19). The values that Panem and the Capitol expect of winning tributes parallel those of the Roman gladiators: “strength, courage, glory, discipline” (Lewis 18). Just as the winning tributes achieve instant wealth and fame, “successful gladiators often achieved celebrity statuses...Tales of their heroism were told as bedtime stories to children” (18). *The Hunger Games* not only stands tall as an ideal dystopian novel with a captivating protagonist, vivid setting, intriguing conflict, and commentary on contemporary society; it also provides opportunity for historical discussion and insight into how the human race has evolved, and where it might be heading.

2 Literacy

The primary goal of integrating young adult literature into the English curriculum is to promote lifelong reading, yet one must also take into consideration the importance of fostering cultural literacy. However, these two objectives need not be separate. There are teachers who scoff at integrating young adult literature into the curriculum under the notion that it is “only necessary for students who are unable to handle the intricacies of ‘real’ adult literature” (Christenbury 150). This argument ignores the fact that once students enter the rigorous schedule of high school, many simply stop reading altogether. In addition, with only two-thirds of United States citizens being literate, and “among those the average level is too low” (Hirsch 2) at that, it is nearly impossible to keep students engaged in reading. Young adult texts, especially those with compelling themes and real-world application, lead students “into reading and the enjoyment of literature” (Christenbury 151). Students must find the joy in reading if they are to be successful readers in the future, and young adult literature allows them to do that. Hoping to promote the development of lifelong readers, many schools across the country have already adopted *The Hunger Games* into their English curriculum. One 15-year-old Boston Latin student says that she “found many parallels between the descriptions in the books and the contemporary world” (Goodale). Perhaps most impressively, teachers have told Suzanne Collins that her books get reluctant readers to read (Hudson 52). Additionally, teaching *The Hunger Games* allows students to examine the text with an academic eye – a skill that they may then take with them, should they choose to read the second and third books of the series on their own. Once students have a taste of the series with the first book, they will undoubtedly want to pick up the next book. Conquering reluctant readers is the first step in promoting literacy.

Paulo Freire, a pioneer in educational philosophy, suggests that literacy goes far beyond the ability to read and write. In his theory on critical consciousness, Freire explains:

To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands; it is to *communicate* graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables - lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe - but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (42-43)

Literacy is taking the skills of reading and writing and using them to communicate with others. The tools readers and writers use to communicate graphically - “sentences, words, or syllables” – are useless without meaning. This process of understanding and establishing meaning is the “creation and re-creation” of one’s context, which must be done through communication. Therefore, it is not enough for students to simply read *The Hunger Games* on their own. Rather, students must turn their reading into a dialogue, both spoken and written, with and about the text in a classroom environment that supports the learning and growth of each individual. Freire argues that in order to allow the process of creation and re-creation with a text to take place, readers need to practice critical consciousness – that is, be consciously aware of the world and society. While students who read *The Hunger Games* may make the contemporary connections to the world on their own, students will gain much more from the text by addressing issues such as media, violence, war, and government manipulation in the classroom setting. Teaching the novel promotes literacy, therefore, by teaching students to be critically aware and using that awareness to analyze the text and communicate new knowledge.

2.1 Cultural Literacy

By promoting literacy, Collins’ novel consequently stimulates cultural literacy, a common concern among educators questioning the use of young adult literature in the classroom. E.D. Hirsch defines cultural literacy as “world knowledge” – “the network of information that all competent readers possess...grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read” (Hirsch 2). Hirsch goes on to argue that acquiring world knowledge and literacy must come from specific cultural knowledge and he produces a list of the necessary knowledge for the average American citizen, including 5,000 names, phrases, dates, and concepts. However, the world is changing. With the bombardment of media that students face today and endless amounts of knowledge at their fingertips, it is becoming increasingly difficult to instill in them a thirst for reading. For even the most diligent of students, modern-day technology such as iPhones, social media, YouTube, and videogames provide distractions on a daily basis and seem to interfere with students and their books, whether those books be textbooks or those they might still pick up for pleasure; students today are constantly multitasking or being entertained, making it difficult for them to sit and simply read a book for any significant amount of time. Moreover, as online resources such as SparkNotes, About.com, Wikipedia and infinitely more websites are able to provide shortcuts to students, student motivation to take the time to read a novel drops significantly. Although Hirsch may not be a proponent of young adult literature in the classroom, dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* not only get students to pick up a book and take a break from their media-saturated lives, but also provide a springboard for students to analyze the world around them.

Cultural literacy is about more than reading the “classics.” As it is, many continue to argue whether those classics even belong in the canon. What is important, Hirsch says, “is our ability to grasp the general shape of what we are reading and to tie it to what we already know” (14-15). When dealing with dystopian novels, readers do not have the pre-existing knowledge of that world. They do, however, have knowledge of their own world, and are then able to analyze the part of their society on which the novel is shining some light. Hirsch’s argument is that literacy must come from national culture, not just local culture. Hirsch worries that teaching “the ways of one’s own community has always been and still remains the essence of education” (18). If new readers are not exposed to literature of the national culture - such as the items that appear on Hirsch’s list - they will not expand their knowledge and the schema they bring to new texts will remain the same. The objection to Collins’ novel, therefore, would

be that it does not offer national culture but is rather a very limiting source from the local culture of young adults. However, what dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games* teach moves far beyond the realm of one’s own community. For example, Peeta, Katniss’ counterpart in the novel, vocalizes the lingering question of morality when he tells Katniss just before the Games start: “I keep wishing I could think of way to...to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games” (Collins 142). Peeta’s rejection of the Capitol and attempt to maintain his morality despite being forced into the Games provides a perfect opportunity for students to address global issues of humanity and the functions of society – a primary goal of cultural literacy.

2.2 Academic Value

Using *The Hunger Games* as a pathway to teaching cultural literacy would be akin to teaching Orwell’s *1984* or any of the fairytales of the Grimm Brothers. *The Hunger Games* parallels both, as director of the film Gary Ross explains, “Go back to the scariest tales in the Brothers Grimm and you realize this is what good children’s stories are about...the stakes are high, but it shows children they can deal with a scary world” (Goodale). Both Orwell and the Grimm Brothers appear on Hirsch’s list, and Collins fits right in. Aside from the recent box-office success of the film adaptation, there would be little difference between teaching *The Hunger Games* and the culturally accepted *1984*.¹ Both novels provide “challenging reading, stimulating themes of dehumanization, isolation, repression, loneliness, social class disparity, and abuse of power, and a basis upon which students can form their own opinions about today’s society” (Sessions 2). In addition, the application of the novel to today’s world “makes it an excellent choice for secondary school readers who hold our future in their hands, whether as tomorrow’s leaders or as followers” (2). Throughout the reading of the novel, students will be encouraged to examine the real-life threat of “reality television, in which a bored and cynical audience amuses itself watching desperate people destroy themselves” (Pollitt 10). In addition, students will confront such real-world issues as the current escalations of technology, government control, and countries that commit atrocities against their own people all over the world. They will also examine humanity’s past implementation of games strikingly similar to the ones Collins describes in examination of the Roman gladiators.

Part of being culturally literate is being able to socialize with others on a particular topic or novel. By undertaking an in-depth study of the novel’s themes and characters through pre-reading discussion topics, novel activities, and a variety of writing exercises that will culminate in a final writing portfolio, students will not only engage in “creation and re-creation” of text, but will also carry with them knowledge of issues of the larger world that they will then be able to discuss with others. This is in compliance with Hirsch’s theory that “the chief function of literacy is to make us masters of this standard instrument of knowledge and communication, thereby enabling us to give and receive complex information orally and in writing over time and space” (Hirsch 3). While it is important that students learn to enjoy reading, it is equally important that they learn to communicate effectively. The study of Collins’ novel will allow students to achieve both of these feats while interacting with and reflecting on their culture.

¹ With the film’s recent success, the popular cultural appeal of *The Hunger Games* would probably not meet with Hirsch’s approval; however, the novel’s thematic value is arguably equivalent to that of *1984*.

3 Conclusion

Some educators may still need time to adjust to the idea of the young adult genre in the classroom, but *The Hunger Games* has already proven its merit by promoting student engagement and cultural literacy in classrooms across the country. The popularity of a novel should not dismiss its value as a learning tool. Not only does the popularity conquer the first hurdle of literacy - getting students interested in reading and interacting with the text as encouraged by Freire - but the novel also lends itself to discussion of societal issues as a whole. This discussion of issues on a global level is a basic step to applying Hirsch's theory that "literacy is a function of a national rather than a local culture" (69). Similar to other dystopian novels culturally accepted as worthy of study, *The Hunger Games* allows readers to scrutinize the world around them and look to the future with a critical eye.

Furthermore, as high school students who read the novel are the future of America, it is ever more pressing that educators "talk with students about violence, war, and the difficult search for 'reality' in our media-saturated world" (Hudson 51). Collins' novel offers more to classrooms than other popular young adult novels, featuring a strong heroine and a "more sophisticated, more violent" (Goodale) narrative. However, despite the strong characters and intriguing concept, novels today are in danger of becoming obsolete to students. Students today are accustomed to being constantly entertained by technology, and seeking quick answers from the internet rather than taking time to read. Rejecting the integration of young adult literature puts reluctant readers at greater risk of permanently giving up on reading, and therefore sets them up to fail. Consequently, perhaps those administrators who deny young adult literature in the classroom are not so much unlike *The Hunger Games*' Capitol, sending out their students to fight for their future and knowing that they will likely fail. Effie Trinket, announcer of the Hunger Games, says to her tributes before the Games begin: "And may the odds be *ever* in your favor!" (Collins 19). Let's hope they are.

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