

Dystopia in the Hands of the Government in *A Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*

Where would we be in a world without sarcasm? Or in a world where the exploitations of others, however vane, were at the expense of our laughter. This may seem cruel, but as Voltaire once said, "I detest what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Freedom of speech and freedom of self-expression have been fought for since the beginning of time. Could you imagine living in a subvertising world where the government told you exactly who you were and what your past, present and future is like? To some, this may seem relieving because their decisions don't rely on themselves but the state, they simply carry out a job with no need to worry about thinking. Nonetheless, thinking and making mistakes have played significant roles in the evolution of humankind, and as Voltaire argued, freedom of speech is the exemplar of a functioning democratic society. A totalitarian government is the epitome of a dystopian future for anyone set apart from the privileged circle of leaders. Dystopia is defined and originated from Ancient Greek to provide a name for an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad. The human mind tends to diverge to negative thoughts when dealing with the uncertainty. Many novels of the past century have used the dystopian ideology to present a heavily dictated society where there is no freedom and all decisions and aspects of life are controlled by the government. Many works of contemporary satire ridicule and criticise the pessimism around us to toy with some realities that could occur from the events that we critique. In the US during the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States, and in the UK, Margaret Thatcher. This was the beginning of a very conservative time in the western

world, fuelled by religious movements and the revival of many antiquated conversations involving the rethinking of women's rights as a consequence of the sixties' and seventies' sexual revolution. This took many authors at the time to shift into doubt, amongst them was Margaret Atwood. She lived at Harvard University at the time. Massachusetts was the central origin of the conservative movement, which Atwood used as the figurative setting in her novel. About a decade later, during the presidency of George W. Bush, the wars and conflicts between the middle east and the US escalated. Heightened military action affected the lives of many in Afghanistan, Iraq, and families in the US who were involved with the military service. One of these families were the Collins, more specifically, Suzanne Collins; she grew up with a military father who was constantly involved in war-expeditions, so she was heavily exposed to the life and the suffering that took place between the warred rivals. These two authors came to write two notorious novels known worldwide. The politics of a totalitarian government are exemplified as a dystopian society in the satirical novels *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins through the use of symbolism of objects as a clear characterization of oppression, the narration to provide us with first person thoughts versus societal ideals and the political activists in a working revolution.

Foremost, the objects, their colours, characters, and figures are used to represent abstract ideas in addition to the narrative and political schemes throughout speculative fiction novels: an umbrella genre that encompasses futuristic notions and science fiction fantasy. Symbolism is used as a strategy of satire to define the maltreatment that comes from the dystopian world. In *A Handmaid's Tale*, symbolism is heavily used to explicate the roles each societal class has as well

as the ecclesiastical law that has taken majority in their refurbished constitution. Taken from the Book of Genesis 30:3, “And [Rachel] said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her,” this became the basis for the most important law in Gilead and the foundation for which all other ecclesiastical laws were developed. The handmaids wear red to represent their menstrual cycles suggesting the colour of blood. It also symbolizes the colour of impurity and sexual sin that comes from conceiving a child unmarried. The red symbolizes who they embody; the unmarried childbearers of Gilead. The commander and his wife are to be the true parents of the child impregnated into the commander’s handmaid, as she is only seen as a womb. This literal depiction signifies the repression of women during the mid 1980s as a new wave of Puritan laws were establishing throughout Cambridge. Similarly, in *The Hunger Games*, symbolism is shown as pure defiance to the Capitol, the heart of the totalitarian state through Katniss’ mockingjay and fire-accented designs as well as blazing figures of speech. While already taking part in the annual hunger games, Katniss meets Rue who introduces her to a scientifically developed bird called a mockingjay, a cross between a mockingbird and a blue jay, and teaches her a secret method of communication, which eventually becomes the symbol of rebellious communication throughout the twelve districts against the oppression of the Capitol. Katniss’ friend and designer, Cinna, creates an outfit for her and Peeta that literally generates flames around each of them, representing the coal of District 12 and the personality of our main character as she burns away the repressive government with her partner. Katniss hereby receives an epithet as “the girl on fire” by all citizens of Panem. ““Guess they liked your temper,’ [Haymitch] says. ‘They’ve got a show to put on. They need some players with some heat.’” (Collins, 126). The play on words

revolving around the idea of fire is used all throughout the novel to describe Katniss as a symbol of strength in the resistance of the dystopian world she is part of. Her attitude and robustness has made her famous and as the images of the mockingjay and fire carry on through her name. The angrier the capital gets, the more vivid these symbols become. Both of these novels use symbolism through objects and appearances to depict the dystopian society they are a part of, but the symbols are accepted in different ways; in *A Handmaid's Tale*, the colour red is the same for all handmaids, therefore the robe they all wear is a choice by the government, whereas in *The Hunger Games*, the mockingjay and the fire is a choice portrayed against the government. However, both novels use substantial metaphors to represent the dystopian society they inhabit.

Accordingly, narration is used to provide us a point of view to carry us through the storyline, dispensing any explanation the author has deemed we need, restricting us to our own imagination. *A Handmaid's Tale* is written in first-person, having Offred limit our understanding of events to her thoughts and the way she perceives things as they happen. This boundary creates intrigue and a successful way to oppress us just as the protagonist is being oppressed; we never know what is coming, nor why things happen until we can fathom as much as the main character. This way we can feel to a surreal extent the horrifying reality of the dystopian world. Offred gradually explains the unfamiliar world that comes to make more sense as the storyline progresses. We know right away that our protagonist's name isn't her 'real' name and is simply reflected off the commander that owns them. For instance, Commander Fred's handmaids are called Of-fred to represent ownership. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your

telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter” (Atwood 95). The narration of this novel bestows a way to inform us with contrary remarks about the “fantasy” world the government has created for its inhabitants; they dress them up in theological clothing, give them biblical tasks, and provide faith-based designations for each citizen. Offred’s name exemplifies whom she belongs to, while her clad shows what her job is; nothing about her is her choice proving that this is a dystopian novel run by a totalitarian government. Similarly, Collins writes her novel through the point of view of Katniss Everdeen, our protagonist for *The Hunger Games*, starting us off with only what she knows, taking us on an intriguing adventure through her leave from district twelve, to the capitol. Differing from Offred, Katniss hasn’t lived in her world before it turned dystopian, she was born into District 12 the way it is, which adds to her innocence as a rebel to the government. She does things and later realizes how dangerous it was for her and her family. “Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers’ table. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig’s mouth and pins it to the wall behind it” (Collins 117). Throughout the novel, we can visualize the rebellion created by Katniss as she subconsciously makes rapid decisions fuelled by her anger towards the Capitol’s cause to kill her. As a hunter, her survival skills are on par; they save her and her image to gain equality throughout the nation. Her narration helps us learn as she learns. Her awe the first time she arrives at the Capitol turns into our awe as we engage in a rich world that is surrounded by famine, sickness and war. We find an underlying sense of sadness as we read the contrast of where Katniss is from to where she ends up just before she thinks she is about to die. Both novels use first person narration, but to a restricting level, in which we only know as much as the

protagonist. We learn as she learns, in both cases. First person narration helps us understand the resistant thoughts and thinking processes delivered to us by the protagonist.

All things considered, resistances and political revolutions seem to be trivial when dealing with oppressive societies, even if they're as small as thoughts. The revolution in *A Handmaid's Tale* is characterized as mayday and has started much sooner than Offred. She wouldn't have been recruited by Ofglen, her walking partner, if it hadn't been for her ignorance to such clues during their walks. She tried 'm'aidez' on her when they first met, but Offred's innocence to the question convinced Ofglen that she wasn't part of the grapevine. Eventually, after months of walking, Ofglen decided that she was harmless and perhaps even good for mayday, which may have ended up saving Offred at the end of the novel when she is taken away in a van. The small luxuries that our protagonist had hidden away such as the "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" written on the inside of her closet, which is translated to "don't let the bastards grind you down", or the hole in her mattress, or the hand lotion, books, magazines, radio conversations given to her during the nightly visits with her commander, despite them being his request. "Mayday, I repeat. 'Don't use it unless you have to,' say Ofglen" (Atwood 233). Offred lives with these small resistances she keeps away that remind her of the distant past from when she took her democratic life for granted. When everything is forbidden it is very easy to find a gratifying feeling when doing the smallest things. It was also illegal for the commander to drag her away to play scrabble and read books in his study. There was a death penalty for taking her to the club in the centre of town where women are used to please their sexual desires, not to mention the rest of the men and women inside doing the same forbidden things. The political

resistances in *The Hunger Games* are carried out through the novel by Katniss Everdeen and what she stands for, unaware of the small revolutions against the capitol where her followers began to resist and fight for equality amongst all oppressors in Panem. The love for Katniss began to spread through the other districts at Rue's death, when Katniss sang Rue's song as she was dying, later covering her body in flowers to prove to the Capitol that they are all more than just pawns in their sadistic game. Later on that night, Katniss receives a loaf of bread from District 11, Rue's district, as a thanks for the respect and care she had for her. This was the first time in hunger game history that another district sent a gift to another. Not to mention that a loaf of bread most likely cost the salary of a couple families from District 11. The idea of two districts uniting without meeting sent shivers through President Snow's veins as his fears of a rebellion being born was becoming more certain each day. Both novels utilize resistances and revolutions in defeating the totalitarianism and the bad place in which they're all accustomed to living in. No matter how small the resistances are, the objective in the end to defeat the completely oppressed society in which they have been placed in. However, Offred was put into this dystopian world, whilst having lived in a democratic pre-Gilead, but Katniss was born a District 12 oppresee. This is probably why Katniss was innocent to the idea that she was creating a rebellion.

The vision of a totalitarian government was implicated as a means to better the world surrounding them, the hopes for the reincarnation of the Golden Age ideology has redefined their stance as the proximate saviours for mankind. The strict division of classes and their meticulous tasks as an upgraded version of humankind can only be judged and given consent by the

respective governments. Karl Marx would take this vision and characterize it as a utopia; where there is no looking back to the past, and the social ideals are perfect. The Ancient Greek word utopia meaning the opposite of dystopia; the perfect place. Marx toyed with the idea of society having positive ideals and moral grounds where there is no need for the government to intervene because of the nonexistence of class struggles and problematic differences, which was later defined as utopian socialism. This definition of utopia can be argued to find the clear and unargumentative idea of “perfect place”, as this can be visualized differently in each person, the same way that dystopia can be. Both Margaret Atwood and Suzanne Collins have tried their hand at a version of a bad place to satirize their current societies dependent of their personal ideals. In our world today, we see can political changes happening around the world. Most recently, in the US, Donald Trump has been elected president. For many of his voters, they are awaiting the utopia of an America First; a golden age America where they lived as well as they remember in the fabricated memories in their minds. For many of his haters, he presents an impending dystopia, a falling of moral highground for the United States where women’s rights are being revised again, as well as the superiority of a certain social classes. In *A Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games* we see patterns arising in the way dystopia takes form and the way the totalitarian government contradicts the promises of a better tomorrow with the use of symbolism in structural figures, such as walls, the narration of unreliable promises, and the political activists working together to protest for women’s rights as well as all other social classes.

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