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# Young Adult Dystopian Literature as Social Change Evolution

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**Rachel Scherzer**

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## Preface

When I began working on my project back in August of 2013, I started out with an entirely vague idea of what it may become. I came into the project in only my second full semester as a Literary Studies major and found myself woefully unprepared for the task ahead of me. On day one of our Junior Honors seminar, we were asked to share what topic we were thinking about for our project, which included a wide variety of responses from the interdisciplinary group of students in the course. For some science students, this question was relatively easy, as many of them were centering their projects on research that they were conducting with a faculty member in their department. Other students had been circulating ideas about what their Honors project would look like since they were freshman, so they came to the course with some ideas. But for many of us, including me, the question threw us for a loop. I had been unaware that I should already have started to prepare a topic prior to the first class of my Junior Honors seminar. It was not that I had never thought about it, but my ideas were vague at best and I was expecting to still have several weeks before I had to declare in front of a group of my peers what my project was going to be about. That first day I settled on the incredibly broad topic of “women writers after 1900,” a topic so vague as to be nearly unusable.

During the first semester of the Junior Honors seminar, the decisions I made about my project were driven less by my personal interests and more by the requirement of getting started on research as soon as possible. In the first assignment of the course, we were asked to create a bibliography listing sources that related to our topic. I used this assignment to compile a list of texts written by women that I thought might be good starting places for my project. Lacking any sort of cohesion, the list was all over the map in genre, time-period, and research questions, yet each one individually could have constituted an interesting project. The strongest contender on the list, and my personal favorite was *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. A canonical

text in both feminist literature and dystopian fiction, Atwood's text was the only text I had done any research on, although I had analyzed many of the other books for short class writing assignments. Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* was become the forerunner for the focus of my project.

As the semester progressed, I began to work with my first director, Dr. Shannon Lakanen. I became interested in having Dr. Lakanen as my director after taking a couple of courses with her that focused on personal essay, a genre that I had previously been entirely unaware of. Her classes made me fall entirely in love with the genre of personal essay as well as Dr. Lakanen's particular approach to literature. In Dr. Lakanen's teaching, the personal essay is the ultimate form of exploration of both the self and the world, always mindfully pushing the limits of what a literary genre can do. The essay's exploration of the truth was always of great interest to me, as the craft of writing about narrative that was highly personal, yet universal spoke to me on many levels. My interest in the personal essay was a jumping off point for my project initially, and working with Dr. Lakanen felt like a great fit for the direction my project could take.

The initial conversations that I had with Dr. Lakanen began to explore *The Handmaid's Tale* and women's writing more general. Since Dr. Lakanen is a creative writer by trade, she led me toward theory that focused around how women write and approach writing differently than men. Some of the work connected to personal essay, while some was feminist literary theory. This work lead to the proposal that I submitted to the Honors program in early December of 2013, which focused on exploring gender performance in dystopian literature using the feminist literary theory *l'écriture féminine*, a theory developed by the French theorist Hélène Cixous. Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as

from their bodies” (875). My proposal focused on use *The Handmaid’s Tale* and other dystopian literary works, including *Herland* by Charlotte Perkin Gilman and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding to explore how the writing style and context of the dystopian world changed when a women was writing verses when a man was writing. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was of particular interest in terms of the body, since Atwood’s exploration of the circumstances of her female character “Offred” is often connected to the body and the telling of a story, especially one that Offred struggles with: “It isn’t a story I’m telling. It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along” (Atwood 39). Along with the dystopian work, I intended to use a variety of personal essayists who wrote about female writing, including Rachel Blau DePlessis, Susan Griffin, and Nancy Mairs.

While my proposal made it seem as though I had a strong idea about what my project would become, I had not spent any time considering what I had gotten myself into. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* was of great interest to me, the theories, essays, and novels that I had planned to use along with that text were not well thought out. At the time of my proposal writing, my exposure to literary theory was limited, especially to anything like Helene Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which came out of a background in feminist literary theory that I was even less familiar with. I had chosen several texts that I was familiar with that seemed to fit my topic, which led me to include *Lord of the Flies*, one of the few books that I have ever read that I had disliked and had struggled to engage with in my earlier reading. Several of these issues could have been easily remedied, yet I was missing a connection to an ongoing conversation. Instead of using a theoretical work as a starting point, I had built the project around the text without entering a conversation that was going on in the literary world. As a result, the work I had chosen felt uninspired and felt as though it was not contributing anything new to the world of

literary criticism. At the time of my proposal, I had not found any modern work on my topic, which kept the conversation from having any sort of vibrancy. In a lot of ways, my choices felt dusty and uninteresting, brought together to fit the deadline for turning in the proposal. I lacked inspiration to work on what I had chosen and I struggled to think of any new avenues for research. The lack of inspiration I felt was compounded by my ineptitude in approaching the project. As previously discussed, I was freshly into my English major and had spent very little time working with or analyzing upper level theory or literature as anything other than introductory level work. Even by the end my first semester of my junior year, I had only written one paper that had been over ten pages long. The technical aspects of how to research and construct a large scale project were a mystery to me, despite being enrolled in a course with the express goal of helping me figure out how to write this project.

My expectation for Junior Honors Seminar as a whole was that the class would help me figure out how to go about researching and writing a paper of this size. Even though the class included students from a variety of disciplines, I expected our projects to have overlaps in research and mental preparedness that are more or less universal across disciplines. Additionally, since my professors had been teaching in the Honors program and advising many students with their projects over the years, I expected them to bring that knowledge to our class. The course, however, failed to find the common ground between disciplines. During the first semester, we never really talked about how to structure a project. The first bibliography assignment had the potential to serve as a jumping off point for a discussion about choosing topics, but instead led us toward a snap decision about our topic. As the first semester continued, the level of frustration among the class was palpable. The course felt like it was only directed at fulfilling specific Honors requirements and not helping us figure out how to write a



project. Furthermore, we often got lectures from our professors about how we were already behind in our work because we had not read enough of our research. The class never took time to help us understand why the steps in the academic process were important or facilitated learning about the differences between disciplines. The Honors requirement became monolithic and incomprehensible, a requirement that we never fully understood how to master.

The result of the two semesters of the seminar course caused many students, including myself, to feel highly demoralized. While I had entered the course knowing that the project would be difficult and stressful, I left feeling as though the paper I was writing would be nearly impossible to finish. The rigorous commitment to the project made me feel as though I was setting up to write a dissertation level paper, which I was supposed to accomplish at the same time as I was taking a full course load. While the project had been hard in the early stages, the later months of the junior seminar course led me to blowing the project almost entirely out of proportion in my mind. The project became a goal that I felt entirely incapable of meeting, thus during the second semester of my junior year, I stayed away from my project almost entirely.

During spring semester of my junior year, my honors project took a backseat to the rest of the work I was doing in my major. I knew that I would be staying on campus in the summer and spending a significant portion of my time working exclusively on my project, so I choose to focus my energy on the incredibly interesting work I was doing in my other English courses. Shakespeare was opening up a new way to more deeply experience literature, as I had never spent much time studying writing from such a different time period or analyzing work that was so rich in meaning and impact. In Postcolonial Literature and Theory, I was dealing for the first time with the true potential of literary theory to explore and deconstruct social and political structures, calling for a change in that way we understand these constructions in our world. This

course paired well with my literary history requirement, Disability Studies, which was the first course where I truly began to understand privilege, oppression, and the importance of social justice and social change as political goals. The historical and theoretical understanding about how disability is viewed in our society pushed me into a conversation about the impact of fighting for marginalized groups. Between Disability Studies and Postcolonial Literature and Theory, I discovered a new vocabulary to evaluate social problems as problems with systems, not problems with individuals. This understanding led me to consider the importance of advocating for marginalized groups and questioning social systems in my literary work. For the first time I was able to begin to create a connection between my literary work and the community service work I had done throughout my life. I was beginning to gain the tools to actually question the structures of the world, not just fix the surface problems. The work felt much more relevant to the kind of work I wanted to be doing in the world, which in turn led me to question the topics I had chosen to focus my thesis around. The questions I was learning to ask about social justice and social change were questions that would be profoundly connected to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Thus, by the end of the semester, I found my project shifting away from the topics I had discussed in my proposal toward something that felt as though it would be a richer topic for my thesis work.

The overall shift in topic coincided with a shift in how I was going to use dystopian fiction in my analysis. At the beginning of the project, dystopian fiction had been important because of my choice to use *The Handmaid's Tale* as the jumping off point of my analysis, but with the shift, the goals of dystopian fiction as an ideal became increasingly important. Even before reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, I had been interested in dystopian fiction. Throughout my middle school and high school years, I had found myself drawn to dystopian worlds and the way

that they managed to be entirely different worlds, yet explain the social and political problems within our current society. The way that the characters stood up to oppressive governments and systems was one of my first understandings of what social justice can be. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* had opened that interest back up, and I began to use the vocabulary and knowledge I had gained to create a new project that explored social justice and dystopia.

Around the time that my topic began to shift, dystopian fiction was experiencing an increase in popularity in popular culture. With the massive popularity of *The Hunger Games*, both the book and film series, I was constantly discussing dystopian fiction with people around me. New dystopian fiction was popping up everywhere, leading to perplexing questions as to why the current trend was so resonant with readers. What about the world was making everyone want to read dystopian fiction? As I built the new direction of my project, these questions remained in the background as I started to research and analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* and another dystopian novel I had recently read, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuro Ishiguro. *Never Let Me Go* connected to issues and questions of human rights, as the characters in the novel are clones whose humanity is an ever present question throughout the text. The direction of the project at this point was not intending to focus much of its attention on young adult dystopian fiction, but rather on other literary works that would model modes of reading that could be applied to young adults. As time progressed, young adult fiction and the questions surrounding it overtook more and more of the project until the project began to focus entirely around young adult dystopian fiction and the social justice analysis of *The Hunger Games*.

The initial topic shift prompted a change to a new director and the momentum to start a summer of serious academic work. My new director was Dr. Steigman, the head of the Honors program and a professor who I had worked with previously in my introductory Honors English

course and Postcolonial Literature and Theory. With her help, I was able to iron out the specifics of my new direction and begin my efforts for the summer I would spend researching. I had always budgeted the summer between my junior and senior year as a time I would dedicate almost entirely to my thesis, free from the distractions of a school year schedule. During that time, I expected to spend my days researching and writing, coming in to the school year with a significant portion of my thesis written, so that during the semester I would not have the stress hanging over my head. The months of research and writing I did during the summer were one of the biggest learning moments of my project and lead to a lot of personal and professional growth.

At the beginning of my summer of thesis work, the freedom of a summer scheduled allowed me to get more work done in a couple of weeks than I had in the previous six months. The work was progressing nicely and I felt motivated as I worked with my novels and theories. I started writing the body of the paper, and for the first time I was beginning to understand how the project would come together. Yet, after the first few weeks, the work started to become overwhelming. While the topic shift had led to a new set of rich research questions, the cohesion in those questions was greatly lacking. The potential of the topic was so vast that I actually would have been able to write an entire dissertation on dystopian fiction and social justice. My work was leading me to create my own theory of “social justice literature,” which gave me the opportunity to pursue my academic interest, but often felt like an incredibly lofty goal. The analytical framework I had learned in my social justice courses made me constantly fearful of creating a theory that somehow left out an entire group of people or was too focused on one particular viewpoint.

On a personal level, I struggled with the writing process for this kind of academic work. As a student in literature courses, I was used to being in constant conversation with professors and other students on the theories and concepts related to the texts we were analyzing. I began to feel isolated from conversation on the literary questions I was asking and I was developing a heightened level of anxiety about the entire process. I felt like, even with several months of work time ahead of me, I would never have enough time to do what I wanted to do. Instead of being the kind of anxiety that motivated hard work, I was constantly struggling to get motivated at all. I began to fall behind in my writing, struggling to meet deadlines with work that was up to the caliber I expected from myself, yet I was unable to produce anything better. The worst part about the anxiety was that I found it difficult to recognize what I was experiencing and try to figure out a way to work around it. Instead, I coped with the problem by avoiding my thesis entirely, which led me to being highly behind in the early parts of fall semester.

In the fall, I continued to stumble through the writing of the project, now with the added distractions of classes and extra-curricular activities. As I fell farther and farther behind, I struggled more and more with writing. Finally, I hit a point where I had a complete breakdown about the project. It was the first time I truly understood that my problems were not entirely with content or questions, but with the process overall. After a few conversations with professors that I felt close to, I decided to shift my project again. In early drafts of my project, young adult dystopian fiction was intended to be a small part of my project that was stuck in after the analysis of Atwood and Ishiguro's novels, yet now the questions about young adult dystopia felt more prevalent to me. Thus, I decided to write on the connection of social justice with the popularity of dystopian novel and discuss the potential for those texts to create a new model for younger students of today, much like dystopian texts did for me as a young student. The shift in topic led

me in a direction that would require additional research on an extremely tight timeline, but I felt that using a young adult text would be able to reinforce my argument in a way that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go* were unable to do.

Thus, I ended up at the current project that you are about to read. There are many elements of the project did not turn out the way I might have hoped. Ideally, I would have a stronger theoretically background for my claims and additional research into analysis and the phenomenon of *The Hunger Games*. Yet, I think that the argument for the connection between young adult dystopian literature and social justice is still able to be a strong argument, especially in the way popular culture could be used for social justice movements. Young readers have an opportunity to encounter revolutions and experience the idea that questioning injustice in the world can make a difference, even if that revolution is imperfect. Katniss undergoes a transformation on a personal level that readers may one day need to explore on their own and may begin to learn that personal resistance can lead to a more collective type of questioning that may, in fact, be able to start providing other options toward a normative sort of culture.

Additionally, this project has helped me grow in my personal connection to social justice activism. Before I started the project, I knew almost nothing about social justice and social change, but once I knew about the potential of this work, its importance became something I could not ignore. Fighting to make the world a better place by changing systems is essential for my ability to make a different in the world. While the individual work on this project was necessary, I learned that I personally connect more deeply to collective forms of activism. Theory is vital for the formation of new ideas and the transformation of activist work, but I find that that type of work disconnects me from the pulse of social change. I yearn for a kind of work that connects theory with hands-on-work and education. This project has highlighted the

necessity of exploring these options for me personally and has been extremely formative in my understanding the kind of work I hope to do in the future.

In this project I hope to create a theoretically understanding that is able to move beyond the theoretically realm. The real genius of literature is its ability to help us expand our understanding of the human condition so that we are able to make the world around us a better place for all the people that live in it. In doing so, all literature becomes political and has the potential to change society and social systems. Thus, it all became revolutionary and all has the potential of social change.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is inspired by quotes by several authors, in particular Salman Rushdie, who I saw speak at Otterbein University in April of 2014, whose speech was discussed in my Postcolonial Literature and Theory course.

## Young Adult Dystopian Literature as Social Change Evolution

### Introduction

In popular culture today, the young adult dystopian novel is experiencing a surge in popularity that is infused with a fervent intensity. Since the publication of *The Hunger Games* in 2008, young adult dystopian novels have become exceptionally popular with adolescent and adult readers alike, spawning a release of blockbuster movie adaptations and new dystopian series. On the surface, the trend appears to be a moneymaking venture by book companies and film studios, yet the potentially transgressive nature of these texts has clearly struck a nerve in the reading audience. The popularity of these novels shows an interest in rebellion and revolution, ideas that build the core of dystopian fiction as a genre. The novels provide the possibility of social change in truly horrible, imagined societies, thus bringing ideas about social change into adolescent consciousness. These pop culture texts have the potential to develop an examination of society through literary analysis. Literature can be used to ask questions about society, social change, and the development of a better society, because of the way it reflects and questions cultural understandings. By creating a way to read literature with an understanding of social justice, literature can interact more concretely with our ability to work for a better society.

This paper will examine the young adult dystopian novel through a lens of social justice readings of literature. Rooted in the history of human rights literature and using a social justice reading, *The Hunger Games* protagonist Katniss Everdeen will be used as a model of social change evolution within a character that can be applied to creating social change in the real world. By reading the current trend of young adult dystopian literature through a lens of social change, the potential of that literature can be examined outside of its commercial success.



## **Using Social Justice as a Form of Literary Analysis**

Young adult dystopian literature can have enormous potential when paired with an understanding of social justice as a form of literary analysis. Literature can be used to ask questions about society, social change, and the development of a better society. Using literature as an important way to reflect and question cultural understanding is inspired by work in human rights literature as a broader category. The combination of these fields can create an understanding of social change and the ability to work for a better society.

As defined by the OED, social justice is “the objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.” The desire for social justice is the desire to live in a world without oppression and inequality, where individuals are able to participate and be valued in a society no matter what identities they hold. Working for social justice requires the questioning of systems of inequality and privilege, presenting claims about what those systems are doing in the broader context of the culture. The ability to examine and question society in light of the social justice claims allows the deepening of understanding toward a world where the participation in systems of oppression declines and those who are devalued as part of the system are able to participate more fully and safely in society. Literary critics are in a unique position to participate in the work of social justice. Social justice, like literary analysis, requires a close examination of sources to determine what is being said and to create an understanding of a deeper claim. Those who think critically about literature are able to look at broad concepts and critically question inner workings. Literature itself plays an important role, as culture is reflected and questioned in literary texts.

Social justice literature takes the concept a step further by labeling texts by their ability to establish the line of questions evident in the project of social justice. Social justice literature,

however, is not a genre within itself. The distinction does not require the text to look at the questions in a specific way, but rather identifies the text as one that engages with questions of social justice claims. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schulthesis Moore's article "Meditation on a Fractured Terrain: Human Rights and Literature" establishes the idea a reading practice for human rights that "can attend to their material and historical context without instrumentalizing the aesthetic in service to those contexts" (15). A social justice reading of literature aims for a similar practice of reading texts with reference to their ability to establish questions of social justice and social change. A text working within a social justice framework allows for the reader to question society in order to determine the type of change that should be advocated for to create a more just society.

Literary critics like Thomas Samson, Greg Mullins, James Dawes, Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, and Alexandra Schultheis Moore argue not only for the important work literature can do for social justice, but for the kind of thinking literature can inspire within readers. According to Greg Mullins' essay "Labors of Literature and Human Rights," readers experience sympathetic emotions of empathy and compassion that work on rationality to "build the human capacity to make sound judgments" (Mullins 6). Readers, from their experience with literature, will become fairer in their understanding of ethical action. James Dawes attributes these sympathetic emotions to shared inner feelings and desires, a concept he attributes strongly to the form of the novel. Characters in novels define the human as an individual, independent being that is defined by inner feelings that humans implicitly share (397). This understanding leads to the conceptions of natural, equal, and universal human rights based on the inner similarity of our emotions.

The understanding of a social justice practice of reading literature has been developed and inspired by work in human rights literature, which focuses on how literature can be a part of human rights work and can cause change in situations of dire abuse. Social justice literature can use these concepts as a background for building a strong sense of their reading practice and goals.

### **Human Rights Literature: A Background for Social Change**

In the past twenty-five years, literary studies has shown an interesting development in its relation to human rights. Literary theorists like Thomas Samson, James Dawes, Elizabeth Goldberg, and Alexandra Moore argue for the potential for literature to relate to and help readers understand contemporary human rights issues and events. Literature in human rights circles can be used as a tool for developing a deeper understanding of human rights abuses and for healing those who have experienced the violent loss of their human rights. Goldberg and Moore argue that literary criticism enters into human rights by using narratives that can offer “terms through which to rebuild that structural ethos of a shared humanity in order that potential targets instead appear as those deserving of rights, as both human beings and legal persons” (16). Literary critics are in a prime position to understand the complexity of abuses and teach others how to empathize with this broader human question. Making these types of arguments about the use of literature in differing contexts, literary critics are calling for a social change in the understandings of how literature can be used.

In both scenarios, literary critics are calling for the use of literary criticism to work to benefit social justice claims through their literary analysis. From this, literary criticism can begin to look at the way social justice claims are expressed in literature and determine what that may mean for social justice more broadly in society. Critics need to examine literature’s potential as

a way to present social justice claims in society to inspire action for readers. While many genres of fiction are able to be read with this social justice reading practice, dystopian literature proves to be a rich area of exploration. By creating worlds that highlight inequality and totalitarianism, the necessity for change in society comes to the forefront. The different ways characters in these novels attempt to resist and rebel against their society begins to give us insight into the ways social change movements can succeed or fail.

### **The Literary Understanding of the Dystopian Novel**

Humans have been dreaming of worlds better than their own since early history, reflective in the West by conceptions of heaven and Eden. The desire to imagine worlds better than your own is debatably a universal human desire, but the tradition of literary utopian writings is most identified with Western ways of thinking. The utopian literary tradition began in 1516 with Thomas More's publication of *Utopia*, which created certain ideas that have developed and transformed into the dystopian genre. In order to understand the young adult dystopia in its full context, we first must understand the elements that are indicative of the broader literary genre (Sargent 2).

The conceptualization of dystopian fiction is part of a larger understanding of utopian and social dreaming. Lyman Sargent defines the phenomenon of utopianism as “social dreaming-- the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (3). Social dreaming is a form of recognizing and desiring a better life that has the possibility for better living and treatment of all people. What that world looks like depends on the particular times, places, and problems of the creator, but with an engagement of the kind of world that might be. The type of utopian genre that comes out of each society differs depending on the

problems and social climate of the society and that kind of situations that that society might be facing. Many different types of worlds are produced by the utopian impulse, from utopias of perfection and pleasure, to anti-utopians highly critical of the idea of a utopia being possible at all, and finally to dystopian worlds (Sargent 7).

Dystopian fiction historically has played into these desires. Dystopian works by authors like George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, Aldous Huxley and Margaret Atwood connect deeply to cultural and social problems and the warning about what would happen if we did not act to change the world around us. Issues of governmental surveillance, totalitarianism, and oppressive power structures are common. In their own way, characters in dystopian texts attempt to rebel against the system, whether from a personal rejection of the power structure, or in a way that directly stands up against the structure and creates a new society. In the end, whether or not the character is successful, the individuals questioning of power allows hope to develop, as the reader can see the potential for change.

Dystopian worlds take the impulse toward utopianism and use that world to create a warning about the future. The dystopian world relies heavily on the specific problems of the present society to invoke a warning about the future society that could develop. The world generally has the appearance of semblance and order, but it soon is revealed that the world contains serious power imbalances, governmental control, or lack of resources. The situation mirrors certain elements of modern society in such a way that the reader can recognize the problem and starts to critically engage with them, resulting in a desire toward change in their own world. Embedded in the sense of warning is an impulse toward hope in the future for our own society. The characters in dystopian texts typically have the ability to attempt to engage with a possible solution for their terrible society. Thus, even if the heroines are unsuccessful, the

reader can envision themselves resisting the dystopian society and escaping from a future like the protagonists. In these texts, the typical hope of the dystopian novel is crushed, leaving the reader to feel that we are on a horrific trajectory for a future that is actually unchangeable. In our world, socially and politically, change does not feel possible at all.

The trend in literary fiction is toward dystopian novels that do not allow for a sustained sort of change. Characters are able to question the power structure but cannot actually change it. Kashiguro Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) follows this trend by creating an alternative history where human cloning has created a second class of citizens with the express purpose of being organ farms. Told from the viewpoint of a clone, the reader experiences the life of the main character as she navigates the oppression in her world and comes to understand that she cannot change the structure. The novel presents a view that the dystopian world could be changed, but leaves the main character without an understanding that the structure could be overthrown. For the reader, the social change potential is visible but infuriatingly impossible within the storyline of the text. Current dystopias in literary fiction focus on the factors that prevent change from occurring.

Yet the popularity and expanded interest in young adult dystopias shows that there is a desire to find a way to change things. Contemporary adolescent readers have moved through their formative years with dystopian texts, starting with Lois Lowry's classic dystopian novel *The Giver* in 1993. The novel was aimed at readers around twelve years old, the beginning age that is considered young adult reading<sup>2</sup>. Other series aimed at late elementary school-aged students came out in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Among*

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<sup>2</sup> Lowry's *The Giver* tells the story of a futuristic society where emotions have been removed in an attempt to make a society that is safe from war and harm. When Jonas, the twelve year old protagonist is assigned the job as Receiver of Memories, he learns what his society chooses to keep from its citizens. He begins to question the acceptability of such a system and eventually runs away to save a young life. The novel allows young readers their first tastes of these questions and themes in a very personal and relatable story.

*the Hidden* series(1998-2006) and Jeanne DuPrau's *The City of Ember*(2003). By the mid-2000s, young adult dystopian literature was a powerhouse, with series like Suzanne Weyn's *The Bar Code Tattoo*(2004), Scott Westfield's *Uglies*(2005), Michael Grant's *Gone*(2005), and Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life as We Knew It*(2006), all published before *The Hunger Games*(2008), which was followed by other powerhouse series including James Dasher's *The Maze Runner*(2009), Ally Condie's *Matched*(2010), and Victoria Roth's *Divergent*(2011)<sup>3</sup>. Adolescent readers have been exposed to dystopian fiction for years in ways that encompassed both the power imbalances and the rebellion along with elements of adventure and romance<sup>4</sup>. This allowed readers to become a part of those dystopian worlds and live out their own adolescent anxieties and lack of power by watching characters launch successful rebellions against worlds that strived to push them down. Young adult dystopian novels were in line with the specific problems of adolescents and provided an outlet for adolescent readers without being understood in terms of broader societal issues and critics. Because these novels are focused on social concerns and question social issues, the novels are able to be read through a lens of social justice fiction. The immense popularity of the texts resonates with readers in a way that shows a desire for change, although the success and failure of the rebellion in these texts takes place in a separate realm. By examining the ways that social change occurs in these texts, the lead protagonists can model instances of activism, showing how an evolution toward social change can occur within a protagonist that can apply to the adolescent readers understanding of social change.

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<sup>3</sup> The young adult dystopian novels of this time period look at variety of social issues, from the post-apocalyptic to the futuristic. *The Bar Code Tattoo* explores what it means to live in a society that tattoos you to keep you under constant surveillance. *Uglies*, *Matched*, and *Divergent* look at how different societies might construct power imbalances that need overthrown. *Gone* and *Life as We Knew It* focus how to survive and create society in a post-apocalyptic world.

<sup>4</sup> Romance is a major theme in young adult dystopian fiction that keeps young readers engaged and could bear further analysis outside the scope of this paper.

## **Young Adult Literature and Social Change**

Critics have been drawing a connection between young adult literature and its potential for social change since the 1970s. During that time, young adult literature was developing as a distinct category among librarians and secondary school educators who had an interest in bringing readers and literature together (Lenz and Mahood vii). The genre was already being categorized by elements that have become the standard in the modern young adult dystopian novel, especially in relation to discontent about the world. In her essay “The Young Adult: An Overview,” Dana Farnsworth traces discontent among young adults from early studies of juvenile delinquency in the early 1950s where teenagers were already prone to be dissatisfied with their world and were falling into delinquency (6). The 1960s and 1970s brought discontent on college campuses that changed the social and cultural understanding of young adults. In her final section, Farnsworth discusses young adults and social change in terms of a desire based on a disbelief in the society and the “massive loss of confidence in our institutions and professions” (15). Farnsworth states that the social conditions of the 1970s created young adults that are “indignant at much of what is going on around them,” leading to a hopeful move toward “rejecting the dramatic solutions of the demagogue of revolutionary and are trying to develop more solid and lasting ways of making equal opportunity and social justice available to everyone” (16). Young adult readers already have the potential to be developing their own understandings of social change and moving toward a desire for action.

The way young adults develop an understanding of social justice and social change is a significant part of their larger psychological development, as described by Armin Grams in her essay “Understanding the Adolescent Reader.” According to Grams, the major question of adolescent development focuses on the sense of self in terms of “‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is my



proper role?” (19). A major element of adolescence is “adjusting to a worthy way of life” which requires an adolescent to examine values, beliefs, attitudes, and ideas into a coherent structure that will allow them to develop their own understanding of the world that reflects their own priorities while “accepting standards and values of his society” (22). Understanding and making decisions about these priorities are heavily influenced by the kind of information the adolescent is given, either from their parents or other sources. In order to synthesize these understandings into a fully formed viewpoint, adolescents need controlled situations to spread their wings and examine their understandings without major repercussions. While Grams does not make an implicit connection, literature can clearly serve as an experimental zone in this process of discovery. Young adult literature has the potential to be responsible for developing an understanding of politics and society in a way that has younger readers exploring social change more in depth. Young adult novels may have an even more profound placement in the psyche of their readers to develop the sympathetic emotionally understanding championed by Dawes.

Melissa Ames in her essay “Engaging the ‘Apolitical’ Adolescent: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post 9/11” examines the current popularity of young adult dystopian texts by placing the understanding of those texts within the broader societal structure and its perception of adolescents political involvement. Using the popularity of the texts as a lens, Ames argues that Millennials’ lack of civil engagement is more complicated than previous understanding and those young adults dystopian novels are an important element in their true political engagement. Ames writes “the popularity of young adult dystopia, which is ripe with these political themes, suggests that this group is actually quiet interested in these topics, although they often turn to the safe confines of fiction to wrestle with them” (3). Young adult dystopian novels serve the purpose to “mirror and criticize reality,

forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it”” (Ames 6). The desire to change their society is present, yet the possibility of actually accomplishing that goal may not be possible to overcome. The ability to act has been stunted in a significant way that may be related to their disengagement from politics, or be tied up in the polarized nature of political discourse and a dissatisfaction with politics in general. The desire to read revolutionary dystopian texts shows a desire for a major social change, but a lack of understanding about how to make it happen. The dystopian texts are playing into a fantasy of change, and it may stop there, as Ames argues at the end of her essay, but it does not actually have to. The characters in these texts are showing the potential for evolving in terms of social justice from a place of discontent to a place of action. Readers can begin to use these dystopian novels to question and examine their own evolution toward social change that can be highly beneficial to their understanding of the world overall.

### **Models of Social Change Development in Young Adult Dystopian Novels**

Current young adult dystopian novels provide a plethora of examples of characters that rebel against their dystopian society in a way that creates a social change. The best models for social change show an evolution in the understanding of how and why they rebel, leading to a deeper understanding into the potential impact of their rebellion. The protagonist of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* is an interesting subject of examination, not only because of the immense popularity of the series, but because she has a dramatic evolution in her relationship to social change. Katniss evolved from passive resistance to active defiance of the power structure, allowing her to play an active role in changing her society. The evolution of Katniss’s relationship to social change models a way for adolescent readers to begin to understand the process of developing social change movements that can allow them to think about their own

activism. The young adult dystopian genre continues to evolve in its relationship to modeling social change with examples of other characters, like *Divergent's* Tris Prior, whose ability to actively question her society from the beginning of the novel allows her to be more aware of her relationship to social change<sup>5</sup>. The models of social change present in young adult dystopian novels allow readers to begin to think about their own relationship to social change and activism.

### **The Evolution of a Mockingjay: Katniss's Journey Toward Social Change**

In popular culture, Katniss Everdeen has become a leading figure of the strong female character because of her ability to stand up to her circumstances and incite a rebellion against the power structure. The rebellion that Katniss is able to bring about is an example of social change, placing her as a dramatic role model for social change movements that can be enacted in everyday situations. Reading *The Hunger Games* through a social justice lens, Katniss becomes a model of social change through her evolutionary relationship to her own revolutionary actions. Throughout the novel, Katniss's understanding of social justice evolves from passive defiance, where Katniss stand up to the government in ways that do not question the structure to active resistance, which directly question the structure in a way that leads to revolution which allows her not only to question, but to change the society that she is a part of. Katniss begins as a reactionary character that chooses to defy the government for reasons of personal and familial safety without purposely addressing the governmental structure. After volunteering for her sister and entering the Hunger Games, Katniss begins to actively question the power structure by pushing against it. By gaining an understanding of how her actions can directly rebel against the power structure, Katniss begins to understand her ability to change the society around her. Her

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of dystopian heroines, both Tris and Katniss provide interesting interpretations of what a strong female protagonist looks and acts like. As a role model, Tris provides a more striking example of how young girls can gain the ability to be courageous and outspoken. Her characterization, however, lacks many of the subtleties of evolution found in Katniss's story.

transformation provides a strong model of social change to adolescents that could be an important factor in how the next generation questions our own society.

### **Trespassing in the Woods: Passive Resistance in District Twelve**

During her childhood in the impoverished District Twelve, Katniss began developing her own understanding of the necessity to change society, but she only engaged in acts of defiance that grew out of necessity, and passively questioned the nature and authority of the governmental structures of the district. Katniss's first acts of defiance grow out of a necessity for survival, not out of a desire to rebel. Yet without these necessary acts of passive defiance, Katniss's later successful rebellion would have been impossible.

Katniss's desire to rebel against the government develops from her early relationships with the structure of governmental power in District Twelve. As the poorest reign in the twelve-district society of Panem, the residents of Katniss's district work for low wages as miners and are plagued by a scarcity of food and other resources. The only opportunity to receive any assistance from the government is in the form of tesserae, which is "a meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person" (Collins 13), but only in exchange for children having their name entered additional times into the lottery for the Hunger Games. Even with this caveat, starvation is common place in the district although never on official documents. These circumstances are in sharp contrast to life in the Capitol, the headquarters of the district, where "food appears at the press of a button" (65). Inequality between the districts is apparent to those within the reigns because of the yearly Hunger Games broadcast. The governmental structure does little to even out the inequality, as Katniss experiences firsthand when her father dies.

The death of Katniss's father is essential to how Katniss perceives the government and develops her first instances of passive defiance. Her father's death is the result of a mine

explosion, a tragedy that causes Katniss's mother to have a mental breakdown that prevents her from being able to care for Katniss and her seven-year-old sister Prim. Katniss finds herself having no other choice but to take over as the head of the family to keep Prim and herself out of the community home. Katniss sees the children from the home through "the sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders" and vows that she could "never let that happen to Prim" (27). That decision to keep her family alive is Katniss's first instance of defiance against her society, deriving from a desire to protect her family and survive without governmental assistance. Katniss's eventual success in keeping her family alive requires that she work around societal rules to hunt outside of the district's fence, which is an illegal activity. Yet, Katniss's choice to break this law is not a revolutionary action, as it is ignored by law enforcement within District Twelve and never threatens the authority of the governmental structure in the Capitol. Katniss's actions register as passive defiance as she survives and thrives outside of the traditional societal structure of the district, but she avoids direct resistance.

Even though Katniss passively defies governmental control within District Twelve, the life she lives there prevents her from a more intense or overt movement toward questioning or change. Katniss is aware that voicing her discontent could put her family and herself in danger. The government's considerable power moves Katniss toward caution, even in the most fleeting of comments, such as the moment when Katniss says "'District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety,' I mutter. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder. Even here, in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you" (6). Within the confines of the district, Katniss is always on edge, fearing that she will be taken away from her family for speaking up against the governmental structure. In the woods, away from the district, Katniss allows herself

to speak about her discontent to her best friend and hunting partner Gale. Often, she finds herself agreeing with him but sees any potential for a change to occur as hopeless. Katniss describes her feeling by saying:

His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It's not that I don't agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill out stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game. I let him yell though. Better he does it in the woods than in the district. (14)

Despite her dissatisfaction with the society around her, Katniss finds no justification to act upon that dissatisfaction. Actively defying the Capitol would be a huge risk that would put the survival of her family in jeopardy, unlike her instances of passive defiance that work to protect her family. When Gale suggests the two of them run off into the woods to avoid future injustice in District Twelve, Katniss does not know how to respond because “the ideas is so preposterous” (8).

Katniss's actions defy governmental control, but they do not directly question the government's policy. Katniss personally defines her actions only in terms of protection and survival, never questioning the government enough to take action in any way that would take her out of society. At this point in the novel, Katniss is comfortable enough in her situation to reject the necessity of questioning a society that oppresses her because she has found a way to work inside the system.

### **I Volunteer as Tribute! : The Games as a Call to Action**

Everything about Katniss's ability to question her society changes after the Reaping ceremony, when her sister Prim's name is chosen as the next contestant in the Hunger Games. In

order to protect her family, Katniss must react immediately to protect her sister and volunteers as a tribute to take her sister's place in the Games. Volunteering as tribute is a decision that Katniss makes without any sense of a thought process or internal struggle. The choice to volunteer is a choice to seize an opportunity to keep her sister safe. Immediately, the other citizens of District Twelve see her action as an act of revolution because, almost as a rule, people rarely volunteer for one another, since surviving Reaping can almost be equated with outsmarting the government, especially for those who have their names in the bowl multiple times. The action of standing up for another person against the oppressively controlling government inspires the people of District Twelve to respond without the traditional spectacle. Katniss explain the situation as "I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree" (24). In the eyes of her district, Katniss has become a revolutionary, standing up to the Capitol by not allowing them to take an eleven-year-old to be killed in the slaughter of the Hunger Games. By standing up for her own sister, Katniss has made a move that questions the logic of the power structure, in terms questioning its potential effectiveness. The continued existence of the Hunger Games as a mechanism of government control questions the effectiveness of the government to control the citizens of Panem.

The Hunger Games are an essential element in the Capitol's control of the districts, despite nearly seventy-five years passing since the rebellion that sparked its rebellion. Each year, the Capitol uses the Games to incite fear within its citizens to ensure their compliance. Before the Games begin, the Capitol broadcasts a mythical storyline that characterizes the importance and might of the Capitol. The story describes Panem as a "shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens" (18), despite clear historical

evidence to the contrary. Shortly after the formation of the new country, the districts rebelled against the Capitol on such a scale that out of the districts, “twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated” (18). The Hunger Games were developed as a yearly reminder to guarantee peace, so that the “Dark Days” of the rebellion would never be repeated. The brutal deaths of the children in the arena work as “the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion” (18). The government still needs to prove their ability to be in control, as the history of rebellion combined with discontent within the district keeps the idea of rebellion alive within the minds of the citizens. The power that the Capitol has over the districts is tenuous, thus establishing the necessity for strict structures of control. The context of an unstable government is essential for Katniss’s defiance to be perceived as revolutionary. Without the structure of the Hunger Games, however, Katniss would have never developed as a leader of social change<sup>6</sup>.

Entering the Hunger Games is a vital moment in the Katniss’s ability to become a model of social change for several reasons. First, Katniss’s impulse to volunteer for her sister moves her defiance from something more passive to something more active. In the initial moment, Katniss is only concerned with protecting her sister “because who else would have volunteered for Prim” (25), but in the aftermath, Katniss begins to realize the impact this action can have. In District Twelve, much more so than any of the other districts, the Games are a death sentence. “Volunteers are all but extinct” Katniss says, as “the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*” (22). While for Katniss the reasons are out of necessity, the revolutionary aspects of her choice become apparent immediately, especially as she watches Peeta’s name being drawn and no one volunteering on his behalf. “This is standard” Katniss

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis of the ideological significance of the Hunger Games draws on Michel Foucault theories of power. See *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).



contemplates as Effie Trinket asks for volunteers “Family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing” (26). The Hunger Games put Katniss’s inclination toward defiance in an appropriate context, forcing her to begin to see her ability to stand up to the government as a radical action, not simply an act of survival.

Secondly, the Hunger Games put Katniss on a platform to defy the Capitol in a public way that is visible throughout the entire country. When she was rebelling in District Twelve, her acts of defiance were only seen by a small number of people, most of whom understood her actions in terms of survival, since surviving with minimal government assistance was an opportunity to defy the structure. The power structure within the district does not view it as such, since those enforcing the rules were themselves struggling to survive the district. Katniss sells her illegally obtained food to the Peacekeepers who “turn a blind eye to the few of us that hunt because they’re as hungry for fresh meat as anyone is” (5). Her actions of defiance in the district have no effect on the broader issue of the Capitol’s ability to control its citizens, thus her defiance is almost unimportant. In the platform of the Games, however, even the basic idea of surviving becomes revolutionary, and Katniss begins to understand that her choices are actively defying the Capitol. In developing her strategy, Katniss begins to place her defiance within the context of defying the Capitol structure<sup>7</sup>.

As Katniss develops her strategy for the Games, she actively works to defy the power structure by building a strategy around her acts of survival. Everything stems from her personal belief that “it isn’t in my nature to go down without a fight, even when things seem insurmountable” (36), a belief that is deeply connected to a desire to return to Prim and her

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<sup>7</sup> The context of the Hunger Games also can be described by the sociological concept of a triggering event. Michael Schwalbe describes a triggering event simply as “something that quickly changed the meaning of the information” (262). Schwalbe argues that a triggering event is necessary for any social change. For more information, see *Rigging the Game: How Inequality Is Reproduced in Everyday Life* (2008, Oxford University Press)

mother. In her goodbyes with her family, Prim tells Katniss “I just want you to come home. You will try, won’t you? Really, really try?” (36). For Katniss, her sister’s plea is essential to her desire to return, to continue to protect “the only person in the world I’m certain I love” (10). Surviving the Games actively defies the Gamemakers but also fulfills Katniss’s personal goals. Her defiance of the Capitol has moved from one that is in passive nature to one that is active. Her survival would show that she was personally able to preserve over the power structure, but Katniss would not yet be able to connect that move to a broader social change, either for herself or for people within the districts. Katniss’s continued evolution toward a model of social justice that is able to make an impact requires that her own personal defiance interact with the understanding of others to catalyze broader social change.

### **The Girl on Fire: Understanding the Implications of Katniss’s Defiance**

Katniss’s strategy of defying the Capitol’s power is an important element to creating a strong rebellious character, but several other elements must be in place for Katniss to evolve in a model of social change that is broader than her personal defiance. Katniss must interact as part of a broader group to place herself in a position to make an impact that begins to move her defiance toward an action that actively questions the power structure in close proximity. In order to do this, Katniss must interact with her mentor, Haymitch, and her fellow tribute, Peeta Mellark, to become a part of a context that allows her actions to become revolutionary.

Haymitch acts as an important element in Katniss’s social change evolution, both because of his practical understanding of how to place Katniss in a position to survive and create a rebellion, but also because of how he allows Katniss to further understand the importance of context to make a change. As the only living Hunger Games victor from District Twelve, Haymitch has spent his life mentoring tributes through the arena, a depressing task that has led

him to alcoholism and apathy about the Games. Haymitch's alcoholism and generally rough behavior caused Katniss to conclude "I realize I detest Haymitch. No wonder the District 12 tributes never stand a chance" (56). What she does not realize is that Haymitch is deeply invested in questioning the Capitol. At the Reaping, a drunken Haymitch yells about Katniss's spunk straight into the camera, in a way that suggests he is taunting the Capitol. Years of mentoring tributes only to see them die has made Haymitch develop an intense desire to destroy the Capitol for the injustice he experienced during the Games and the continued injustice to District Twelve. Katniss's defiant personality and fighting spirit provide a reason for Haymitch to work with Katniss and Peeta. Haymitch's deep knowledge of the Games allows him to place Katniss in a situation that allows her to become visible, even if she finds it at odds with her own strategy.

Haymitch's strategy for Katniss and Peeta encompasses elements of rebellion and visibility in a way that later allows Katniss's defiant nature to become essential for the development of a revolution. First, Haymitch places Katniss in the hands of the designer Cinna and uses his expertise in a way that distinguishes his tributes during the opening parade. While any interaction between Cinna and Haymitch is never clearly stated, Haymitch's insistence that Katniss not resist the stylists shows a sense of trust in their skills. Cinna's design creates a dynamic image of a linked pair of tributes lit by artificial flame, creating a moment when Katniss becomes the "Girl on Fire." Within this image, Haymitch sees a spark of rebellion that becomes essential to Katniss's ability to become a revolutionary. At the time, however, the design is the first in a set of steps to bring Katniss and Peeta into the spotlight as tributes, a theme that Haymitch continues throughout the training and into the Games.

Haymitch's strategy continues to be at odds with Katniss's as he pushes her visibility by linking Katniss and Peeta as star-crossed lovers, a concept that forces Katniss to begin to understand that simply surviving as a strategy of defiance will be more complicated than she expects. The star-crossed lover angle comes into sharp contrast with Katniss's plan, leading to a response of anger that highlights Katniss's self-focused approach to defying the Capitol. Katniss is initially angry enough at Peeta to push him into a vase, which is followed by this conversation with Haymitch:

“Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own.”

“He made me look weak!” I say.

“He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve.” (135)

Katniss has yet to conceptualize her defiance of the Capitol outside of her personal survival and into the realm of questioning the societal structure. In order to achieve more than just a personal act of defiance, Katniss must place her defiance into a situation where people will see how she questions the government. Without Haymitch, Katniss's defiance would have been limited to one girl personally standing up to the system. Haymitch allows her defiance to become visible in a way that Katniss does not fully realize, allowing her to become more than just a defiant girl, but a revolutionary<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The mainstream culturally focus on Katniss is typically on her individualistic rebellion, yet the collective aspect is vitally important to reading her as a model for social change. I believe collective action is far more important to building a legitimate social change movement than a simply individualistic approach.

### **Defiance to Rebellion: The Importance of Questioning Power**

The final element that is necessary for Katniss's defiance to become revolutionary requires Katniss to begin to question power in a way that actively questions the power structure. The development of her decision to have Peeta and herself both eat poisonous berries instead of killing each other in the final moments of the Games becomes essential for the development of a final rebellion, proving that defiance can successfully overthrow the power structure. Katniss's ability to make this choice is essential for catalyzing a final rebellion, which by the end of the series, is able to overthrow the power of the Capitol.

Throughout the majority of the novel, Katniss's defiance of the government comes out in a variety of ways that stand up to the structure, but never question the acceptability of that structure. Katniss assumes that the power systems will ultimately be able to have continued power over her, despite her anger at the system. Even if she succeeds in surviving the Games and defying the government, the Capitol will remain in control of her life, with no sense of change in sight. Katniss has to connect her defiance to an active questioning of the structure itself. The defining moment in this stage of evolution comes during her private session with the Gamemakers. The sessions allow the Gamemakers to evaluate the skills of each contestant and rank them against one another so sponsors and fellow contestants can get a sense of each person's chances. Katniss plans to use her session to showcase her archery skills for the first time, hoping to garner a high enough score to receive gifts from sponsors in the arena that will keep her alive. When she arrives in her session, Katniss sees the Gamemakers have been there too long, and they will not pay attention to her, despite her considerable skill. In that moment, Katniss's requirement for compliance in the Games is manifest in anger:

Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief

“Thank you for your consideration,” I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed (102).

Even though she has publically defied the Capitol before, this is the first instance where her actions directly question the structure. By rejecting the rules of the session, Katniss actively stands up to the power structure and begins to question the system that is in place. Her previous defiance, directed at the power structure from a distance, does not question the power structure up close. Here she acts on the desire to change the system, not find a way around it. Her action moves to question the structure of the Games and society in a way that should soon lead to revolution.

Katniss, however, reacts to her first instance of direct defiance with fear, as directly questioning feels like too much of a threat. After she leaves her session, Katniss's immediate thought is that she has ruined everything by questioning the structure of power. She laments that “Now I've done it! Now I've ruined everything! If I'd stood even a ghost of a chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Gamemakers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me?” (103). In later conversations with other members of her team, Katniss's reaction appears overly dramatic, yet in the context of her evolutionary struggle, this moment is a critical one that moves her from acts of defiance to starting to embrace actions that move toward rebellion. In order for Katniss to continue to defy the structure in the way that she does, she must be able to see her actions as questioning the power structure. In her evolution to

revolution, however, Katniss finally must understand the implications her actions can have toward the potential for revolution.

The last moment in Katniss's evolution as a model of social change comes from a conversation she has with Peeta the night before the Games begin. Both tributes have been kept awake, contemplating what will happen to them during the course of the competition. Katniss has become even more deeply invested in the survival strategy as a way to defy the Capitol, as the control of the Games and Capitol seem to make that the only option. Peeta, on the other hand, knows that his lack of practical skills will mean there is no way to survive the arena. Thus, he begins to contemplate his own death, both what it could mean for his personal identity and for the potential statement he could make. In their conversation, Peeta tells Katniss "I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games" (142). Peeta articulates his own desire to question the structure in a way that does more than just try to defy it, but rather reject and redefine it. Until Peeta voices this idea, Katniss has been moving toward the concept of actively questioning, but has not embraced it because of a sense of personal risk. Peeta shows how important questioning the governmental structure is for the other people it affects, planting the seed in Katniss's mind for her final act of rebellion.

Katniss's final choice to have both herself and Peeta attempt to eat poisonous berries is a calculated and deliberate act that questions the power structure. The moment is the essential start of the rebellion, where the action is deliberately against the structure of the Games. At the last minute, Katniss and Peeta are trying to figure out who will make the final kill of the Games. In a moment of quick thinking, Katniss moves from a defiance character to one of revolution, as she realizes:

They have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.

If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...

"Trust me" I whisper. He holds my gaze for a long moment then lets it go. I loosen the top of the pouch and pour a few spoonfuls of berries into his palm.

(344)

This final act of defiance is different from her previous action, as it is the biggest direct threat to the structure of power. While Katniss does not understand the possible repercussion until much later, she does understand how direct her choice is and makes the choice with knowledge of what might happen. At this moment, Katniss's evolution in terms of a model of social change has completed an arch from passive defiance to active resistance, and finally, revolutionary action that directly questions the power structure.

### **Evaluating Katniss as a Model of Social Change**

Throughout *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins's protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, models important elements of how a social change movement develops, both in terms of the individual and the movement as a whole. A person who is experiencing rightful dissatisfaction at their circumstances, even if they are able to stand up to their society or government, can choose to work around the rules of their society without questioning the rightness of the structure. The appropriate context is necessary in order to push a person to move to actively defy a structure, and even more so, directly question that structure in close proximity. Making the



movement truly revolutionary, however, requires even more context which may be nearly impossible to create.

Yet for young adults, seeing social change modeled in a dramatic context can help them understand the importance of questioning the structures in their own lives. In the current world, where a wide variety of social issues need to be changed, having a model that explores those ideas in a safe space allows young adults to test the theories, without the threats of death that a revolution on the scale of *The Hunger Games* would cause. The concepts imbedded in the novel are important to an understanding of creating social justice. Armin Grams explains the process by stating:

Adolescents are given to reflection about ideas, to a critique of what has already been absorbed, to trying out this knowledge in vital everyday life. In order to make such evaluations the adolescent must be well supplied with facts, for he cannot think without them. (23)

Young adult dystopian novels allow this process to occur, likely on a less conscious level in a way that appeals highly to teenage interests. The massive popularity of the novels suggests an interest in exploring rebellion further in terms of creating change in the world. Katniss acts as a canonical model of how an individual can inspire a change in the world through a personal evolution. The mass popularity of *The Hunger Games* series has brought about new examples that the young adult dystopian genre has continued to build on. Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series stars another strong, defiant female protagonist, but Tris begins the novel already having experienced her own evolution in understanding that she can question the power structure and cause a revolution against injustice and inequality. With films being made based on *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series, the potential to inspire readers toward social change is not

insignificant, although a lack of the appropriate trigger may lead these ideas to be expressed in smaller ways as adolescents grow into adults who begin to understand the importance of fighting for justice for those who experience inequality. The potential to inspire young people toward acts of social change is not insignificant, as within days of the writing of this paper, students in Bangkok protested a military coup using the three-fingered salute and were arrested for the use of that symbol. The potential for change is apparent, but the connection of the novel as an example of a broader change of social justice literature could use texts as models of social justice in the broader culture. By critiquing and understanding the movements more deeply, protagonists like Katniss have the potential to inspire the next generation to accomplish more instances of social change.

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