**SYMBOLISM**

The Thirteen Districts

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

As we learn from the novel's first chapter, the country of Panem is located in what once was North America. In the middle sits the Capitol, a center of wealth and affluence which organizes the yearly Hunger Games. Surrounding the Capitol are thirteen districts, regions which fall under the control of the Capitol. The districts all have distinct personalities (District 12, for example, is a coal-mining community; District 11 is primarily agricultural), yet they are all ruled from afar by the cruel and powerful government of the Capitol. The districts supply the Capitol with goods (like coal or grain), yet they often have sanctions, punishments, or unfair restrictions placed upon them by the tyrannical powers that be. District 13, of course, is the one exception. The thirteenth district is a rebel region that the Capitol obliterated during the Dark Days as a reminder that everyone in Panem must obey the power and might of the Capitol.

The American history buffs amongst us might find this set-up – thirteen districts ruled by a harsh and distant power – all too familiar. During the colonial period, a huge chunk of North America was also split into thirteen colonies: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia. (That was a mouthful.) As colonies, these regions reported to the fancy-pants British, as that region of North America was then considered part of the domain of the British Empire.

Just as in the *Hunger Games,* colonists in North America supplied folks back in England with goods such as cotton and tobacco; and much like the Capitol, the British government often imposed rules, laws, and restrictions on the colonies that the people living there felt to be pretty unfair. (Remember the battle cry "No taxation without representation"?) Though the Brits definitely were making the American colonist fight to the death for entertainment, the colonists eventually decided that it was time for either [liberty or death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Give_me_Liberty,_or_give_me_Death%21), and thus the [Revolutionary War](http://www.shmoop.com/american-revolution/) began. Figures such as [George Washington](http://www.shmoop.com/george-washington/) and [Betsy Ross](http://www.betsyrosshouse.org/hist_woman/) came onto the national stage to fight the Red Coats (British soldiers) that began invading the shores.

In sum, the thirteen districts of Panem are in a very similar position as the original North American colonies. Both have fallen under the rule of a tyrannical system of government. Unlike the original colonies, whose story we can read about in American history books, we don't yet know the fate of the 13 districts of Panem. Will the districts of the *Hunger Games* also ask for their independence from the Capitol? It looks to us like a revolution might just be on the horizon.

The Mockingjay Pin

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

The mockingjay pin is the circular gold token Katniss wears during the Games to represent District 12. Each tribute is allowed one item to remind them of their friends and family in their home district; the small pin bearing the image of a bird in flight is Katniss's.

The mockingjay pin was originally given to Katniss by Madge, the mayor's daughter, before Katniss's departure to the Capitol to participate in the Hunger Games (3.24). Though Katniss forgets about the pin during her training sessions, Cinna, her stylist, is sure to place the mockingjay prominently on Katniss's outfit for the arena. He tells her that the little pin "barely cleared the review board" since the authorities thought Katniss might be able to use the pin as a weapon (10.94). While the thought of a tiny little pin being used as a weapon might seem silly to us, the image of the mockingjay, as we will find out, is indeed an incredibly powerful and important weapon.

What is a mockingjay, you ask? Well, as we are informed in Chapter 3, a mockingjay is a bird, of course, but a hybrid one. Their lineage can be traced to a species known as the jabberjay. Jabberjays were birds that had been genetically engineered by the Capitol as spies during the rebellion of the 13 districts. The little guys were meant to overhear subversive conversations, and bring that information to the Capitol, and repeat what they heard. This was all fine and dandy, of course, until the rebels caught on and started feeding the jabberjays false info. Once the Capitol figured this all out, the birds became useless to them. The jabberjays were left alone in the wild where they mated with female mockingbirds. After a few generations, the mutated birds could no longer repeat or carry information, but they instead learned to carry a tune and to repeat songs and melodies. Hence, the mockingjay was born.

The mockingjays appear not only on Katniss's pin, but in several portions of the novel. We learn, for example, that the bird reminds Katniss of her father, who loved mockingjays very much, and loved to whistle and sing with them (3.57).

Rue, another music lover, is also associated with mockingjays, since she sings to the birds in order to send messages to the other agricultural workers back in District 11 (16.33). After Katniss and Rue team up in the arena, Rue teaches Katniss one of her mockingjay signals, which, if Katniss hears it, should mean that Rue is alive and well. Unfortunately, that same signal will later lure Katniss into a trap, where Rue is being held hostage by the tribute from District 1. Katniss will arrive too late to save Rue's life. As Katniss sings a funeral song for Rue, the mockingjays will take up the song and spread it through the forest (18.32).

Katniss's mockingjay pin, like the bird itself, symbolizes a creature with a spirit of its own. As hybrid creatures that have broken free of the control of the Capitol, they suggest the inability of the Capitol to enforce their power over all living creatures. These birds are signs of resistance and rebellion. As Katniss says, they're "something of a slap in the face to the Capitol" (3.55). In many ways, as we will see in the novel, Katniss herself is very much like a mockingjay and will come to identify (or be identified with) the bird.

Reality Television

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

The Hunger Games are reality television squared. With rippling walls of fire and swarms of deadly mutant hornets, the trials in the arena are kind of like Panem's version of *Survivor* – but deadlier. Contestants are forced to fight each other to the death in front of the cameras while the events are televised all over the country of Panem as sport.

From the moment Katniss takes her sister's place as tribute for District 12, then, she is forced to play the part of a reality television star. Cameras are on her at every moment of the hoopla, as we come to find out that in these Games image is everything. The difficulty of such a surreal world, we learn, is that it becomes very hard to tell what's real and what's not.

On a basic human level, Katniss has a rough time knowing how she actually *feels* about Peeta. While we might think it's kind of crappy of her to kiss him when she doesn't *really* mean it, Katniss doesn't have a choice if she wants to survive. As she says, she's "got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance" (19.93).

The reality television angle is also significant in a broader sense. Because these deadly games are framed as a reality television spectacle, the novel asks us to think about the difference between televised entertainment and brutal human sacrifice. As we find out, those lines blur in *The Hunger Games.* For example, the citizens of the rich Capitol, along with the wealthier districts, view the Games either as a celebrated sporting event or a form of mass entertainment. Despite the fact that tributes are dying left and right, the Hunger Games are something that young men and women train for, like the Olympics.

As Katniss tells us, however, the poorer districts reject the Hunger Games as a form of entertainment. They lack the skills and resources to produce winning tributes, so for districts like Katniss's, the Games become about suffering and sacrifice. The Hunger Games are a constant reminder of the outlying districts' weakness, poverty, and subordination to the Capitol.

Food, Glorious Food

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

Anyone else hungry after reading *The Hunger Games*? We know we were. With all of those descriptions of big hot plates of lamb stew and dishes brimming with orange chicken (and cream sauce!), how could you not be?

Food symbolizes wealth, plenty, and comfort in *The Hunger Games*; it is the dividing line between the Haves and the Have Nots. (That is, the rich and the poor.)

In the Capitol, food – decadent, sumptuous, and delicious food – is simply everywhere. Any meal you could possibly desire is only a button-push away. This shows very clearly that the people in the Capitol are consumers – they thoughtlessly and wastefully consume tons of food, just like they carelessly consume the lives of the people in the districts.

The constant availability of food is mind-boggling to someone like Katniss:

*What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by?* (5.27)

As Katniss tells us here, food is quite scarce in the poorer districts of the country where starvation is a serious threat. Katniss's entire existence, in fact, is dedicated to gathering the daily food needed by her family. What would her life be like, she wonders, if her family had enough food to eat? What would it mean if Katniss's daily life weren't a battle against hunger

Dandelions

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

Dandelions symbolize hope for Katniss. Why? Well, because these little flowers (some might say weeds) were the first things she saw after Peeta gave her the bread on that fateful day long ago when her family was starving to death:

*I had just turned away from Peeta Mellark's bruised face when I saw the dandelion and I knew hope wasn't lost. I plucked it carefully and hurried home. I grabbed a bucket and Prim's hand and headed to the Meadow and yes, it was dotted with the golden-headed weeds. After we'd harvested those, we scrounged along inside the fence for probably a mile until we filled the bucket with the dandelion greens, stems and flowers.* (4.13)

Upon seeing the dandelions, Katniss realizes that she will be able to feed her family with food she can gather from the forest. What other people might consider useless, Katniss turns into her family's sustenance. This is both a lesson in resourcefulness and a reminder that hope springs eternal.

Rue's Flowers

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

After the death of her ally Rue, Katniss covers the body of the young girl with flowers as a symbol of Rue's humanity and a tribute to her short life. By calling attention to the sacrifice that Rue made during the Hunger Games, Katniss challenges the idea that Hunger Games – and the people who play them – are mere entertainment for the audiences back in the Capitol. For Katniss, Rue isn't simply a character on a television show. She is a human being who is worthy of respect, admiration, and mourning.

As Katniss says:

*"I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do that there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I."* (18.38)

Covering Rue with flowers is an intense act of rebellion against the Capitol. The experience of witnessing Rue's death inspires Katniss to go on and win the Games – and to prove to the Capitol that they can't strip the tributes of their humanity, however they might try.

The Double Suicide

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

Move over [Romeo and Juliet](http://www.shmoop.com/romeo-and-juliet/), there's a new pair of star-crossed lovers in town, and they're willing to do anything – and everything – to keep their love (and themselves) alive.

OK, so Katniss might not be head over heels in *love* with her co-tribute Peeta, but at the end of the Hunger Games, she realizes that the only way she and Peeta might have a chance of both coming out alive is to take the whole star-crossed lovers bit to its logical conclusion: tragedy. Like the doomed teenagers Romeo and Juliet, Peeta and Katniss decide not to fight each other to see who will win the Games, but instead to deny the Gamemakers any winner at all by downing some poisonous berries in a double suicide attempt.

Katniss explains:

*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 […]* (25.86-25.87)

Katniss realizes that if she and Peeta both take their own lives – or at least *act* like they're going to – then the Gamemakers would be in some very hot water. This stroke of master strategy is what allows Katniss – and Peeta – not only to survive, but to actually beat the Games. Instead of allowing the pair to kill themselves, the Gamemakers change the rules of the game once again and declare *both* Peeta and Katniss winners.

The double suicide attempt is an act of rebellion, to be sure. Even after she's out of the arena, Katniss fears that the Capitol will somehow punish her subversive behavior. It is this reason that Katniss must continue her star-crossed lovers charade with Peeta – even though she finally realizes that he wasn't actually pretending.