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## **Just-War Theory and Feminist Ideals in *The Hunger Games***

### **Introduction**

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins details the story of a sixteen year old girl who is forced to fight to the death in a tournament against twenty-three other teenagers. Katniss Everdeen has lived in poverty her whole life and, after the death of her father, she becomes the sole provider for her family. When her twelve year old sister, Prim, is chosen in the reaping, Katniss volunteers to go in her place. We view the world of Panem through Katniss's eyes, taking in the extreme poverty of district twelve, the riches of the Capitol, and the terror of the arena. Through Katniss's thoughts, actions, and perception of the world in *The Hunger Games*, Collins is able to reflect on just-war theory through a feminist lens and push back on patriarchal ideals about war that are held by much of our society today, ultimately analogizing towards nonviolence.

We will look at Katniss and how she can either be perceived as a feminist character or someone who upholds patriarchal ideals. Acknowledging that *The Hunger Games* is a story about war, we look at Katniss and how she chooses to interact with the world as a way to guide us through our own by welcoming voices that are not often welcome in this conversation. Through dramatism, critical analysis, and feminist analysis, we look into just-war theory, feminism, and authoritarian governments.

### **Katniss Everdeen as a Feminist Role Model**

Keller and Gibson (2014) talk about the implications of *The Hunger Games*, resistance of the male gaze it presents her as a female action heroine. Most female action heroes are sexualized in some way but in the case of Katniss, we are just presented with a girl who is doing her best to survive. Their focus surrounds the film but much of their ideas could easily be applied to Katniss in the books. In contrast, Brown (2019) talks about how both *The Hunger Games* and *The Selection* series utilize postfeminist individualism. In many aspects Katniss in *The Hunger Games* and America in *The Selection* reject their feminine traits. Despite this, they still are seen possessing traditionally feminine characteristics. This is referred to as “performing not-performing” (p. 737). Brown (2019) ultimately argues that the use of “performing not-performing” makes it so the patriarchal ideals are ultimately upheld in each respective novel. In this analysis, Katniss’s ability to have both feminine and masculine traits makes her more of a feminist character. The idea that she can embrace traditionally masculine ideas while still holding space for traits that, in all other senses would make her “weak”, makes her more of a role model in a feminist sense. Taylor (2012) talks about *Twilight*, the extremely popular novel released in 2005 and its glorification of gendered violence. Many instances “recode” gendered violence to be more appealing to its female readers (p. 400). *The Hunger Games* pushed back on many popular trends in similar media that came before it. When it comes to gender roles, male characters in the Hunger Games are not required to seem dominant. In the case of Peeta, the main love interest throughout the book, Katniss is almost always in control of situations surrounding him.

Noreen (2019) talks about dehumanization as a hegemonic and ideological tool in *The Hunger Games*. It depicts the struggle between the upper and lower classes within Panem. They

argue that the Capitol's power reflects the Marxist idea that capital is dead labor. The Capitol starves people then offers food randomly in order to "...implement their hegemony and false consciousness" (p. 92). The Hunger Games is a way for the Capitol to turn the poor districts against each other in order for them to maintain control. By doing this, Collins is able to demonstrate the struggle for survival in the districts as well as the Capitol's struggle to hold onto control. Cronshaw (2019) brings forth the question of responsible government. The oppression brought upon the districts is just as unlivable as the anarchy of the Games. There needs to be some sort of government that is held accountable by the people it governs. In many cases people in power will do anything to hold onto power, no matter who they hurt in the process. In this analysis of *The Hunger Games* we would like to consider just-war theory and how it applies to many of these same themes. Both Cronshaw (2019) and Noreen (2019) talk about the sharp similarities in our world and that of Panem. From the way residents of the Capitol live compared to the extreme poverty in the districts we can look at our own society and begin to unpack these aspects.

### **Katniss Everdeen and the "Not Like Other Girls" Trope**

Bitzer (1992) breaks the rhetorical situation into three parts. Exigence is the demand for rhetoric. This is the reason the artifact was created. Next is the audience. These are the people that can be persuaded by the use of rhetoric. Changing their mind must be pertinent to the exigence for it to matter to the rhetorical situation. Next is constraints which are situations that might stop the rhetor from being able to communicate their story. Putting these things together creates a rhetorical situation that allows the rhetor to create something that attempts to persuade an audience. When looking at *The Hunger Games* through this lens we must first and foremost acknowledge that it is a novel about war. The book itself falls under the dystopian genre. In his

book about dystopian fiction and political thought Stock (2019) wrote, “...I argue that dystopian narratives are a form of political and politicized writing” (p. 2). There is nothing more political than the topic of war. *The Hunger Games* attempts to answer the question: When is war okay? Are there circumstances where the absolutely horrible acts that war brings about are justified? Published in 2008, *The Hunger Games* is written for teenagers, specifically young girls. In this time period the “not like other girls” trope ran rampant in young adult media. It thrived on the idea that being a woman made you lesser and all girls should strive to be less like other girls to be accepted in society (*“I’m Not like Other Girls” Trope Discussion*, 2021). It is still fairly common to shame young girls and women for liking things that are popular among their peers. Because of this, it is common for young girls to be left out of conversations about more complex topics like war. Even when they try to participate they are talked over and shut out. Collins purposefully includes young women in this narrative, giving them a chance to consume things like just-war theory marketed directly at them.

*The Hunger Games* also found an audience outside of this. After its film adaptation, it gained popularity with older audiences who also appreciated its nuance. The film was viewed widely which led to a rise in popularity of the book as well. While it is designed specifically to include young girls in the conversation of just-war theory, much of the rhetoric is still applicable to older audiences and audiences of different genders.

### **Dramatistic Analysis**

Dramatistic analysis is one way to look at artifacts that focuses mainly on the words we use to describe the world. Created by Kenneth Burke, it focuses on terministic screens which are defined as “...the capacity of language (terminology) to encourage us to understand the world in some way while filtering (screening) other interpretations out” (McGeough & King, 2016, p.

148). Dramatistic analysis utilizes the terms of the pentad which define parts of an artifact. The act of an artifact is the action that takes place. The scene is defined as the place or context in which the act takes place. The agent is the person committing the act and the agency is the means by which the act is performed. Finally, the purpose is the reason the person is doing the act (McGeough & King, 2016). Dramatistic analysis is useful because it allows us to break down an artifact and look at its dominant term and ratios. This helps us to better understand how the story functions. When looking at *The Hunger Games*, dramatism gives us the opportunity to look into what drives the story forward and supports its message.

### **Critical and Feminist Analysis**

Critical rhetoric deals with the idea of power and domination. Stemming back all the way from Plato's work, it focuses on how power "creates and sustains social practices which control the dominated" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). McKerrow (1989) states that maintaining certain societal ideas contributes to the oppression of historically oppressed minority groups. Using critical analysis helps us to unpack these harmful stereotypes and move forward as a society. Feminist Analysis is utilized to bring the ideas of the patriarchy in the media we consume to the front of the conversation. There is so much masculine hegemony that makes its way into books, television, and even onto social media without us even noticing. By analyzing these things we can spotlight the harmful rhetoric and begin to move away from it (Sellnow, 2010). Using both critical and feminist analysis helps us to better understand how *The Hunger Games* either upholds societal ideals or pushes against them.

### **Katniss Everdeen as a Feminist Icon**

*The Hunger Games* frames Katniss as a feminist character by making her an androgynous character. By possessing many feminine and masculine traits as well as easily fitting the

description of many races, Collins is able to create a mold that many young girls can fit into. Collins purposefully describes her vaguely. She is supposedly thin with dark hair, olive skin, and gray eyes (Collins, 2008). This leaves the door open for young girls but, especially young girls of color, to see themselves in Katniss. This is something that had previously not really ever been done. Writers, more often than not, will make their feminist characters objectively white. Though it is usually not done with malice, it can leave a large portion of their audience left out and unintentionally send the message to young girls of color that they are not included in their feminism.

When she arrives in the Capitol Katniss is uninterested in being pampered by her stylists. For most of her life she has been busy just trying to survive. She has much bigger things on her mind than what she is going to be wearing. She spends hours with her escort, Effie Trinket while she attempts to coach her in all things lady and Katniss fails miserably. Still, Katniss still possesses many feminine traits. When a young tribute from District Eleven named Rue is killed, Katniss does not take the usual revenge path that we see in many action movies. Though this would have been the traditionally male reaction, Collins takes time to acknowledge Katniss's grief. It is implied that Rue reminds Katniss of her sister, Prim, who Katniss originally volunteered in place of so it makes sense that Katniss would be devastated by the loss of Rue. Not only had they formed a close alliance, Katniss can't help but imagine her sister in Rue's place. At Rue's request, Katniss sings her to sleep then decorates her body with flowers (Collins, 2008).

Before *The Hunger Games*, much of the media marketed towards young girls only showed them that they could be one thing. They either had to be hyper-feminine or a tomboy. While these things are not necessarily bad, most people exist in a space between these two

extremes. Katniss is an example of how this is possible. At first glance you may see Katniss as a tomboy but she has much more depth to her than that. She cares deeply for the people close to her which is uncommon in other action heavy books and movies. This is a traditionally feminine trait that would not be included in characters playing traditionally masculine roles. Katniss's empathy doesn't make her weak. Instead it adds to her character and drives her forward. She is able to take time to do things like mourn Rue and still be a powerful opponent. War stories are almost always told to men and boys. By telling the story directly to young girls, about someone who is very similar to them, Collins is able to create an opportunity for them to ask the questions provoked by just-war theory.

### **Just-War Theory in *The Hunger Games***

*The Hunger Games* is a complex story about war and all the terrible things that come along with it. It allows its reader to fully understand the consequences of war and poses the question: when is war justified? It is made clear throughout the book that none of the tributes really have a choice in their participation. Even tributes who volunteered do not have enough autonomy to be considered willing participants. When her younger sister, Prim, has her name picked at the reaping to be entered into the 74th annual Hunger Games Katniss is quick to step up and take her place even though it is seen as a death sentence in District 12. This is our first look at the effects of war in *The Hunger Games*. It is Prim's first reaping and her name is entered only one time but still it is chosen when there are people with their names entered many more times. When reflecting on this fact in the seconds after Prim's name had been called Katniss thinks, "One slip. One slip in thousands. The odds had been entirely in her favor. But it hadn't mattered" (Collins, 2008, p. 21). Katniss volunteers out of necessity to protect her sister but even the career tributes who have trained their whole lives for this don't understand the gravity of

what's at stake. We see this most clearly in the final battle scene between Katniss, Peeta, and Cato. After Cato is pushed off the cornucopia and attacked by the Capitol mutts, he practically begs Katniss to kill him (Collins, 2008).

When looking at it through a dramatistic lens *The Hunger Games* has a scene-act ratio with the dominant term being scene. It is the Hunger Games that cause the act of war and even the participants do not have a choice in their participation. This is important because it paints an unedited picture of what war is. No one wants to be there, and if they think they do, they do not understand what they are signing up for. In a YouTube video on *The Hunger Games* as an anti-war story it is stated that, "War destroys people, even the survivors," (Dennis, 2019, 6:10-6:13). We watch not only Katniss and Peeta be destroyed by war but also Cato, someone we see from the beginning embrace the idea of the Hunger Games.

The reader is forced to ponder whether or not the terrible things that Katniss and all the other tributes go through are really worth it. In the book it is clear that Katniss thinks that all of the death and suffering that takes place during the Games is completely pointless. For the sake of entertaining the Capitol citizens, the children of the districts have been suffering for years. It is easy for the reader to agree that this is something terrible that no one should be forced to endure. They are also forced to acknowledge that much of this stuff occurs in real life. They must ask themselves if there are circumstances where acts of war are necessary. Are there lines that they are not willing to cross? Though, there really isn't one right answer, *The Hunger Games* leans heavily against violence and leads its readers in the same direction.

### **Panem as a Authoritarian Regime**

In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol utilizes its unlimited power to control the districts. By dehumanizing people, the Capitol is able to face almost no resistance from the people it is



claiming to care for. Through Katniss's eyes, we get a front row seat to poverty in District Twelve. Food is hard to come by and often expensive. For the hungriest of District Twelve's citizens, most of the time the issue lies in their finances. The entire district is surrounded by a fence and crossing into the woods to hunt for food is illegal. In the earlier part of the book Katniss remarks, "'District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety'" (Collins, 2008, p. 6). It is not uncommon for people to die of starvation in District Twelve, though their cause of death is never listed as starvation. The Capitol controls almost every aspect of their lives, even when they have electricity. On the other hand, the citizens of the Capitol live extremely lavish lives. They are known to have excess food, spend an excessive amount on fashion, and even have complicated showers. This is all a huge contrast to what Katniss's life in District Twelve looks like. It is clear that they keep much of their resources for themselves. The lack in the districts is purposeful to create a sense of hopelessness and keep the citizens in check (Collins, 2008).

When we view *The Hunger Games* from our perspective as readers it is clear that what the Capitol is doing is wrong. They control every aspect of the district's daily life and we see extreme poverty. Still, it is something that happens to people everyday. Through *The Hunger Games*, Collins pushes us to become more aware of our government. It emphasizes the idea that the Capitol's power comes from the cooperation of its citizens. A huge example of this is Katniss and Peeta's victory in the Hunger Games. The gamemakers intend to make a spectacle out of them when they change the rules to allow two victors from the same district and then attempt to take it back at the last minute. When Katniss and Peeta threaten to kill themselves with nightlock, they are both allowed to win (Collins, 2008). They take back their power by not falling in line with the Capitol's rules. In the context of just-war theory, it also allows readers to remember that they have power in conversations. Many conversations that surround war often

fall victim to the idea that it is what it is. Just-war theory reminds us to reflect on our surroundings and ask questions. Just because something is part of the status quo does not mean it is something we have to put up with. It also allows its audience to consider again what necessary violence looks like. Are there moments when they might have to fight back? Is that justified? While the question is technically open ended, Collins leans heavily towards the idea of nonviolence.

## **Discussion**

*The Hunger Games* provides a unique perspective on the topic of just-war theory through a feminist lens. Katniss is designed specifically to appeal to a large audience of young girls. This is something that is highly unusual, especially in literature that covers topics like war. By possessing both masculine and feminine traits these young girls are able to see that their feminine traits will not hold them back. In fact, sometimes feminine traits will make you better at something. This allows them to embrace the idea of just-war theory. Collins does not sugarcoat the horrors of war. She gives her young audience the chance to really understand what happens during war. It is clear that the tributes do not have a choice in the matter, even if it may appear so at first glance. She also gives them a chance to see how authoritarian regimes function by keeping their citizens hopeless. She also reminds them that once they find their power, these governments have far less control. There are many parallels between Panem and the world that we live in today. *The Hunger Games* sets up its readers to be able to ask the right questions and ultimately leads them towards the idea of nonviolence.

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