“A Revolutionary Act”: Investigating the Draw of Dystopia in Young Adult Literature

In the year 1948, George Orwell wrote a book about a very different year which consequently sparked a new literary trend. The atomic bomb had been dropped, introducing the horror of mass destruction to the world. Nazism had risen and fallen again, and communism in the Soviet Union was growing and becoming threatening. In the midst of these world changes, Orwell’s book described a remade world in which an oppressive totalitarian government ruled over the lives and souls of its people, and before long Big Brother and the Party had marked the beginning of a genre—popular dystopian fiction. *1984* painted a disparaging picture of communism and the Soviet Union, and was consequently banned in Russia by Stalin for its effectiveness in doing so (“List of Books Banned by Governments”). Other dystopian novels followed, many of which were highly successful and some of which are still used in schools today: *Fahrenheit 451, A Brave New World, Ender’s Game, The Handmaid’s Tale,* and many others. From Orwell on down, most dystopian stories were politically centered and virtually all were geared toward adults—until recently. Within the last two decades, and especially within the last five to ten years, dystopia has found a new and surprising audience that has baffled publishers and readers alike, especially after the sudden boom of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins in 2008: young adults, or in other words, teenagers.

Young adult literature is not often the subject of critical attention, but the type of reception a book receives and the audience that receives it is an important part of its value and its
place in literary history—and in few genres is this more prevalent than in dystopia. In 1970, literary historian Hans Robert Jauss wrote a significant treatise stating that while the author and critic are part of literary history, it is the readership that really determines the significance of a literary work in history and in the humanities cannon.

“A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue. It is much more like an orchestration which strikes ever new chords among its readers and which frees the text from the substance of the words and makes it meaningful for the time” (Jauss).

In other words, the response and resonance a text has among its readership shapes its meaningfulness to that reader in that time. While adults have voiced a multiplicity of opinions on recent dystopian literature, it is the primary readership—adolescents—that have marked this genre as significant.

Yet the question remains—why teenagers? What is it that young adult readers see in books about fictional big government and explicit oppression and cruelty? What draw do books saturated in political and social commentary hold for an allegedly ambivalent generation? Jauss also said that a literary word “predisposes its reader to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakes memories of the familiar” (Jauss). The familiar is powerful in literature because it brings the story into the realm of reality, of our true-to-life selves. As Orwell himself said, “telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” In no area is this truer than in adolescent literature. One undisputable truth of young adult literature studies is that adolescents tend to favor books in which they can see themselves reflected, whether that be with regards to race, disabilities, sexual orientation,
socioeconomic status, or overall teenage experience. I would argue that in spite of the abundance of fantasy and paranormal young adult literature, and in spite of assessments of young adults as socio-politically ambivalent, the current reception of dystopian fiction is because dystopia is uniquely rich in “familiar characteristics and implicit illusions.” In an era filled with information and a focus on controversial issues, Dystopia in general and *The Hunger Games* specifically attract young adult readers because of its reflection of reality--both in presentation and commentary on real issues, and through real protagonists in a position to effect sociopolitical change. Thus, the “memories of the familiar” in young adult Dystopic narratives provide opportunities for young adults to address real issues and, ideally, to instigate change themselves.

**Real Issues—The World through the Dystopia Lens**

“Dystopia” is a relatively new term. The word itself comes from “Utopia,” a hybrid itself meaning an idyllic society, and the Latin prefix “dys,” meaning “bad” or “disordered.” The idea of Utopia has deep historical origins, arguably beginning with Plato’s Republic and philosopher-king but most certainly appearing in published history with Thomas Moore’s book *Utopia*, where the term was originally coined. Utopia represents an idyllic, almost heavenly society characterized by equality, order, and peace. By contrast, dystopian novels paint a picture of a possible (yet exaggerated) future in which oppression and totalitarianism rule over a decrepit people—a reverse utopia. Vivien Greene describes it as a “utopia gone wrong in a grim futuristic society… characterized by oppressive canons and the suffocation of independent thought” (Greene). Dystopia is usually illustrated in order to prove a political or social point. Where science fiction is the logical extrapolation of scientific fact to paint a possible technological future, dystopia represents a logical extrapolation of socioeconomic or sociopolitical fact, painting a picture of a larger-than-life potential future society. Dystopia feeds on reality, taking
real issues, problems, and failings of the world, expanding and distorting them, and reflecting them back for the reader to view anew, as Orwell did so successfully with communism in his dystopian work. Bold dystopic narratives offer a powerful commentary on the problems that actually exist in the world and the realities we face every day. Recent young adult dystopia follows the same trends as the original dystopias, though with greater boldness, usually focusing on a single issue or a select few issues on which to expound.

As a modern example of dystopia, *The Hunger Games* fits into the definition and history of dystopic fiction. In *The Hunger Games* the dystopia is a future version of North America, reorganized and renamed “Panem” after a bloody civil war. The country is divided into twelve districts run by the Capitol, an authoritarian central government that exploits the resources of the districts to support a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle. As a reminder of their submission, every year the districts are required to send two tributes each—one boy and one girl—between the ages of twelve and seventeen to compete in the Hunger Games, in which the twenty-four tributes fight and kill one another to the last man standing (an idea inspired by Athenian tributes to the Cretan Minotaur) (Blasingame 726-27). The story follows Katniss Everdeen, of district 12, volunteers as tribute to the games when the name of her younger sister is called. The novel follows her fight for survival in the games, as well as her experiences with the Capitol, her discovery of and commentary on her society, her relationships with other characters (especially the boys, in true young adult fashion), and her final attempts to preserve her own identity and defy the Capitol’s control of her life. In the story there are the elements of an oppressive government, exaggerated vices, a futuristic society attempting to defuse independent thought, and so on. It reflects real issues of the real world, an idea that will be discussed at length presently.
There can be no denying its popularity. *The Hunger Games* alone—easily the most popular young adult dystopia novel this side of 2000—has sold over 11.7 million copies (Roback), spent 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, topped both the Harry Potter books and the *Twilight* series for eBook and physical copy sales on Amazon .com (Doll), and is now a multibillion dollar move franchise. At the time the first book was released there was backlash from parents and others claiming that the book’s portrayal of the mutual slaughter of children was too dark for young readers. Other dystopian novels are similar, including *Unwind,* in which parents may retroactively abort their teenagers; *Divergent,* in which young people in a domineering society violently fight the government and each other; *The Maze Runner,* which features high suspense and no small number of gruesome deaths… the list goes on. *The Hunger Games* drew particular attention because of its widespread popularity. The question becomes even more pertinent: why does a book that portrays two dozen children in mortal combat draw these kinds of numbers?

The answer is that the issues Collins describes really exist, and that puts the novel into the realm of our reality—thus creating a powerful, relatable story. We do *The Hunger Games* and dystopia generally a disservice if we assume that children killing each other is all there is to it. The societal commentary is so crucial and so potent to the story that to ignore it is to ignore the chief purpose of the book. For example, one issue in *The Hunger Games* specifically on which Suzanne Collins capitalizes is materialism and poverty. The theme is intrinsic to the whole conflict of the rich Capitol vs. the impoverished districts and is woven throughout the book in many different forms. The members of District 11 who grow the capitol’s food but are not permitted to eat it themselves (with echoes of the great starvation in Ukraine). The people in the capitol eat gluttonously at parties and then take a fluid that makes them throw up so that they can
keep eating. Then there is the obvious association of food with the Hunger Games, both as a prize and in exchange for entering one’s name into the lottery, Katniss’s struggle to provide food for her family, and so on. The Capitol especially harkens back to our own society’s materialist ideals on many fronts. Collins describes one in this powerful passage:

“They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elder person, you want to congratulated them on their longevity, ask the secret of their survival. A plump person is envied because they aren’t scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren’t desirable. A round belly isn’t a sign of success” (74).

The connection to our current societal ideal of beauty is obvious, as is the commentary on the severe want in the districts. Poverty and hunger represent a rampant problem in the world, especially third world and war-torn nations but in the United States as well. Collins has also discussed in public interviews how she drew inspiration as well from current trends in reality TV, in which people (teens included) are pitted against one another for money or some other reward, their struggle exploited for entertainment. Child slavery, militarism, oppressive dictatorships, and so on are all ongoing problems around the world. Hunger and excess are real issues, and their presence in the novel lends the story weight that a fiction alone cannot conjure.

**Real People—Young Adults in Action**

As another aspect of Jauss’s reception theory in this case, it is not only the content but our current societal trends toward free exchange of information that lend itself to reception of this particular kind of literature. Thanks to the advent of the Internet, information on issues and conflicts worldwide are available at the touch of a button. Facebook, one of the biggest sites of
information exchange on the Internet currently, boasts 1.23 billion users. The Huffington Post, a news website, is one of the most frequently visited sites on the web, along with Wikipedia and others. Because of all these platforms, along with cellphones and other modes of communication, word travels fast and is available instantly to almost anyone. The fact that we are able to access information so quickly leads to greater awareness of current issues and more dialogue from different views; and because we are able to be part of these issues, they are recognizable and important to the reader when they appear in the dystopian setting. Ames also suggested that this generation may be particularly receptive to dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels because of the impact of 9-11: “Through [apocalyptic narratives] mediation of fictionalized scenarios, they present trauma in order to do away with it, hence becoming a sort of emotional security blanket for individuals existing in an unstable post-9/11 world” (Ames 6). Ames argues that dystopia and apocalyptic works are popular among young adults because they provide a relatively safe place to grapple with issues of reality that have become more immediate in the USA after the 9/11 crisis. Whatever the perspective one takes, it is not unreasonable to say that that the present decade has had an impact on the trend of placing real issues into popular literature. Because important issues are readily present and highly pertinent in an information-heavy society, the young readership is prepared to see and deal with those issues in a real or fictional setting.

The political commentary alone is not enough, however—an even more significant factor in the positive reception of *The Hunger Games* is in the form of Katniss Everdeen, the book’s strong and impulsive protagonist. Adolescents readers like to see themselves in the stories they read so that they can feel themselves validated and represented—and although set in a fictional world, Katniss is an accurate reflection of a teenager’s personality. Amber M. Simmons, in her article “Class on Fire: Using the Hunger Games Trilogy to Encourage Social Action,” described
Katniss as “the most accurate depiction of a teenager that I have ever encountered … She is oxymoronic with her uncertain impulsivity and her role as a leader and a pawn. She is strong and brave, features I observe daily in my students, but fragile to the point of breaking. Her black and white sense of right and wrong, betrayal and loyalty, is a trait of youth” (Simmons). Katniss is impulsive, sometimes oblivious to others perspectives or feelings, hates to be left out or feel inferior, and has a heightened sense of injustice. She is simply a teenager—and as such, teenagers relate to her. Other dystopian protagonists follow similar patterns—almost every recent dystopian novel follows a white, teenage hero in a world made oppressive by the decisions of adults. The sense of rebellion or resisting oppression is also appealing to the young adult audience. Melissa Ames said that “at the core of many of the most popular YA novels published in the last decade is a government that seeks to quell rebellious impulses…. Although this could be seen as a commentary on current times—an era that has seen a wave of resurrected conservatism and conformity—it also is very much a staple of young adult literature more generally. Dystopian narratives play well to teenage audiences because they serve as powerful metaphors for their current developmental stage” (Ames, 8). Teenagers relate to those they see that mirror their own feelings and their own “developmental stage,” and so become consumers of books like The Hunger Games in which they can see themselves.

The teenage protagonist placed in oppressive circumstances provides more than just a sense of anti-adult camaraderie with the teenage reader—it provides a representation of an adolescent who not only recognizes right and wrong more than the adults, but who is placed in a position to effect real change on a societal level. The appeal of such an influential figure stands in stark contrast to our society’s current appraisal of young adults as socio-politically ambivalent. The stereotype is not without basis. For instance, in a recent survey of 3,000 college students,
20% said they would trade their next vote for an iPod, and half said that for one million dollars they would give up their right to vote entirely (Ames, 3). Results like this paint a disparaging image of the modern young adult, but the dystopian protagonist shows that our assumptions about teens’ interest in the world may not entirely true. Dystopia paints a picture of young adults not only living with societal wrongs, but taking an active part in changing them. This is clearly evidenced in Katniss, who is not only an accurate portrayal of a teenager but who also is forced to solve her own problems with her own skill and her own ingenuity, with no magic wand or deus ex machina to do it for her. Some writers compare Katniss’s experience (and those of other dystopic protagonists) to the experience of high school, in which students feel “oppressed” by adults and desire to push back; but while that may have some truth to it, there is more to this than the unruly teenager experience (Ames). If Katniss were resisting only the adults of District 12, such a comparison might be made—but her actions almost immediately have society-wide repercussions, not just personal liberation or autonomy as is the case in high-school level novels.

**Real Application—The Revolutionary Act**

The depiction of young adults making a difference and pushing back against global and not just local problems is a powerful image. It is an appealing image in a society that tends to push back against conformity and societal norms in everything from media censorship to health care to same-sex marriage. The question, however, is this: does it really do any good? These narratives are powerful, surely, and we have established that they have been widely and favorably received for many reasons—but does the presence of the commentary actually make a difference in the actions of adolescents in real society?

The answer is that it can—it has the potential to do so. Literature in general has always been a vehicle for change, and dystopia especially so. This is first and foremost the case because
dystopia promotes awareness, and once a problem is known there is a greater likelihood that it can be changed or improved. *1984* was banned for precisely this reason—because it posed a real threat to the Soviet Union in its portrayal of the communist government. *The Hunger Games* has already become a vehicle for social change since its publication and the release of the film versions of the story. Most recently, five young people in Thailand were arrested for using the three-fingered rebellion gesture from the series as a sign of resistance during a political speech from the current military president, who was put in place after a coup some time ago. The incident was not isolated, either—several arrests were made in the last year of people using the same symbol as a stand against the military government. The recent film released last week, “*Mockingjay Part 1,*” was banned in Thailand because it could potentially incite further conflict (Bryant). The protestors in Thailand recognized themselves in the narrative of *The Hunger Games* and recognized their own potential to resist their real struggles. Outside of *The Hunger Games* specifically, young people have a history of being more acutely aware of the wrongs around them and attempting to change—from Tiananmen Square in China to Occupy Wall Street. Dystopia has the potential to promote awareness in an already conscious age group.

This is not to say that all of our high school students should go out and start protesting the government after reading a dystopian novel—but there are ways to convert the reflection of reality present in the narratives into real practice. Amber M. Simmons uses *The Hunger Games* to teach about current social issues—from modern day slavery to sex trafficking to poverty and hunger—and to encourage students to act based on their inquiry. She writes that "by raising awareness and advocating for change, such projects encourage students to assess their world and take action against the social problems they observe… just as Katniss does, by using their literacy skills to participate in social-action projects” (Simmons). Steven Wolk discusses the
same, stating that “using young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the wonderful stories of good books. And within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as they are in endless civic issues (Wolk, 667). The Hunger Games is powerful for readers, but it takes outside inquiry, guidance, and actions to make it powerful in the real world. It is not enough to read about issues, there must be action as well. Dystopia is unique in its ability to encourage that kind of change in its readership. That work falls upon the readers of a work but also teachers, parents, librarians, and others whose responsibility it is to guide students through literature and through the world.

Since its genesis, The Hunger Games has stood as a powerful in its depiction of individuals creating meaningful change in a society that resists correction and individual thought. Distinct, however, is the presentation of a figure that some believe has become an anomaly in our world—a young person who makes a difference. That person is not an anomaly, however, and the fact of The Hunger Game’s overwhelming reception indicates that the idea of societal change is not foreign to the younger generation. Jauss said that “a literary work must be understood as creating a dialogue” in its time and with its readership (Jauss 10). Dystopia draws its power from a unique tendency to draw readers into a dialogue not only about literature but about reality as well. The problem, of course, is that it is terribly easy to read about the struggles of others, say “that’s terrible,” and go one with ordinary life. The hope of Dystopia is that the depiction of revolutionary acts can lead to real revolution—actual change—and, as many classrooms and real revolutions have shown, that hope is possible and growing. The young adult trend could, perhaps, be a positive indication of further dialogue to come as teenagers use the “memories of the familiar” they see in the books they read and make their own “revolutionary acts” a reality.
Works Cited


