

Research Paper

**The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins -  
a Typical Dystopian Novel?**

Basic Course English

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# 1. Introduction

The novel "The Hunger Games" written by Suzanne Collins and published in 2008 by Scholastic Inc. was a bestseller and captured many readers all over the world. Moreover, it was so successful that it has been turned into a movie which was very successful as well. The ideas of the fictional world "Panem" and of the "Hunger Games" appeal to the readers because of their dystopian transmission.

Not only did both the novel and the movie catch the attention of readers and fans all over the world, but mine as well. Therefore, I came up with the question "is the novel "The Hunger Games" by Suzanne Collins a typical dystopian novel?"

With this research paper I want to find out what exactly a "dystopia" is and what it is characterized by. Also, I want to look at the opposite of a "dystopia", which is a "utopia" and what its particular aspects are. After that, I am going to examine the novel for characteristics of a "dystopia" or of a "utopia", in order to come to a well founded conclusion and answer the question if the novel "The Hunger Games" by Suzanne Collins is a typical dystopian novel.

## **2. Utopia**

### **2.1 What Is a Utopia?**

Thomas Moore introduced the term “utopia” in his book “Utopia”, which was published in 1516. In his book he describes an island in the Atlantic ocean which forms a utopia. A utopia is an imaginary society often portrayed in literature. It can be considered as the perfect and ideal world with an ideal political system and society. The population lives under perfect conditions and laws with no oppression or discrimination. They are not affected by environmental pollution or catastrophes. Moreover, they live in a perfect state of harmony with no conflicts.

The term “utopia” consists of the Greek prefix “eu”, which can be translated into “good” and of the Greek root “topos”, which means place. So as a result a utopia is a “good place”. The opposite of a utopia is a so called “dystopia”. (Lesamiz)

Moreover, a utopia is a society that does not exist and also will not exist in the future. In literature it is described in detail and plays in normal space and time. The readers are supposed to think that the portrayed utopia is better and has better conditions than the society they are currently living in. (Sargent)

### **2.2 Types of Utopian Guiding**

There is a form or type of guiding in every utopia. One type of utopian guiding is the religion. The whole society has the same religion and together they are led by beliefs and rules made by their religion. Another type of utopian guiding is humanism. This type of guiding is in contrast to the religious guiding a philosophical guiding. It emphasizes the value of humans and that every human being is equal to another. But science and technology can guide a utopia as well. The people living in this utopia appreciate science and technology because they improve their lives and make them much easier. Also because of the science and the technology the population has a higher life expectancy. A different guiding is the economical guiding. People only work in jobs they enjoy because money has been banished. Following the economical guiding is the ecological guiding. The whole population lives in harmony and is at peace in the nature. The last type of guiding is the political guiding. Here the government is dutiful and helps the people living in the utopia. Also it is trustworthy and unbiased and gives every human being an equal chance. (Lesamiz)

## 2.3 Utopian Characteristics

Also utopias have certain characteristics and qualities. The first characteristic of a utopia is equality. Human beings are equal to another and have the same chances. Also they all have access to education and health care to protect and prevent themselves from diseases. Moreover, they live in a safe environment with no harm or danger. The government protects their inhabitants and is peaceful and beneficial to the inhabitants. Furthermore, the employment which is provided to the inhabitants is very responsible and does not favour one inhabitant over another inhabitant. So every human being that lives in a utopia also has a possibility and is able to work. (Lesamiz)

Added to that the inhabitants are allowed and able to think in an independent way and to envision and establish their own ideas. They do not fear the outside world and live in harmony and peace. All the inhabitants are led and brought together by a concept or an idea. Nature is protected and embraced by the government and by the inhabitants. Also the government accepts and embraces individuality and innovation. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Utopias*)

## 3. Dystopia

### 3.1 What Is a Dystopia?

A “dystopia“ is a theoretical, speculative and imaginary society which can be found in literature. In this society people live fearful lives with inhumane conditions in a state where humanity has been banished. They are often facing environmental catastrophes or political and social issues. Also the citizens feel trapped and they are controlled by the government or other totalitarian groups. Moreover, a dystopia is the opposite of a “utopia“. So there is no perfection, no ideal community and no beneficial government or social conditions. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Dystopias*)

The term “dystopia“ is made up of the Greek prefix “dys“, which means bad or harsh and the Greek root “topos“, which means place. In contrast to a utopia, a dystopia is therefore a “bad place“. (Lesamiz)

The portrayed dystopia does not exist currently and is written in a detailed way and plays in ordinary and regular time and space. Here the author wants the reader to think that this form of a society is much worse than the one he is currently living in. (Sargent)

But different to a utopia, the described dystopia might exist in the future. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Dystopias*)

### 3.2 Types of Dystopian Control

In a dystopia a type of control is exercised. One type of control is the corporate control in which corporations control the society and the inhabitants through products, media and propaganda and advertisement. But a dystopia can also be controlled by a foolish and senseless bureaucracy with unqualified and unskilled government officials. This is the bureaucratic control. A different type of control is the technological control. Here the dystopia is ruled by technology through computers or robots and scientific beliefs or new developed technology. The last type of control is the philosophical or religious control. A philosophical or religious ideology or belief form a government with a dictatorship. Every type of control is oppressive and not beneficial to the inhabitants. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Dystopias*)

### **3.3 Dystopian Characteristics**

Also a dystopia is characterized by certain aspects. First of all the inhabitants are living in a dehumanized state and under constant surveillance. They live up to uniform expectations because independent thought and individuality are not embraced. But also freedom and the access to information are restricted and controlled. Moreover, propaganda and media is used to control and to survey the inhabitants. Added to that all the inhabitants fear the world outside of the dystopia and the former natural world has been destroyed. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Dystopias*)

### **3.4 Characteristics of Dystopian Literature**

Also dystopian literature has its own characteristics. In literature the described dystopias are often based on the current world but this world is destroyed. Therefore, dystopias often have a large history and backstory of wars or battles. But also revolutions or uprisings can play a big role in the history. Environmental catastrophes or other climatic disasters may also be responsible for drastic changes to the society with the consequence that a dystopia forms. Moreover, in literature the standards of living are much lower than the ones in the society the readers lives in. Most of the dystopias in literature play in the future and because of that there may be new and better developed technology. (Lesamiz)

But the protagonist in dystopian literature also has its own characteristics. The protagonist often feels trapped in the society and questions it. She or he wants to escape the dystopia but has no power, chances or possibilities to do so. Added to that the protagonist knows of the bad aspects and conditions of the dystopia and often wants to start a rebellion or revolution. Through the protagonist the reader is able to notice the bad aspects of the dystopia. (*Dystopias & Utopias: Dystopias*)

## 4. Dystopian Elements in the Hunger Games

### 4.1 The History of Panem

After many wars, natural catastrophes and other climatic events, Panem “[...] rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America” (p. 18). This shows that the story of the novel plays in the future after disasters destroyed our known world.

Panem consists of the main government, the “Capitol”, and of twelve districts surrounding it. At first there were thirteen districts but then “[...] the Dark Days, the uprising of the districts against the Capitol [happened]” (p. 18) and therefore the Capitol destroyed the thirteenth district and got the other districts back under their control. During this war the Capitol invented new mutations of animals to attack the districts. One of the deadliest mutations are the “tracker jackers” which are mutated wasps that “[...] will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nests and attempt to kill them” (pp. 185-186). Those tracker jacker nests “[...] were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war” (p. 185) and after the war was over, only the nests around the Capitol were destroyed and not the ones near the districts. The ability to create those mutations shows that the technology is more advanced than before and used in a bad way. Now the Capitol has power over the districts and rules with violence and fear.

To guarantee that uprisings will never happen again, the Capitol invented new laws and the Hunger Games.

### 4.2 Living in the Districts

Each district is characterized by a significant work and they pay tribute to the Capitol. District 12, which is the home of the protagonist Katniss Everdeen, is characterized by coal. Most of the men of this district work in a coal mine and they give the coal to the Capitol so that they can burn it for electricity and heat. Nevertheless, the inhabitants can buy coal from the Capitol before it is distributed to them. If inhabitants try to steal the coal and get caught, they are punished and might get killed. For instance during the Hunger Games Katniss Everdeen forms an alliance with Rue from District 11, which is characterized by agriculture. At one time they talk about their districts and their lives and therefore Rue tells Katniss that “[...] [they are] not allowed to eat the crops” (p. 202) and that if you eat or keep parts of the harvest “[...] [they] whip you and make everyone else watch [...]” (p. 202). Moreover, Rue says that when the people in her district work on the

fields during night-time, the Peacekeepers distribute glasses for night vision and “[...] [one] time, this boy Martin, [...] tried to keep his pair“ (p. 204) and because this is not allowed “[...] [they] killed him on the spot“ (p. 204). Those are examples for the violent, fearful and bureaucratic control of the government.

Furthermore, the government does not “[...] want people in different districts to know about one another“ (p. 203). The districts are permanently and with much effort kept apart so that they cannot communicate with each other and that no alliances or uprisings can form. Because of the lack of contact to the other districts and because of the hard restrictions when it comes to leaving the districts or wanting to know about the other districts, the inhabitants of each district fear the outside world.

Also, there is a lot of poverty in the districts and they do not get help from the Capitol. The protagonist Katniss Everdeen says that in her district “[...] you can starve to death [...]“ (p. 6) and this shows that hunger is a big problem in the districts as well. Moreover, she tells the story of the problems she, her mother and her sister had after their father died in an explosion in the coal mine. From there on Katniss “[...] took over as head of the family“ (p. 27) and had to feed the family. Even when their “[...] money ran out and [...] [they] were slowly starving to death“ (p. 27) the government did not help them. Added to that most of the people living in District 12 like the protagonist Katniss Everdeen make their money by making “[...] trades in the Hob, which is the black market [...]“ (p. 6) because they do not get support from the government. Those problems of poverty and hunger and the not helping government are dystopian elements.

Peacekeepers are military troops from the government and the main form of surveillance. They live in every district to control and to observe the inhabitants of the districts. Moreover, they make sure that the rules and laws are obeyed and not ignored. But if an inhabitant breaks a law or rule, this person is firstly punished by the Peacekeepers in public in a humiliating way and secondly this inhabitant is taken to the Capitol to either get killed or be turned into an “Avox“. Also, if inhabitants follow their dreams and think in an independent way, they might be turned into an “Avox“ as well. An “Avox“ is a person that commits a crime and as a punishment this person is brought to the Capitol where “[...] [they] cut [...] [the person’s] tongue [...]“ (p. 77). From there on the person is an “Avox“ and has to work as a servant in the Capitol for the rest of their life. So, this exhibits that independent thought is not allowed and that freedom and peace are restricted. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the districts live under constant surveillance and control.

### 4.3 The Hunger Games

For the Hunger Games, every district has to provide a female and a male tribute between the ages of twelve and eighteen. All the tributes of the districts are trained and interviewed in the Capitol before they enter the outdoor arena of the Hunger Games. There they have to fight against each other until only one tribute is left and the last one alive. This tribute is declared as the winner of the Hunger Games and gets to live the rest of her or his life in the winner's village in their district without having to compete in the Hunger Games ever again. Added to that the district of the winner "[...] will be showered with prizes, largely consisting of food" (p. 19).

The tributes are chosen in the "Reaping" for which you become eligible at the age of twelve. Until you are 18 years old the entries of your name are cumulative. As a result the chances of you being selected are usually the highest when you are 18 years old. But because the people in the districts live in poverty and have almost nothing to eat, "You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae" (p. 13) says Katniss Everdeen. A tessera is a one-year amount of grain and oil for only one person. You are not eligible anymore after the age of 18.

On the other hand, you can also volunteer to be a tribute, which is common "In some districts, in which winning the reaping is such a great honor [...]. But in District 12 [...] volunteers are all but extinct" (p. 22). The protagonist Katniss Everdeen herself volunteers to be a tribute after her little sister Prim was chosen. This catches the attention of the Capitol because volunteers are very rare in District 12 and volunteering as a tribute also impresses the citizens of the Capitol. Furthermore, this is a very important aspect in the Hunger Games because the tributes and their mentors who teach and train them try to find sponsors before the Hunger Games start. Those sponsors can help the tributes during the Hunger Games by buying supplies, medicine or food for them, which will be sent to the tributes in "[...] a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute" (pp. 187-188).

Even though the Hunger Games take place in an outdoor arena far away from Panem, they are still controlled and influenced by the Capitol through the sponsors and through the "Gamemakers". The Gamemakers are the people who create the arena and televise the Hunger Games. Also, they are able to influence the occurrences in the arena and they "[...] manipulate [...] [the tributes] into confronting one another face-to-face" (p. 177) so that the Hunger Games become more exciting and thrilling to the viewers in the Capitol. For instance, at one time during the Hunger Games when "[...] [no] deaths, perhaps no fights at all [happened]" (p. 173) the Gamemakers create "[...] the wall of fire [...]" (p. 171) around Katniss Everdeen so that she has to "[...] follow the others, the rabbits and deer [...]"

(p. 172) to get into a safe zone where the fires cannot affect her. The Gamemakers intend with “[...] [this] fire is [...] to flush [...] [the tributes] out, to drive [...] [them] together“ (p. 173) with the consequences that new deaths and fights will happen and that they will entertain the viewers in the Capitol.

Moreover, the Gamemakers are able to use more advanced and better technology. Added to that they also have access to the scientifically-created mutations which are “[...] no natural-born animals“ (p. 331). For example, the Gamemakers spawn mutations in the final part of the Hunger Games which “[...] resemble huge wolves [...]“ (p. 331) to attack the three left tributes. But those mutations have a twist to them because they also embody “[...] all of the other tributes“ (p. 334) with the consequences that feelings of fear and guilt appear to the left over tributes. This shows that also the Gamemakers play with the fear and other feelings of the tributes and that they form their own type of violent and fearful control and a different form of surveillance.

However, in that year’s Hunger Games Claudius Templesmith, who is the head Gamemaker, explains when there are only six tributes left “[...] [there is] a rule change in the Games“ (p. 244) which says that “[...] both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive“ (p. 244). When Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark are the last tributes in the Hunger Games and both from the same district, the rule change is cancelled. Katniss and Peeta try to kill themselves together by eating poisoned berries with the consequence that there would be no winner and that the Gamemakers “[...] [might] possibly even be executed [...]“ (p. 344) because they disappointed the Capitol. So to prevent that “[...] Claudius Templesmith shouts above them [...] [and] present[s] the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark“ (p. 345). These actions of both Katniss and Peeta have characteristics of a revolution.

## **4.4 The Capitol**

The Capitol is the main government of Panem and also the wealthiest and richest part. President Snow is the head of the government and controls the districts with fear and violence. Moreover, he prefers the citizens of the Capitol over the inhabitants of the districts.

The citizens of the Capitol do not have to worry about competing in the Hunger Games because they live in wealth and in the Capitol. Rather they are delighted by the Hunger Games because to them they are a form of amusement. During the Hunger Games the

citizens of the Capitol are going to parties, watching and betting together with the others. Every death of a tribute is celebrated by the citizens if they have bet correctly. And even if their bet does not come true, they do not show sorrow because the tribute they bet on died, but because they have lost money. When the Hunger Games start the mentors of the tributes are “[...] signing up [...] sponsors [...] [and] working out a strategy on how and when to deliver the gifts [...]” (p. 138) of the citizens of the Capitol. They can influence the Hunger Games by paying for different kinds of gifts for the tributes. This is an action that only the wealthy citizens of the Capitol have access to because “Gifts go up in price the longer the Games continue” (p. 266) and others do not have enough money or power for those actions.

Moreover, manners and etiquette are very important to them. Before the Hunger Games start, every tribute gets interviewed by Caesar Flickerman and after the Hunger Games are over, those interviews are repeated with the winner. Caesar Flickerman “[...] has hosted the interviews for more than forty years [...]” (p. 124) and because “[...] [they] do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner” (p. 124) it seems like Caesar Flickerman never changes. Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark give interviews together, after they are declared as the winners of the Hunger Games. There they have to act as if they are deeply in love and show etiquette in order to be accepted as the winners. During the preparations Katniss has trouble with both etiquette and showing emotions. However, both Peeta and Katniss manage to give a good performance in the interviews so that at the end of those “[...] [everyone is] laughing and crying and hugging [...]” (p. 370) and the citizens are impressed by their love and behaviour.

Also the citizens of the Capitol live in health and wealth. Unlike life in the districts the citizens of the Capitol are not affected by poverty or hunger. Protagonist Katniss Everdeen says that you can see that they “[...] never missed a meal” (p. 59). Added to that she describes them as “[...] oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces [...]” (p. 59) because of their extravagant taste and lifestyle. This shows that every citizen of the Capitol is wealthy in order to afford this lifestyle and that there are no exceptions.

The city itself is very big and characterized by “[...] the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets [...]” (p. 59). This also exhibits that the Capitol is characterized by advanced technology and a luxurious lifestyle.

All the named aspects of the Capitol are utopian elements and they stand in contrast to the dystopian elements in the rest of Panem.

## 5. Conclusion

The fictional world Panem in the novel “The Hunger Games” by Suzanne Collins captures different aspects of both a utopia and a dystopia.

In the Capitol where the Hunger Games are celebrated as a type of amusement the citizens live in wealth and peace. They are not affected by poverty or any other form of disasters and they have access to a health care system. Moreover, the citizens express themselves in a luxurious and extravagant lifestyle which does not exist in the districts surrounding the Capitol. Because of those utopian aspects, the Capitol itself can be seen as a form of a utopia.

However, life in the districts surrounding the Capitol is miserable and brutal. The inhabitants live in poverty and hunger. In addition to that they are kept under surveillance by the Capitol through the brutal Peacekeepers. The Peacekeepers punish the inhabitants of the districts directly if they break the laws with the consequences that fear is a main part of the daily life of the inhabitants. Because they do not receive help from the government, which is the Capitol, the inhabitants have to look after themselves without any contact to the other districts. Furthermore, their circumstances for living are inhumane and disastrous.

After the wars and the uprisings, humanity all over Panem has vanished. Now the Capitol rules with violence and fear and showcases their superiority and power over the districts. Also, the districts have to provide tributes for the brutal Hunger Games in which all the tributes of the districts fight against each other until only one is left alive and the winner of the Hunger Games. These Hunger Games spread fear and desperation among the districts as well and also showcase the superiority of the Capitol because the citizens of the Capitol celebrate the Hunger Games and do not have to compete in them. All these dystopian aspects deduce that the rest of Panem is a dystopia.

Even though the Capitol on its own forms a utopia, the dystopian aspects all over the rest of Panem outweigh the utopian aspects. Because of that you can say that the novel “The Hunger Games” by Suzanne Collins is a typical dystopian novel.

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## 7. Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die Facharbeit ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt und nur die im Literaturverzeichnis angeführten Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe.

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(Datum, Unterschrift)