Critical Thinkers through *The Hunger Games*

*Working with Dystopian Fiction in the EFL Classroom*
Abstract

This essay gives examples of possible ways to inspire young adults to become politically more aware and active using dystopian fiction in the EFL classroom. First, an overview of the dystopian genre and different ways of using it in the EFL classroom to improve critical thinking skills will be given. Subsequently, different scenes from The Hunger Games will be analyzed to show how young adults can be inspired to be more aware of social and environmental justice and to act. Finally, it is discussed why literary material in a classroom must relate to a student’s personal life and why the relevance must be explained to a student to raise their interest. As a conclusion, it is claimed that it cannot be expected that all students care for the world, but showing them why they should and how they could do it is a first step.

Keywords

young adult literature, dystopian literature, EFL, The Hunger Games, civic involvement, social justice, environmental justice, upper secondary students, dystopian fiction
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1. Introduction

Dystopias were originally meant to be satires, criticizing utopian worlds. They have always dealt with political and social problems that could be possible threats for humanity if we keep on living like we do, signaling the underlying intention that reading dystopian fiction might make the readers criticize the world we live in (Spisak 60). For a long time, it has been considered adult literature, but dystopian fiction for young adults has grown in popularity over the past few years. April Spisak says that “there is no discounting the bump in numbers and popularity since The Hunger Games was published, and the movie has only served to draw more attention” (55).

Recent novels like Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games (2009) and Veronica Roth’s Divergent (2011) have sent the message that, unlike in earlier young adult literature, the adult generation has steered society onto a different, most probably wrong path, and it is up to the next generations to solve their ancestor’s problems by taking a stand against the system. In a way, watching these movies and reading these novels can teach us that this is a future that might not be too distant if political engagement keeps on decreasing within younger generations. In the past decades, it has been dropping dramatically, as shown by Russel Dalton in The Washington Post in 2016, who found that political participation of the millennia generation in the United States dropped by two thirds in comparison to the baby boomer (post-world war 2) generation. BBC has found similar results which they describe in an article from 2014. Only 31% of 16 to 24-year-olds were fairly or very interested in politics. This is a worrying tendency that needs to be counteracted.

I believe that teaching dystopian literature is a suitable method to do that. In this essay, I will argue that the reading and discussion of dystopian fiction in the EFL classroom could be a way to awaken that interest again in today’s students. The primary objective of this essay is to analyze scenes, motives and symbols from The Hunger Games (2009) and to put forth ideas
how they can be used in the EFL classroom to raise social and political awareness, engaging students in political issues and developing critical thinking skills. It also discusses the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school and the syllabus for English 5 and if they support the use of dystopian literature. To carry out this investigation, the essay focuses on Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008), which describes a possible future with a social and political system that has gone out of control.

The following section will describe where the issue of young adults lacking interest in politics fits in in terms of literary-didactical research and why it is an important topic to discuss, recognizing previous research discussing similar dilemmas.

The theoretical framework will then be delineated, with Matthew Lipman and Martha Nussbaum as the foundation of this study, discussing various approaches to how to raise political awareness and critical thinking. To link critical thinking to dystopian literature, possible definitions of dystopian literature by Gregory Claeys, Krishan Kumar, April Spisak and Lyman Sargent and why they are relevant for the education of young adults will be explained. Discussing the use of *The Hunger Games* as a tool for interpreting thoughts and feelings and for analyzing contemporary society is a possible way of showing how critical thinking and awareness can be achieved by working with dystopian literature.

Afterwards, possible didactical approaches to working with *The Hunger Games* in the EFL classroom will be examined. Teaching about social and political awareness in another language always automatically involves secondary goals such as improving one’s language as well and therefore the novel as a tool for teaching English will be discussed.

Gillian Lazar points out that by making use of novels in English, language acquisition is encouraged (17). However, the Swedish Syllabus for English says that, when teaching English in school, there is no doubt that the language is not the only thing taught. We confront
the students with much information about “living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket “Syllabus”).

As Amos Paran points out “Language learning is not only about language – it is about learning as well; it is not only about training, but also about education” (473). Although the syllabus states what has to be taught, i.e. “different kinds of fiction” (Skolverket “Syllabus”) there is no mention of how it should be taught, giving the teacher the freedom to work with material they can choose themselves. Dystopian fiction covers both “areas related to students' education, and societal and working life; current issues; events and processes; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; relationships and ethical issues” (Skolverket “Syllabus”). These areas cover basic aspects of life such as survival, living conditions and social aspects. They show us, that civic involvement is one possible answer to why it is important to teach these ideals. The exaggerated setting of dystopian fiction can help challenging students to tackle these ideals, as shown in section 3.3,

Finally, relevant sections from Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008) will be discussed to give an overview of why this dystopian novel can be used.

2. Previous research

To start with, quite a lot academic work on critical thinking in education has already been done. Matthew Lipman for instance researched the topic of critical thinking in education as early as in 1988 in his article “Critical Thinking- What Can It Be?” Martha Nussbaum based much of her research on him, advancing the topic even further, applying it to contemporary society, which has changed a lot since the 80s. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities* of 2010 she argues for why the education of young adults should focus more on the arts and humanities instead of adding more courses in other subjects such as mathematics and the sciences.
There are also quite a few essays on dystopian literature. Several authors give definitions of what a dystopia is. Spisak for instance claims that dystopian literature is good for making young adults think about themselves and society, but offers no solution on how to tackle the problem; to make students getting involved in politics (40). Others, such as Rachel Wilkinson, provide ideas on how to work with this genre, dystopian fiction, in the classroom. She claims that looking at the context and taking it apart is a key to making students think critically (25).

Literature in the EFL classroom is nothing new. In fact, there is a lot of good research to be found about it, such as Gillian Lazar’s *Literature and Language Teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers* from 2009, Joanne Collie’s and Stephen Slater’s *Literature in the Language Classroom. A resource book of ideas and activities* from 1987, and Rachel Wilkinson’s article “Teaching Dystopian Literature to a Consumer Class” from 2011. This essay builds on literary didactics that aims to make students politically aware. I will use examples from *The Hunger Games*, a book that has been used and is still used by many teachers around the world in the EFL classroom. This book might be used because of its popularity rather than because of its social and political commentary (Ames 17). To my knowledge, there is little research describing concrete examples of how to work with specific dystopian literature in the EFL classroom, which can be an important inspiration to today’s teachers, and with this essay I am aiming to address that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Critical thinking and political awareness

Critical thinking seems to be a much-needed skill in the so-called post-truth society of the 21st century. The Swedish syllabus for compulsory school English states that students should “reflect over living conditions, social and cultural phenomena in different contexts and parts of
the world where English is used” and “understand and interpret the content of spoken English and in different types of texts” (Skolverket “Syllabus”). Does that not mean that students, at a young age, should start to train their critical thinking skill? Furthermore, if the Swedish school describes it as an important skill to build upon, this suggests that it might be of importance in one’s professional life as well. Global society has a “growing demand for superior critical thinking skills, problem solving, and negotiation skills” (Zare 241). Lipman (1988) claims that if we want to teach critical thinking in school, we need to know what exactly it is. He says that the result of critical thinking is not the important thing, rather the process and the criteria are what should be taught and learned. Students having an opinion does not make them critical thinkers, but the students’ “ability to identify and cite good reasons for their opinions” does (40). Treating critical thinking as a skill, it could be just as important as for example a language skill. Political interest and engagement among young adults is heading towards a high passivity and disinterest in political matters, both in Europe and the United States, as shown earlier in section 1. However, it is a skill worth investing in, but it is not a skill that can be taught without the help of other materials or examples, such as literary texts, which can help us analyze fictional problems and conflicts and engage us in transferring this kind of thinking to the real world (Zare 241).

Lipman (1988) says that it is important for teachers to act as a person students can get inspiration from, creating a context where other people involved share the same values. He claims that students observing such teachers will adopt their values, such as critical thinking and questioning things.

Nussbaum writes about a crisis that is invisible and damaging to the world’s future of “democratic self-government” (2). What she means is a worldwide crisis in education. She claims that nations recklessly discard skills, like critical thinking, which are needed for a well working democracy, in exchange for profit. This, Nussbaum says, jeopardizes the world’s
democracies. Because of that, it is important to encourage precisely those skills. I will get back to this topic in depth in section 4. However, Nussbaum gives examples of how this happens and why humanities and arts are “losing their place in curricula” (2) as well. A major reason for this is that the arts and humanities are not perceived as being as essential as more practical skills that yield short term profit. This does not mean that other skills, e.g. in the field of science, are not needed, but it means that skills that come from the humanities and arts – “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (7) – should not be forgotten. She says that:

What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials. Every modern democracy is also a society in which people differ greatly along many parameters, including religion, ethnicity, wealth and class, physical impairment, gender, and sexuality, and in which all voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves. (9)

To make awareness matter, it is important that students act politically as well in their future lives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups” (UN General Assembly art. 26). The education and development of human personalities that are being talked about is of high
importance for the global future and it can only be secured by the next generation of young adults being aware of political changes and caring for its outcome.

To prepare students to become politically active, they not only need to learn about it at home, when with their families or friends, they also need to learn about it in school, which is argued for in this essay. The support of schools and the curriculum and syllabus is needed to make students educated citizens.

3.2 Dystopian literature

Gregory Claeys describes three variants of dystopianism (14). Firstly, he describes dystopian fiction as a non-religious approach to new phenomena encountered in the modern world. It explains how a possible future could look like and what great issues humanity could face. Furthermore, the second definition according to Claeys contradicts the Utopian worldview. This theory claims that Utopian associations are completely irrational and are replaced by totalitarianism. Being able to see this contrast makes us aware of the differences between a utopia and a dystopia (14).

Krishan Kumar adds that “if utopia embodies ordered freedom, dystopia embodies unfreedom” and “just as the Garden of Eden and Heaven remain prototypes of utopia, so hell performs the same role for dystopia” (3), meaning that it describes the contrast to Utopian fiction, which was the origin of the dystopian genre. It was a time when people started to let go of secular thoughts because the church lost power and science got ever stronger. This led to a possibility for a new type of genre that dealt with recent issues (19). Simply put, a dystopian narrative is ‘the story of the “bad place”’ (Kennon 40).

Furthermore, Sargent claims that a dystopia is a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in a time and space that the author intended a
contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (9).

When teaching dystopian literature students might become aware of this much worse society and, through the social commentary, become aware of similarities in their own society’s development in comparison to the fictional society’s development. Since these phenomena described usually take place in new places or deal with unknown or unusual problems that are not (yet) known to us, dystopian stories are most often found in science fiction. Furthermore, teaching dystopian literature, we should keep in mind the target age group. Kennon believes whereas utopian literature might appeal to children, “a more troubling and darker atmosphere is far more common in young adult literature, where dystopian young adult fiction provides a promising vehicle to depict adolescents’ political and social awakening and their mediation with the authority of adults and inherited institutions” (40). This implies that dystopian literature is especially suitable for teaching to young adults, since it connects to the problems they are facing while growing up. It also means they would be more prone to getting involved in political issues, which is the focus of this project. If this is true, dystopian literature is an ideal way of involving young adults in politics and making them responsible for their own future, which I will come back to in sections 4 and 4.1.2.

Spisak points out that end-of-the-world novels e.g. involving zombies or alien invasions do not automatically fall into the category of dystopia (55). However, if the survivors of these worlds would create a “messed-up society” trying to protect its members through irrational means, it is a dystopia. The four main elements a dystopian novel has, Spisak claims, are, firstly a detailed and lively description of the setting, secondly characters having a reason to act like they do and be like they are, thirdly a process that has changed them due to their environment, and finally a conclusion reflecting on the whole situation (56).
Dystopian novels make for good young adult literature, according to Spisak, because they make people think about what our individual role in this world is, where they would fit in and compare life to that of a fictional world of a book they have just read. The exaggerated world of a dystopia that Sargent mentions (9) makes people think about social and political structures and how these structures could be changed for the better, especially when there is not a happy end (Spisak 60). Again, since this is the major focus of this project; how to involve young adults in politics, the question remains how to do it. Some approaches to how to utilize dystopian fiction will be given in the following section.

3.3 Critical thinking and political awareness through dystopian literature

As mentioned above, young adults frequently find dystopian fiction appealing, but how can that interest be used didactically?

Rachel Wilkinson claims in her article “Teaching Dystopian Literature to a Consumer Class” that “many students are struggling with more depression and anxiety than ever before. These are characteristic dangers of the ‘consumer class’” (22). She argues that materialism and the desire for a better lifestyle – according to the advertisement industry - are the biggest causes of that danger. In her teaching practice, she uses dystopian literature, “which exaggerates our modern context so that we can challenge it” (22). In other words, dystopian literature, if taught in a consciousness-raising way, could help guide students towards critical thinking. She also explains that a future like in the dystopia *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1994) could be entirely possible and shows students how manipulative the advertisement industry often is:

When the important thing is selling and buying, the individual becomes nothing more than consumer or worker. This is where it gets tricky: Young people love advertising, consuming, entertainment, and technology. If we attack these trappings of modern life,
we risk nurturing defensiveness. The challenge is to focus on the dangers, demands, and opportunities common to the "consumer class" without alarmism – difficult terrain to navigate. It's a matter of human nature, not stuff. (Wilkinson 22)

In contrast to previous approaches, e.g. focusing on the exciting aspects of a novel or connecting it to the students’ adolescence, this approach appealing to their political awakening concerns a possible future and deals more with a bigger point of view, i.e. how this industry brainwashes people. Nussbaum also talks about this, as previously mentioned in section 3.1, and I will come back to her in section 4.

Wilkinson suggests that it is important for students to “deconstruct their contexts” (25), and for teachers to give discussion starters that deal e.g. with how life is for us today, how we escape from everyday life and why, talking about consumerism, etc. (25). However, it is my understanding that one problem with young people reading dystopian fiction is that teachers tend to take for granted an interest in the social commentary behind the novel (purely because of the immense popularity with young adults). It is hard to tell whether teenagers are only interested in the setting, storylines, the coming of age-themes or action-filled plots of the novel, or if they want to tackle more serious content like for instance consumerism or the undemocratic societies represented in the books. However, if that would be the case, an increase in popularity in other young adult literature would be seen as well. Nonetheless, as Melissa Ames points out in her article from 2013 “Engaging 'Apolitical' Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post-9/11”, this is not happening on a regular basis (17). It is the teacher’s role to introduce such novels and their social commentary behind it to the students, which Judith Langer writes about (4). See section 4.

Even though it is hard to tell why young adults are interested in these kinds of books, there is something within these novels that is very attractive to this generation of young adults
and “the most likely answer is that teenage readers are drawn to the way these texts repackage societal concerns from reality, displacing them into the safe comforts of fiction where they are addressed recurrently with more favorable results” (Ames 17). As mentioned earlier, the time of being a young adult makes students more prone to civic involvement and appeals to their political awakening. However, by making use of fiction, they can address these topics in a safe environment, without telling too much about their own interests and hopefully without making a wrong decision in real life rather than in a fictional world. Fiction allows us as teachers to elicit information from the students without them feeling uncomfortable and giving them the opportunity to talk about a topic without really talking about the real thing.

3.4 EFL through literature

Gillian Lazar mentions that literature can reflect the culture which it describes, and that it is important for us to understand a connection between a novel and our own lives (15). Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater claim that literature teaches “fundamental human issues” (3). Of course, this is an aspect that highly depends on the time the literature is written in. *The Hunger Games* contains topics that are relevant even today, as discussed later on. Collie and Slater (3) also mention that literature deals with authentic stories that are not written for the purpose of teaching, but instead for entertainment and as a warning (in the case of dystopian fiction). Because it is written for native speakers in the first place, students get a genuine insight to the language, discovering what the characters “believe [and] fear” and “how they speak and behave behind closed doors” (3).

Dystopian fiction treats a mass of current topics that might also be of interest to the students, which makes this kind of text more interesting for them. As Collie and Slater point out, “if it is meaningful and enjoyable it is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect”
It is however the teacher’s job to make the text enjoyable, which leads us to how to do this. Examples by Wilkinson have been given in the previous section.

Furthermore, Mantero concludes that “classroom talk was more likely to extend into discourse when students did not have to interpret the meaning of ‘Literature’ and relied on their own experiences and expertise to talk about a cultural topic” (449). This connects to what has previously been said. A strong connection to personal life and interests makes working with literature in a foreign language much easier. On top of that, this leads to a genuine interest and no obligation to study literature, which agrees with Martin and Laurie who claim that “what seemed to put the anti-literature students off was the obligation to study literature, as distinct from reading it for enjoyment or personal development “ (201). As a conclusion, it can be said that the more students enjoy the content, and the more connections they see to their own personal lives, the more fruitful the outcome will be.

4. Analysis

In the previous section I have shown the importance of critical thinking skills and why dystopias such as The Hunger Games are a suitable method to teach those to young adults. In this part of the essay I will give examples of how The Hunger Games is based on past and contemporary global society and give further examples from the novel to show ways in which it can be used in order to inspire young adults to be more engaged and active in political matters. Burke claims that “Panem is both a consumer-driven and thinly veiled version of the United States, now a dictatorship, and a vision of our future if our current national ideologies and policies persist” (57). If this is true, the novel serves the traditional purpose of a dystopia: beyond its entertainment value, it is intended to warn readers of what might happen if the present situation is accepted with indifference and passivity. Thus, analyzing key elements of the novel is of high importance to encourage students to see beyond the first level, that of an
entertaining story about a heroic girl and a sympathetic boy winning some cruel games. If students realize that there are several more levels in every literary text, it is easier to analyze the text. *The Hunger Games* contains many symbols and themes that can be analyzed, such as the fence, the reaping, Rue’s death scene, the final cornucopia scene, just to mention some of them. The awareness of these levels and methods of how to discern them in texts can foster the types of readers who can see deeper than face value, i.e. critical thinkers (Lipman 1988).

By reflecting on the examples mentioned above, the goal is to make students realize themselves that they have to start with themselves to make a change. Through e.g. dystopian literature in the classroom, they can be given the opportunity to realize that they themselves must change and do not continue the way they might do things right now, i.e. not being democratic, hurting the environment, and more. They might realize that a corrupt political system must change and that it is up to every single individual to create that change.

Judith Langer writes that

if skills of interpretation and critical analysis are to be taught more effectively, recent research indicates that the study of literature can be a particularly productive way to do so. Literature is an inviting medium, both in content and structure, in which all students can productively develop, analyze, and defend interpretations. (4)

She describes reading as envisionment-building, which means the understanding of the text at a certain point and that this understanding changes constantly until the end of the text. It is this process of change that will activate the readers’ deeper interpretation of the text, and by guiding it, the teacher can empower students to understand a connection between a text and their own lives (Langer 4). By talking and discussing about symbols and themes, as mentioned, teachers can make their students aware of this deeper level that we want to teach, and make
students go through the process of change that Langer mentions. Only then do we engage students to arrive at their own understandings.

4.1 Social Justice

4.1.1 The Fence

In *The Hunger Games*, Collins creates a government that depicts an example of what can go wrong in society and what needs to be done in order to change it. The good thing about dystopian literature is that it can show a possible future if we do not get involved enough in current issues. As Burke points out, Panem can be seen as representing “a vision of our future if our current national ideologies and policies persist” (56). She makes us and her students very aware of the fact, that this could be future America, since it is based upon the United States as they may become if the present war-mongery and exploitation of nature continue, and what they may subsequently turn into. She talks about China producing technology and other goods for the U.S., which can be compared to the districts in the book producing different things for the Capitol, “Collins shows how, in a system where everything has a price, nothing is immune — not the basic necessities for survival, and certainly not the poor” (58).

In the very beginning, the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is very afraid of the Capitol and to show any sign of rebellion against it. She despises the political system but at the same time sees how dangerous it is to express her opinion. However, her rebellious acts start as early as chapter one, when Katniss is crawling under the sometimes-electrified fence to enter the woods to hunt. The woods are a wild place, housing “venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow” (5). But there is food. It is the opposite of “District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety” (7). Even though the woods are Katniss’ refuge, it is not as safe as she might want it to be. “Even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone
might overhear you” (7). The woods serve another purpose than the fence, signifying a forbidden place where food is plenty, which I will come back to in section 4.3.1.

The fence however can be seen as a reminder of a society controlled by the Capitol. It symbolizes the district’s imprisonment and the lack of freedom they have. There is no democracy in the political system of Panem and citizens are treated like animals, by means of an electrified fence. Furthermore, citizens are told that the fence protects them from wild animals, but just like in real life, politicians do not always tell the truth, and most inhabitants of the Districts know the true reason why there is a fence around their districts. Katniss is not satisfied with the current state, and her crossing the fence, the border that restricts her freedom, can be seen as a first step of showing that this needs to be changed. However, this requires strength, courage and a strong will to act.

The situation can very much be compared to German history. A wall was built to keep East-Berlin citizens from escaping the city, as well as controlling who gets in. This is the exact function of the fence in the Hunger Games and shows clearly how the novel’s content relates to global society and history. There is a government, the Capitol, which rules over its citizens with a tyrannical dictatorship. There are ways past the fence, but just like in Berlin, it is a dangerous place to be. Where people got shot in the death strip, wild animals can kill you in the woods. However, the woods provide its hunters with food and a better lifestyle for their families. Katniss does not take this risk for the purpose of rebellion, but to provide her family with food. James Blasingame explains in his review of The Hunger Games in the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy that “citizens are so worried about where their next meal will come from that they seldom bother to think about the totalitarian government which oppresses them” (724). At this point, Katniss and every other character are still very passive about thinking to make a change to the system. Having learned and accepted the power of the Capitol, the fear of
it will haunt even those that have escaped beyond the borders of its laws. The characters have also learned that it is better not to resist, keeping their thoughts and emotions to themselves:

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. (7)

Believing that resisting only would make things worse, Katniss learned to keep her thoughts and emotions to herself. A condition that benefits the Capitol greatly, meaning that it does not have to fear rebelling citizens.

Chapter 1 and especially the scene in the woods and its strong connection to reality show the cruelty of a government that no one dares to oppose. What makes it especially cruel is how this system affects people in their everyday lives and routines. It also shows that a change cannot happen without someone standing up against the system.

4.1.2 The Reaping

However, the novel is not about staying passive, it is about getting out of passivity and making changes. As early as chapter 2, citizens of District 12 are taking a stand. When Prim is chosen as one of the two tributes for their district and her sister Katniss replaces her, the inhabitants show the first signs of that they do not accept what is happening:

To the everlasting credit of the people of District 12, not one person claps. Not even the ones holding betting slips, the ones who are usually beyond caring. . . . So instead of
acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form
of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone.
All of this is wrong. (29)

Katniss suddenly becomes “someone precious” (29). “At first one, then another, then almost
every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and
holds it out to me … It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you
love” (29).

This scene teaches about the seed that one person can plant. It teaches that it sometimes
only takes one person to stand up in order to make other people do the same. Nussbaum believes
“people behave badly when nobody raises a critical voice”, and I would say that they even
behave passively in such a case (43). We often tend to think that we as individuals cannot make
a difference, but the reaping in The Hunger Games proves different. Brianna Burke claims that
“the message that compassion is contagious and the key to undermining an exploitative system
is the most radical statement of the novel” (62). It is an important lesson that can be learned
from this act of silent rebellion. Burke says that “Collins gives Katniss and readers hope by
arguing that one revolutionary act of courage and sympathy can create social change” (61).

To fully understand the meaning behind the reaping though, one must look at the word
itself. The corresponding verb to the reaping would be to reap, which the Oxford English
Dictionary (2017) defines as “to gather (a crop or harvest)”. The dictionary also gives an
example, i.e. “you reap what you sow”, saying that one eventually has to face up to the
consequences of one’s actions. The origin of the word dates back to very old English. In terms
of The Hunger Games, the Capitol reaps their reward for having the absolute power of the
districts. It also serves as a reminder for the districts, meaning that the reaping is their own fault,
and that they have to face up to the consequences of their actions now. Just like a crop, the
children of the districts are raised just to be harvested by the Capitol for their entertainment. This power, that the Capitol possesses, is scarily similar to the power of something similar to a god. Their power is that strong, that they can decide to kill innocent children, which reminds the reader about the Grim Reaper, “wielding a scythe which he uses to harvest souls” (“Grim Reaper, def. 1”). Furthermore, The Urban Dictionary depicts the Grim Reaper as a black, hooded figure that is “the main focus of attention in whatever room he is in”. The similarities between this mystical figure and the Capitol are significant. Just like the Grim Reaper, the Capitol, especially president Snow, is a figure that no one really knows much about. The president only shows up for special occasions, such as the Hunger Games. However, when he does, he is the center of attention because he is a powerful man that most people from the lower districts fear.

The Urban Dictionary (U.D.) also explains that the Grim Reaper is a reminder of our short lives and that we should make the best of the time that we have. Furthermore, the UD explains that we should care for our friends and family that have already deceased. This is a lesson that can very much relate to The Hunger Games and global society as well. It means that we cannot live in an oppressive society and that we need to take action in order to change matters, political as well as private, in the direction we want them to be. In the case of the novel, that would mean that there will never be any satisfaction for the lower districts unless the citizens will take action against cruel acts, such as the reaping, in order to abolish them. Remembering all the losses they have already suffered; their friends’ and families’ graves serve as a reminder that things cannot continue the way they are now.

4.1.3 Rue’s Death Scene

The salute as a symbol of change changes drastically throughout the book. At first, it is a token of goodbye, as demonstrated in the reaping scene. It shows the citizens the cruelty of
politics. However, the formalized goodbye creates a turning point later on, when Rue dies in the games and Katniss insists on bidding her farewell:

Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then I remember Peeta's words on the roof. "Only 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." And for the first time, I understand what he means. (286)

The scene teaches that it takes something big and terrible to happen for us to act. Before this point, Katniss never thought about rebelling on a level that would have large-scale consequences for society, however, this changes with Rue’s death. Katniss realized earlier that she was acting like a “trained dog trying to please people (she) … hate(s)” (9), but it is here that she realizes that it is she who can actively show the unhappiness of all the people and make a change, even if it means her death. Here, the three finger salute is not a sign of passivity anymore, meaning only goodbye, it is also a symbol of revolution and change now, marking the book’s turning point. Realizing that something is wrong and that something needs to be done is a principle that teachers want their students to achieve; to think about what they can do to change something that they are not satisfied with and to realize that every citizen has the power to plant this seed that was mentioned earlier. Rue’s death has affected many others that now are prepared to make a stand, such as District 11 supporting Katniss and Peeta with donations.
The tribute is not the only key factor in this scene. There is also the lullaby, Rue’s final requests before her death: “Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try” (231). It is a song, that Katniss sang to her sister Primrose during the very first scene where she woke from a bad dream the day of the Reaping, and that connects Rue to Prim, both 12-year-old and innocent girls that have not seen much of this world, yet they are vulnerable to this oppressive society. The lullaby is “easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today” (231). It shows the reader, and the audience of the Hunger Games, that innocent children should not be used for such cruel shows that only serve the Capitol’s entertainment. All mockingjays, another symbol of hope, take up the lullaby, demonstrating the power of one person spreading her message to many others. This turning point of the book demonstrates that there is much hope, which is a necessity for people to get engaged. It is president Snow’s greatest fear in the movie version of The Hunger Games: “Hope, it is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective, a lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained”.

The flowers are another powerful symbol to demonstrate that a change needs to happen. “Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors” (234). It is a visual way of showing that Rue wasn’t just a toy in a game for the Capitol’s entertainment, but shows everyone that this is not a game and that she was a person that is worthy of respect. Horrifying scenes like these make people realize the true meaning behind these games and their consequences. The flowers return Rue to her original state of innocence and show that it was better to die than to live in a society like this. In the end, Katniss’ actions affected not only the other Districts, but also other players, such as Thresh, who let her go, “Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl” (284).
To connect all of these symbols to what has been said earlier in section 4.1.2, this whole funeral act can be interpreted as Katniss understanding that Rue is dead, literally returning her to the Capitol, to president Snow, the Grim Reaper, knowing that the helicopters are on their way to pick Rue up. However, the funeral act makes us remember the dead. Just as Katniss will always remember the flowers she put on Rue, everyone else will do the same. Again, as mentioned earlier, remembering Panem’s losses makes its citizens remember that they have to do something if they do not want these unnecessary and cruel deaths to continue.

4.1.4 The Nightlock Berries

As a final act of courage, wanting to act and inspire other people to rebel, Katniss tries to take her life together with Peeta in the end of the games, using the poisoned nightlock berries. “Hold them out. I want everyone to see”, Peeta says (418). It is a final attempt to show everyone that the Capitol cannot own them completely, and that there is a way to change things for the better. The Games were designed to have only one winner. A winner that will be either traumatized or be seen as a folk hero, depending on why they entered the games. It is a system that was reliable for decades, and the decision that there are two winners, brought instability to the system. It also showed that the Capitol does not have absolute power, as long as there are people rebelling against it. Katniss and Peeta change the rule, they do not let the Capitol control them and rather commit suicide than killing each other. A thing that more than 1,700 other tributes before them have not had the courage for. This action creates more than hope, which is, as mentioned earlier, necessary for people to change.

Acting and not staying passive is the first step. If we let our society drift into similar issues the people of Panem are facing, it will become our reality as well, according to Burke. She claims that it is also a fact that many people choose to die because they do not want to suffer more from their countries’ system, just like in The Hunger Games, when Peeta and
Katniss are about to commit suicide with the nightlock berries. “Collins shows in this moment that knowledge leads to self-determination and empowerment. This is a powerful message for young readers who, in maturing, may be starting to grasp that they live in an exploitative system they may not fully endorse, even as they benefit from it” (Burke 60). After reading the book, Burke lets her students reflect on everything said about it. She asks them if we, humanity, are essentially good or bad, and the answer often is “that humanity is bad—look at the world around us, the war and conflict, the ecological devastation” (62). They might be right, according to Burke, but her answer to that is that “when we give people all of the information they need and empower them to act, it is my experience that the vast majority want to do the right thing. Just look at yourselves, I point out—isn’t that true? They agree, and I find that an enduring moment of hope” (62).

We cannot change into what system we are born, but we have to be aware of the invisible facts, like inequality and injustice, and get involved in these issues in order to change the system to the good. It is very important to open young adults’ eyes and not let them drown in dependency on others. It is important, according to Burke, to teach that one person can make a difference, just like Katniss singing Rue to peace.

4.2 Environmental Justice

Political passivity is, however, only one of many issues described and counteracted in The Hunger Games. Consumerism and starvation are other topics that relate to our own global society just as much as it does to Panem and which is an important topic for students to learn about in order to understand that something has to be done to make our world a better place.

By living in a society where we get everything for money, “it does mean we take our food and those who grow it for granted, and we are increasingly dependent on corporations for our survival” (Burke 56). Many parallels can be drawn to global society. As Wilkinson points
out, depression and anxiety among young adults are a common problem, and one of the reasons for it is the desire for a better lifestyle (22). Some countries are more privileged than others, but none is immune to it. Just like there are many different districts in the book, there are many different social classes in every country. It is something that even children discover in school or in their peer groups; the poor always suffer more than the wealthy. Burke implies that people nowadays do not know anymore how to take care of themselves and that it will only get worse. She claims that some hundred years ago, technology was not at hand and people had to work for their food and other things. Today, we can visit a giant supermarket where we can get everything we need, and more (59). It is therefore important to make people aware of these problems. Where people stay passive because of insufficient knowledge about their political systems and about food production, they also might face other issues, such as starvation, one day, because of insufficient knowledge. In this section, examples of consumerism and starvation will be given and analyzed to show connections to the real world that have to be counteracted.

4.2.1 Starvation

Food matters make up a big part of the book, but is not as visible as social justice issues. Burke tells her students “to keep a record of the pages where food is mentioned, which inevitably includes almost two-thirds of the novel” (55). Interestingly enough, ”rather than present readers with a history of the future, that is, with a detailed account of how the Earth came to be a ‘broken planet’, Collins instead only hints at what has happened in North America over the course of hundreds of years, never being specific“ (Henthorne 112).

Lack of food is one price that many citizens of Panem have to pay in order to keep the Capitol happy and entertained. There is anger between classes in the book, which is created e.g. by rich people not having to take tesserae and poor people having to take them, granting their families more food, but in return increasing the chance of being drawn for the games. A fact
that amuses the Capitol, “The tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our districts. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another” (Collins 14). There are many themes and symbols throughout the book, including the woods as a forbidden food heaven, and the cornucopia, the horn of plenty, all of which will be looked at in the following.

As mentioned in section 4.1.1., the woods symbolize a forbidden place where there is food for Katniss to hunt or gather, which makes for an interesting comparison between Katniss and Robin Hood. Although the woods are a place that is not really used by the Capitol, Katniss steals from the woods “teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, [and] fish iridescent in the sunlight” (Collins 9), gathering, hunting, fishing and more, which is forbidden. She steals from the rich, the Capitol, and gives back to her community, mainly her family and friends. It is a task that she needs to do in order to keep her family alive. However, by forbidding actions like these, the Capitol keeps Panem’s districts on the verge of starvation in order to have a better control over them. However, because of the restriction, Katniss is one of the few who knows how to do these things. Most people in her district do not know how to hunt and they do not know where their food comes from, other than the Capitol. A parallel that can be drawn to global society as well. We are completely dependent on food suppliers, giving the state complete power over us. What stops them from cutting off our food, inflicting hunger, in order to control us, if the need arises? Burke writes that the food system

in our modern day, … has become naturalized, and we are entirely dependent on it. Fewer of us grow our own food, which isn’t necessarily bad (as it allows us to do other jobs), but it does mean we take our food and those who grow it for granted, and we are increasingly dependent on corporations for our survival. Corporations, I believe, care
more about profit than people, and like the Capitol’s voracious appetite for capital, this is part of what *The Hunger Games* wants to teach young adults. (56)

It is a thing that is already happening. If we look at recent events, the news is filled with accusations against president Maduro of Venezuela not caring about his citizens and letting them starve to death. Citizens have to eat dogs, cats and similar in order to survive, a shockingly similar situation to what is happening in *The Hunger Games*. Real world examples like these help students to realize the need of change.

The Cornucopia from the games is another example for this kind of inequality.

By placing these supplies in a “Cornucopia,” Collins again reaches back to Roman myth and implies that we live within a system where food magically appears without source or labor … The fight over the resources in the Cornucopia kills almost half of the children on the first day, literalizing the horror of a future with diminishing resources if we do not implement social and environmental justice globally. (Burke 59)

This passage about the first minutes of the games is not complete fiction. It is real when facing starvation. Even today, people are fighting over food and killing each other to survive in many countries. Burke works with this issue in her classroom, teaching this as “an opportunity to raise complicity, because we are all complicit in the global marketplace, and this is why students often express feelings of guilt and shame” (60). She also mentions the system everyone is born into “and how that system conducts business is often invisible to us” (60). However, we do benefit from it, even though we do not agree with it and its methods. Burke claims that “if we can see this system at work, the way Katniss does, and understand where our commodities come
from, how they were obtained, and the real cost of their production, we can think of ways to work around—or even outside of—the system” (Burke 60).

Being more actively engaged in discussions to improve conditions like these can make us realize that it is a hard task to accomplish equality, but it is possible. “We have the calories, but their distribution is based more on geography, class, race, and gender than students think” (Burke 56). Teachers might inspire their students to realize things that are not working the way they should and show them ways of how to be more engaged in environmental and social matters in order to fulfill the curriculum’s goals, saying that students “can consciously determine their views based on knowledge of human rights and fundamental democratic values, as well as personal experiences” (Skolverket ”Curriculum” 10).

4.2.2 Consumerism

I have shown that the citizens of Panem, but also we, depend on the state providing us with food in order to survive. However, food is not the only thing that is mass consumed in the Capitol respective wealthy countries of the world. There is also the matter of mass consumption of media and entertainment matters. I have been writing about The Hunger Games becoming a possible future for our own global society. Shockingly, real world examples can already be found in form of a planned Russian reality show called Game2: Winter. The goal of the show is for the 30 contestants to stay alive in the Siberian wilderness that is populated with dangerous bears, wolves and other dangers. The winner is to be given 1.6 million dollars. The similarities to The Hunger Games are alarming, allowing participants everything, including rape and murder. An advert, according to The Independent from 2016, reads “Each contestant gives consent that they could be maimed, even killed. 2,000 cameras, 900 hectares and 30 lives. Everything is allowed. Fighting, alcohol, murder, rape, smoking, anything”. It is but a small consolation that the Russian police are allowed to arrest anyone committing a crime, despite
the contract that has been signed by participants in the show. In fact, Collins took inspiration in real events, not this one in particular, but war, as she describes in an interview:

One night, I was lying in bed, and I was channel surfing between reality TV programs and actual war coverage. On one channel, there’s a group of young people competing for I don’t even know; and on the next, there’s a group of young people fighting in an actual war. I was really tired, and the lines between these stories started to blur in a very unsettling way. That’s the moment when Katniss’s story came to me. (Margolis 1)

In contemporary society, it is difficult to distinguish real events from not-real events. As I have shown in earlier sections, many things happening in The Hunger Games are as well happening already in global society. TV producers love reality shows, such as “Robinson” or “Survivor”, but even “Big Brother”. Shows like “Are you hot?”, according to WebMD Medical News, contribute to eating disorders in young adults. It is frightening to think about what can happen if these trends continue. We may get citizens that behave very much in a similar way as those citizens living in the Capitol. Citizens that might, in the worst case, care more about their own entertainment and wealth than about starving children in third world countries. Nussbaum calls it “a suicide of the soul” (142). In my view, we must get away from being passive and need to engage in important matters such as these. Young adults are the next generation who might heavily influence our future, and it is our moral responsibility, as adults, to guide them towards a better future. Dystopian fiction can serve as a method to discuss everyday issues, such as the ones mentioned in this section, in a safe context (Ames 17).
5. Discussion and conclusion

To mention the goal and summarize the most important aspect of this essay in one phrase it would be: civic involvement. This essay gives different examples of a not-working, fictional society that bears a frightening similarity to our own society, in order to inspire students to make a change. By only telling students about what is wrong, without telling about reasons and connections to real life, the impact on them would be small. Only by realizing what the problems, in this case social and environmental issues, are, and what causes them, is it meaningful for students to make an effort to change these conditions. It might be one possible way to make students want to involve themselves and work for a better world.

Making the content of literature relate to a student’s life and showing the relevance (Collie and Slater 3), it is easier to engage them into working with certain topics. By showing immediate effects on their lives, it is possible for them to see connections and the importance of action. However, some students might be unaffected by the lessons and still not want to involve themselves. It is impossible to change everyone, but the aim is to make as many students involve themselves in a society that loses more and more interest in making the world a better place.

It is a common issue that students are not interested in politics, in the environment, and just care about themselves. The question arises, why are these issues not integrated in the current curriculum more? They might be an issue for history and politics classes, but why is critical thinking not part of the syllabus for all subjects, but instead neglected (Nussbaum 2)? It is in the language subjects that we deal with foreign literature which has big potential for working with these issues. As this essay shows, through dystopian fiction, which shows a possible future, we can learn very much about our current lives as well. It has the potential to engage students in the world’s problems such as social and environmental justice, starvation and consumerism. The syllabus states that students should learn about other countries and living
conditions, but it makes no mention of why, other than to improve one’s language skills (Skolverket “Syllabus”). In my opinion, it should include suggestions on how to work with variations in living conditions and why. Right now, it is up to the teacher to decide how to work with this, but they are not told why or how. An engaged teacher might not teach culture only to teach language skills, but also focus on important skills such as critical thinking (Lazar 15). There are practices such as the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach, which do just that, but they are not integrated in current curricula in Sweden, whereas they could complement other methods to reach said goals.

We cannot expect young people nowadays to just start caring for the world. We cannot expect them to just involve themselves. As Nussbaum explains, “we probably cannot produce people who are firm against every manipulation, but we can produce a social culture that is itself a powerful surrounding “situation,” strengthening the tendencies that militate against stigmatization and domination” (44). By showing them how to do just that, and especially why they should do just that, giving them the tool of critical thinking that literature may provide, we can try to inspire them care about the world, and encourage them to not create a world where people would support dictators like Hitler or others ever again. It is up to parents, legal guardians and teachers, to raise a generation that cares, and, most importantly, thinks.
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