



## **The Hunger Games and Women: Binary Oppositions that go even further.**

*The Hunger Games* (2008) is the first book of the *Hunger Games* saga published between 2008 and 2010 by Suzanne Collins. On it, the author tells the story of a dystopian future where after a series of catastrophic events only one nation, *Panem*, remains and is ruled by the federal district of The Capitol and further divided into twelve districts. The federal government hosts an annual event, called *The Hunger Games* where two citizens from every district between the ages of 12 to 18 are selected as *tributes* to take part in a televised event in which all of them compete for their lives until only one remains alive and is declared winner. It is on the 74<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Games* where Katniss Everdeen, the main character of the series, volunteers as a tribute to save her sister Prim from being murdered on television to the amusement of the Capitol. Little did she know that her actions - starting from that moment where she saved the life of her sister, or her alliance with the other tribute of District 12, Peeta Mellark, and her brief but unforgettable friendship with District 11's Rue - would spark a flame of revolution that would end up with the overthrowing of The Capitol in the follow-up books *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010).

Since the publication of the first book, the series was an instant success. According to a press release by the publishing company *Scholastic* in 2012 "*The Hunger Games has appeared on the New York Times bestseller list for more than two hundred consecutive weeks more than three years. [...] Scholastic has more than 50 million copies of the original three books in The Hunger Games trilogy in print and digital formats in the U.S. (more than 23 million copies of The Hunger Games; more than 14 million copies of Catching Fire; and more than 13 million copies of Mockingjay).*" (Good, 2012). And it is easy to see why the series has become so successful, since Collins immerses the reader in a very detailed world that while it feels futuristic and dystopian, it is also a clear comment on the state of the entertainment industry today, with the success of Reality TV shows like *Survivor* or *Big Brother* that push the boundaries of what people are willing to do in order to achieve stardom and also what the general public is willing to watch as entertainment.

If we take a look at *The Hunger Games* under the microscope of literary analysis, there are an infinity of aspects and pieces of the book that one can take and dissect to find layer upon layer

of meaning. In this essay, I want to dive into the world of *Panem* using the literary theory of Structuralism. More specifically, I want to look at some of the binary oppositions that Collins introduces during the course of the story. There are plenty to choose from, so I selected some that I think share a similar theme, which is in itself a binary opposition: Men vs. Women. Collin's words establish an interesting main binary opposition, that is further scaffolded with other oppositions that happen along the story. Is there a relation between those *smaller* oppositions and the opposition of Man vs. Women? Let's take a look.

To start with the analysis, I would like to explain the basics of the literary theory of Structuralism. Structuralism was born in post Second World War Europe (mainly France and Russia) as a theory that did not only concern itself with literature, but also with other fields such as sociology, history, anthropology, just to name a few. The main idea of Structuralism is that all elements that form human culture are part of a *system of signs* and thus, are all related to each other, functioning within a larger system. Barry Peter in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* summarizes the main point of Structuralism in one sentence: "*things cannot be understood in isolation, they have to be seen in the context of larger structures they are part of.*" (Barry, 2017). Thus, Structuralists believe that, in order to analyse and understand text, one has to look at the signs that are on it, since the meaning of the text is found within these signs.

Signs are defined by two key concepts: the signifier (the literal definition of a word) and the signified (the mental representation of the word, that is by definition, arbitrary). A signifier can have multiple signified, depending on one's knowledge and culture. Those signs can establish relations with each other, like binary oppositions. Binary oppositions are sets of two signs that are defined by setting them against each other. As I said before, the main idea of Structuralism is that all elements are related to each other, and once we can identify binary oppositions on a text, we can find the true meaning of a text. That *meaning*, other of the key elements of Structuralism, can have a hierarchy. There is a *privileged term* (usually the first in a binary opposition) that has more power and makes the second term exist.

For example, consider the binary opposition of life vs. death. Without life, the privileged term, death cannot exist since there is nothing to compare it against. Then, we can say that the binary

opposition is destroyed, and the remaining term no longer exists (there is no life without death, and there isn't death without life). Thus, the true meaning of being alive or death relies on the connection of the two terms: One cannot exist without the other.

If we apply the concepts of Structuralism to *The Hunger Games*, one can find many binary oppositions across the contents of the book. Most of them can be related to the role of women in society, specifically their inferiority and subordination: The Capitol, ruled mostly by men, is the powerful group and the Districts are the weak group. The people in the weak group are oppressed and exploited by the use of fear tactics and systematic poverty to keep them at check. This results in a binary opposition in Katniss Everdeen: She has to be both a *lady* and also the breadwinner of the family, a position usually occupied by a male. Thus, the Man vs Women opposition is born.

Furthermore, another binary opposition contributes to this: Katniss vs. her sister Prim. Katniss is to Prim a father figure in the absence of their father, who died in a mining accident long before the events of the book. And to Katniss, Prim is the figure of a young daughter that needs to be protected at all costs (culminating with Katniss volunteering as a tribute to save Prim). This binary opposition is cloned during the Games, but this time it is Katniss vs. Rue: Katniss knows that she has to win by being the last one to survive, but nevertheless makes an ally out of Rue, which for her represents her sister Prim and therefore has to be protected. It is in this binary opposition that the role of Katniss as a *male* or *dominant* is further established, when the tragic death of Rue happens, and she gives her a proper burial and starts the sign that will spark the revolution.

Another binary opposition that is related to the bigger Man vs. Women opposition is the one of Katniss vs Peeta: Katniss is a strong woman but needs help from Peeta (the male figure) to survive the Games and gain the love of the public. Without their lover storyline, Katniss cannot get the help she needs to survive the games. Even in the climax of the book, Katniss needs Peeta to achieve victory, without his idea, one would have to die. This event out of itself creates even another binary opposition within Katniss herself. She is both *the male figure* and the *lady figure*. She is strong enough to defy the rule of The Capitol, but she is always under the control

of The Capitol first and then by Peeta Mellark. It is his grand plan that allows her to survive and at the same time spark the revolution, by bending the rules of the game so that there are two winners instead of one. At that moment, Katniss begins to break free of the control of The Capitol, only to be trapped again under the control of Peeta and the revolution that ensues.

Is through those binary oppositions that one can find the answer I posed at the beginning of the essay: There is a clear link between the role of women and the role of men. The dominant side is characterized by traditional *masculine* traits and the weaker side is characterized with more *feminine* traits. Katniss is portrayed at times as the *masculine* side but always in a context where there is a *masculine-like* figure (Name it The Capitol, name it Peeta Mellark) controlling, or at least directing, her actions so therefore she is in reality always the *feminine* figure. Thus, there is always a binary opposition of Men vs. Women that is not expressed directly in the text, but through other binary oppositions that when connected, like Structuralist suggest, give meaning to the *main* opposition. In the world of *Panem*, much like in the real world, Men are in a dominant position when compared to women. Alas, we arrive at the true binary opposition that was hiding in plain sight all along: The one of Men vs. Women.

## References

- Barry, P. (2017). *Beginning theory : An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (4th ed.). Manchester University Press.
- Briggs, R., & Meyer, J. (2017, April 21). *Structuralism*. Department of Anthropology, College of Art & Sciences; University of Alabama.  
<https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/structuralism/>
- Collins, S. (2008). *The Hunger Games* (Kindle Edition). Scholastic Inc. (Original work published 2008)
- Good, K. (2012, July 12). *Scholastic Announces Updated U.S. Figures for Suzanne Collins's Bestselling The Hunger Games Trilogy* | Scholastic Media Room.  
Mediaroom.scholastic.com; Scholastic. <http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/press-release/scholastic-announces-updated-us-figures-suzanne-collinss-bestselling-hunger-games-tril>
- Nasrullah Mambrol. (2019, March 25). *Structuralism*. Literary Theory and Criticism.  
<https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>
- Purdue Writing Lab. (2018). *Structuralism and Semiotics* // *Purdue Writing Lab*. Purdue Writing Lab; Purdue University College of Liberal Arts.  
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject\\_specific\\_writing/writing\\_in\\_literature/literary\\_theory\\_and\\_schools\\_of\\_criticism/structuralism\\_and\\_semiotics.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/structuralism_and_semiotics.html)