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# KATNISS EVERDEEN – A LIKELY OR UNLIKELY REBEL IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN FICTION?

# KATNISS EVERDEEN – PRAWDOPODOBNY CZY NIEPRAWDOPODOBNY BUNTOWNIK W DYSTOPIJNEJ FIKCJI DLA MŁODYCH DOROSŁYCH

**Summary**

The article discusses the concept of young adult dystopia (henceforth YAD), and offers an analysis of a chosen female dystopian protagonist. The first part of the article includes a discussion of the terms 'utopia' and 'dystopia', and characteristic features and motifs of YAD of the 20th and 21st century. The second part of the article focuses on the presentation of a chosen YAD heroine based on the example of the rebel Katniss Everdeen, the main character of the novel 'The Hunger Games' by Suzanne Collins.

**Keywords:** Katniss Everdeen, rebel, young adult dystopia (YAD)

**Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza koncepcji dystopii w literaturze młodzieżowej oraz zbadanie buntowniczej postawy głównej bohaterki wybranej powieści dystopijnej. Pierwsza część artykułu omawia pojęcia „utopii" i „dystopii" oraz charakterystyczne cechy i motywy w literaturze dystopijnej XX i XXI wieku. Druga część artykułu skupia się na przedstawieniu typowej bohaterki młodzieżowej literatury dystopijnej na przykładzie buntowniczki Katniss Everdeen, głównej postaci powieści „Igrzyska Śmierci" autorstwa Suzanne Collins.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Katniss Everdeen, buntowniczka, młodzieżowa literatura dystopijna

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## Introduction

Young adult literature has been characterised by Kass and Teal (2009) as generally devoted to dilemmas and social issues close to teenage hearts, and also concerned with the coming-of-age, describing a life-changing period or event in a teenage life (p. 567).

The popularity of young adult literature, in particular dystopian or post-apocalyptic fiction, is unquestionable. Despite placing a literary society in disheartening circumstances, dystopian literature sells in millions of copies each year. Many of these novels have recently been transferred onto the big screen to become blockbusters. Their titles have also become engraved into the popular consciousness since the topics discussed seem relevant to today's society (Campbell, 2014).

The unquestionable phenomenon of the YAD lies with its emotional intensity and the relevance of topics discussed. According to Koss and Teal (2009, in Di Martino, 2019, p. 56), 85 percent of young adult literature deals with teen characters finding themselves, 34 percent with searching for answers and secrets, 34 percent with finding identity and hiding self, 34 percent with dealing with loss, over 50 percent with friendship and family, 27 percent with coming of age, around 35 percent with bullying and moving, over 30 percent with relationships, 20 percent with violence and abuse, and 25 percent with illness and mental issues (Koss and Teale, 2009: 567). As can be seen, such topics teenagers find highly emotionally charged, thus reaching for such literature.

Another reason for the popularity of this type of fiction lies with the creation of its main protagonist, who is usually a young female, often a teenager, independent and ambitious. The dark, post-apocalyptic world is generally presented from the perspective of such a teenager, who battles not only the difficulties of coming of age but, at the same time fights for survival in this hostile world. Teenagers and young adult readers may fully identify with the dystopian heroes and heroines since they also may often feel misunderstood by adults or denied the right to speak out and be independent (Campbell, 2014).

Another reason for the demand of such literature may lie with the fact that readers generally feel supportive of the underprivileged in a competition or struggle. According to Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards (2007):

> 'some of the most enduring figures in history, literature, mythology, religion, cinema, and sports are those who have faced daunting odds, were given little hope, or were expected to fail. These figures have a great appeal, largely because of their status as underdogs' (p. 1603).

Readers can easily identify with such protagonists as they themselves might feel disadvantaged and strive for justice and fairness. They might also be inspired by the heroes' resilience at the time of oppression and bask in their reflected glory.

The aim of this article is to investigate the characteristics of a dystopian novel and to analyse the actions and motifs of one of the dystopian heroines, Katniss Everdeen from 'The Hunger Games' by Suzanne Collins. The major questions concern the reasons whether Katniss Everdeen is a likely or unlikely heroine of dystopian, young adult prose.

## Utopia vs. dystopia as concepts

'Dystopia', also referred to as 'antyutopia', came to exist in opposition to 'utopia'. The latter term is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2012) as 'a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy', while the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2012) underscores utopian 'ideal perfection especially in laws, government and social conditions'. In turn, the former term is characterised by the Cambridge Dictionary (2012) as 'a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened; a description of such a society'. Also, according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2012), dystopia is 'an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanised, fearful lives'. As reported by Milner (2009), the term 'dystopia' was coined by John Stuart Mill and refers to the Greek expression 'dis topos', which can be understood as 'a bad place'.

The concept of utopia dates back to Greek myths and Plato's philosophy (Sypnowich, 2018), and has since frequently appeared in literature. One of the first examples of literary utopias is 'Utopia' written by Thomas More and published in 1516. The author created an imaginary community, fenced off from the rest of the world and contained within the boundaries of an island. The inhabitants are hard-working people who share a way of life. Cuddon (1999) summarises More's 'Utopia' by stressing: '[n]o private property, free universal education, six hours' manual work a day, (…) free medical treatment, (…) [a]ll religions (…) tolerated, but the penal code, especially in sexual matters was harsh: adultery led to slavery; repeated offences to death' (Cuddon, 1999: 958). Furthermore, the utopian society believed in the contemplation of nature and praise of God (Hodgkinson, 2016).

## Dystopia then and now

The term 'dystopia' appeared in literature much later then 'utopia'. The precursor of dystopian fiction dates back to the year 1600 and the publication of Joseph Hall's fantasy *'Mundus Alter et Idem'(Cuddon, 2013). A*round

1860 in Hungary, Imre Madach published a play 'The Tragedy of Men'. As stated by Gottlieb (2001: 43-44), her work connected theological and biblical studies with scientific philosophy of the modern mind. 'The Tragedy of Men' is considered dystopian due to the presence of its most characteristic elements and the fact that it is essentially a speculative fiction, and its plot revolves around a journey of Adam, the first man, and Lucifer, through history. The final sequence of the journey refers to the vision of the future, in which the sun is dying, human civilization no longer exists, and a group of savages (the few remaining survivors) are trying to stay alive. Adam declares that there is no hope for humankind (Madach, 1993). Another example of a dystopian novel was a novel entitled 'We' written by Yevgeny Zamyatin, inspired by the October revolution and published in 1921. It describes a society living in a country called One State, where instead of names people are assigned numbers, mass surveillance prevails, and people live a very logical, reasonable life controlled almost entirely by the state.

The second half of the 20th century brought some of the most popular bestsellers and highly popular dystopian novels that include George Orwell's *'Nineteen Eighty-Four'* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *'Brave New World'* (1932), or Margaret Attwood's 'Handmaid's Tale'(1985). Among the most recently published dystopian novels are 'The Hunger Games' by Suzanne Collins (2008),'Divergent' by Veronica Roth (2011), 'Chaos Walking' by Patrick Ness (2008), or 'Maze Runner' by James Dashner (2009). Needless to say, many of the above-mentioned futuristic visions of the world have been transformed onto screen and turned into blockbusters, 'often of considerable and disturbing power' (Cuddon, 1999: 958).

**A dystopian society**

Dystopian society is extremely gloomy for the ordinary masses as the society is downright oppressive and the future – hopeless. Typical features of a dystopian world, some of which are further discussed below, include:

1. A hierarchical society with definitive and unbreakable divisions between the upper, middle and lower classes;
2. The propaganda and the educational system preserving the Caste system;
3. The cancellation of individuality;
4. The presence of symbols presented as commandments of a religious faith, summarizing and hiding the aims of the state;
5. The constant surveillance by state police agencies;
6. A back story of a disaster justifying any dramatic social changes;
7. A protagonist doubting the society;
8. The presence of advanced technologies (Mahida, 2011).

The literary dystopian society is hierarchical in nature and is usually divided into the subjugating top cast holding the authoritarian power and the subjugated one, powerless masses or minorities (Nyman, 2015). This class division seems to be granted by law and reinforced with the help of police brutality. The authorities enjoy unlimited power and a comfortable life, while the remaining parts of the society seem to have little or no control over their lives. The latter group are usually provided with just enough food to survive and some entertainment; in return they are expected to remain passive and obedient. Needless to say, the totalitarian regime is not to be challenged under any circumstances.

Another key theme of a dystopian world is the use of propaganda and misinformation, leading to brainwashing. For instance, in the novel 'Fahrenheit 451'by Ray Bradbury propaganda can work effectively because the public have no access to their own history (Gresh, 2011). This type of control leads people to believe the misinformation provided by the media, however absurd it might seem. Additionally, access to the information on current affairs is heavily censored. What is more, propaganda is provided in various forms, it seems ubiquitous and continuously assimilated by the society.

The purpose of keeping the society ignorant is to keep the people's minds away from the dire situation in which they find themselves and to convince them that it is, in fact, in their best interest. Misinformation also plays an important role. In 'The Hunger Games', when describing the famine in District 12, the main character mentions that when someone loses their life 'you hear the wails from a house, and the Peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one' (Collins, 2008: 28). All public information, even that from the District Peacekeeper Reports, is carefully selected so as not to unveil the truth and keep the official version of reality intact. Moreover, it shows that people, exhausted by the hopeless situation, choose to ignore the truth.

The loss of individuality seems to be another characteristic element of the dystopian society. Usually, conformity is required and procedures are put in place to deprive individuals of their own identity. As stated by Basu et al. (2013), societies of this kind often accept sameness out of fear that any form of diversity will destabilise their community. For instance, in the novel 'Divergent' the authorities create the entire systems that manage personality, choice or even appearance of certain segments of society in order to avoid any threat to the common interest.

An important tool used to keep the dystopian society oppressed is the omnipresent surveillance, used to subjugate the community. Marks (2015)

notes that surveillance processes are strictly connected with the loss of freedom, but many accept this as the price of living in relative safety. Naturally, surveillance requires a close observation of the society to avoid rebellion and ensure full control. As a result, when people become used to being watched, the external discipline becomes internalised. Watterson (2017) points out two other forms of societal control – enjoying entertainment in form of the games and fighting off the ever-present hunger. The deadly competition is meant to remind the whole state that a rebellion was once crushed and that the same would happen should citizens plan to repeat it. The shortage of food, on the other hand, forces the inhabitants of poorer districts to fight for survival; the result of which is their diminishing physical strength and willpower to plan a rebellion.

Also, the technology used in dystopian society is often very advanced. Some inventions are meant to make life easier, at least for the elite, others seem questionable morally, and some, as in the trilogy 'The Hunger Games', are applied so that the Capitol always has the upper hand. One of such creations are Muttations, designed in the Capitol laboratories, sporting physical features of the dead Tributes. As explained by Katniss:

> 'they're no natural-born animals. They resemble huge wolfs, but what wolf lands and then balances easily on its hind legs? And the green eyes […] are unlike any dog or wolf […] I've ever seen. They are unmistakably human. […] I notice the collar with the number 1 inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me. The blonde hair, the green eyes, the number... it's Glimmer'(Collins, 2008: 325-327).

When Peeta turns his attention to whether the creature's eyes might be the real eyes of the dead, Katniss thinks about their brains. She wonders if the Gamemakers implanted in them the memories of those killed so that they can pursue the remaining survivors even more viciously in order to avenge their own deaths.

Muttations are not the only example of The Capitol authorities actively using genetic engineering. They also create genetically improved wasps called 'tracker jackers'. The author, through the inner reflections of the main character, shapes the following description of the creation: '(…) these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war' and '(...) they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact' (Collins, 2008: 183). In addition to that, their venom creates hallucinations that can drive people into madness. These wasps are unrelentless killers and will hunt down anyone who disturbs them.

## Katniss Everdeen as a typical dystopian heroine

With the lack of basic human rights prevailing in a dystopian world, it is only right to expect some character(s) to rebel against it. A typical dystopian protagonist is often female and is characterised by inquisitiveness and the strong will to rebel against the status quo. They become involved in acts of revolt, risking their wellbeing or even life. According to Day et al. (2016), the main characters are often forced to fight not only with governments, but also with stereotypical expectations based on their age or gender. Because they are commonly put in a liminal state, they relentlessly seek to understand the world around them in order to find out who they want to become, and then live their lives according to their own desires. What is more, they often attempt to change the society from within to make it more progressive and freer to all. Interestingly, Moylan and Baccolini (2003: 5) point out that in a typical dystopian narrative, the protagonists come from within the society and thanks to that they are immersed in it in an unreflective manner. However, they try to bring a change to the world around them in form of a rebellion, and the aim of such a revolt is to save the world from post–apocalyptic collapse (Basu et al., 2013).

The main heroine of 'The Hunger games' is Katniss Everdeen, a girl of about 16, living a gloomy life in District 12, one of the poorest parts of Panem. Susan Collins created in Katniss a likable character with many traits that readers find appealing, some to do with her personality and others with the intelligent use of her skills. According to Firestone (2012), Katniss is a reluctant heroine, but once she sees that she is an inspiration to others, she decides to accept the responsibility, proving her selflessness. When faced with a stressful situation, she manages to stay composed, thus spreading confidence and empowering others. Another reason why she is admired is the fact that she uses her intelligence to the advantage of her survival and the survival of those she protects. She knows how to navigate the terrain with great coordination, and uses to her advantage all the resources available to her.

Katniss Everdeen seems to perfectly fit the description of a dystopian character. She chooses to be a rebel, decides to stand against a massive enemy, and wins a lost battle thanks to her ability to apply the scarce resources available to her advantage. These are also the reasons that make the novel popular among readers.

## Katniss Everdeen – the rebel

The situation in the state of Panem is very difficult as it is run by a totalitarian dictatorship. The head of the government is President Snow, who enjoys unlimited power since he firmly rules not only the country's

government but also the police and the military forces. Citizens suffer from hunger and have practically no human rights, and those who disobey are killed instantaneously and without a trial.

Once a year, the Capitol organises a competition highly publicised yet dreaded by ordinary citizens. The competition is called 'The Hunger Games', and its purpose is to punish the previously rebellious districts. Participants of the competition, called the tributes, include only teenagers: one boy and one girl from each of the 12 districts. Teenagers become part of the reaping system on their twelfth birthday: upon reaching this age, their name is placed in the pool for the first time, and each year one vote is added with their name. Thus, by the age of eighteen, the name of every child in the country appears in the pool seven times. As stated by Katniss: 'You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tessarae. Each tessera is worth a meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for each of your family members as well' (Collins, 2008: 12-13). The games are cruel because the only way to survive requires killing all the other tributes. Additionally, to add to the cruelty, the participants are deprived of equal chances, and the rules of the game are often changed arbitrarily.

Everyday life in District 12, in which Katniss grows up, seems even more difficult than in other districts, and the hardships are manifested not only in the poor housing conditions or food shortages, but also in the omnipresent oppression, for example, in form of the reaping system. Katniss has to claim extra rations on behalf of herself, Prim and their mother, making her name appear in the pool twenty times by the time she is sixteen. It can be assumed that Katniss inherits her brave attitude from her deceased father. Apparently, when he could not freely hunt for food, he would sneak off into the forest surrounding the District 12. According to Katniss, the bows he made would be sold for a considerable sum, but had officials found out he would have been publicly executed for inciting a rebellion (Collins, 2008: 5). Growing and trying to survive in such an unjust and restricted society makes Katniss Everdeen defy the authorities.

Katniss shows her intelligence early as even as a child she recognises that the world in which she lives is evil and chooses to rebel against it. As stated by Basu et al. (2013: 9), acts of rebellion are common in dystopian settings and 'The Hunger Games' is no exception. As Katniss herself acknowledges '(…) When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule their country, Panem, from a far-off city called Capitol' (Collins, 2008: 6). Katniss would often express a negative attitude towards authority and use strong language against them, which could get both her and her loved ones into trouble. As the girl recalls, the risk of repercussions eventually taught her to control her mouth,

which resulted in her being a quiet and distant person. Nevertheless, Katniss seems to perfectly fit the view of Day et al. (2016: 3), who claim that dystopian female heroines are ready to fight against the adversities that are imposed on them. What is more, according to Waterson (2017), Katniss can be considered an outsider, because from a young age she refuses to be controlled by the system and ignores the largely oppressive laws; at the same time, she is not an outcast, because she stays loyal to her community (Waterson, 2017).

Another early act of rebel on part of Katniss is the fact that she hides her mother's depression form the authorities. In District 12, there is an institution known to residents as the 'community house', a place for children who, for various reasons, have no family to protect them. As the protagonist claims, she grew up seeing those children at school: 'the sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward' (Collins, 2008: 27). Given this description, it is not surprising that Katniss did what she could to keep her sister and herself from that place. Should the Peacekeepers find out that Mrs Everdeen was unable to care for her children, both Katniss and Prim would have been moved to the community house where, according to the elder Everdeen, Prim would have perished (Collins, 2008: 27).

The first significant instance when Katniss openly defies the Capitol is when she decides to volunteer as a Tribute to replace her sister. 'After all, District 12 hasn't had a volunteer in decades', she recalls (Collins, 2008: 22). Katniss does not want fame, glory or money, but she desires to protect her loved ones, even at the cost of her own life. As she recollects, unlike in other districts, where becoming a Tribute is considered an honour, in poor District 12 it is a death sentence (Collins, 2008: 22). This act of compassion shows that Katniss is capable of resisting the rules imposed by Capitol at all costs.

Another open act of rebellion occurs when, after the death of Cato, the Tribute of District 12, Katniss and Peeta become the only living participants in the tournament and the Gamemakers revoke the rule that was supposed to allow them both to win. Although they both consider sacrificing themselves for one another, Katniss sees another option that allows them both to survive. She encourages Peeta to try and swallow the poisonous berries with her. When the berries pass the girl's lips, the Gamemakers, seeing that she is not joking, declare them both winners (Collins, 2008: 336-338). Thus, as can be seen, Katniss is prepared to take the ultimate risk. She even dares to openly defy the Games organisers because, as she herself claims:'(…) Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country' (Collins, 2008: 337). Katniss is ready to take the risk but not in a half hazard way. She knows

exactly that, at this stage of the Games, the organisers, as well as the Capitol need a winner in order for the tournament to be considered a success and to please the nation. Her act of rebellion is successful.

Katniss is not provided with the expected resources, like weapons, to fight her battle, so she makes the best possible use of what little she has. First of all, she uses her personal qualities. For instance, she is a seasoned observer of the people around her, especially when her life depends on their decisions. Thanks to her close observations and her intuition she is ready to make the right decisions and is mentally prepared for whatever trap her enemies prepare for her. When she is crowned the winner of The Hunger Games by President Snow, she remarks that 'his eyes (…) are as unforgiving as a snake's. That's when I know that even though both of us would have eaten the berries, I am to blame for having the idea. I'm the instigator. I'm the one to be punished' (Collins, 2008: 356). During the banquet, Katniss sometimes notices President Snow in the crowd (Collins, 2008: 357). This may suggest that the she can sense danger on his part. Furthermore, during an interview that takes place the next day, Katniss notes in her mind that '(…) President Snow may be arranging some sort of "accident" for me as we speak' (Collins, 2008: 358).

Another resource Katniss can rely on is her intelligence, which allows her to draw valuable conclusions from the previous editions of the games. A good example of such skill can be observed in connection to the forest fire which occurred suddenly in the arena. Katniss concluded that '(…) This was not tribute's campfire gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made' (Collins, 2008: 171). According to Katniss, the fire occurred because nothing interesting had happened in the arena the previous day. The spectators were thirsty for excitement, so the organisers of the Games decided to provide it and forced the Tributes to gather in one place.

One final resource that Katniss uses to her own advantage are the media. She knows that whoever is in charge of the media footage summarizing the Games, he or she 'has to choose what sort of story to tell' (Collins, 2008: 354). By having two winners that year, the story focuses on their romantic relationship, which quickly becomes popular with millions of viewers. The creation of the District 12 lovers' myth was a deliberate attempt by the editors to sow doubt in the hearts of the Districts' inhabitants. This was done, because the threat of the finalists eating the poisonous berries could be understood in two ways: as an act of rebellion or as an act of love and the inability to live without the other person. After winning the competition, Katniss decides to continue playing out the survival strategy of falling in love with Peeta in front

of the cameras. This situation serves to illustrate that Katniss is able to use the narrative of the media in her favour, protecting herself and Peeta from potential harm.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that Katniss Everdeen is a poorly armed, single teenager standing against a bleak and oppressive system, having to deal with deadly dilemmas, she is not an unlikely hero. On the contrary, she seems to fit the frame of a dystopian rebel protagonist perfectly. It also seems difficult not to support her wholeheartedly. One of the reasons for that lies with the readers' need to support the underdog, another – with her resourcefulness: she uses her skills, high intelligence, sharp perception, intuition and determination, to fight her uneven fight while at the same time is trying to find herself.

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