

# The Desensitization to Violence and the Perpetuation of Oppression and Slavery in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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In an interview with Rick Margolis in 2008, Suzanne Collins explains where she discovered her inspiration to write her best-selling trilogy, *The Hunger Games*:

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 ... there is so much programming, and I worry that we're all getting a little desensitized to the images on our televisions. (Margolis)

## ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes slavery in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy by contextualizing her works within the history of Roman gladiator fighting and by examining the social structures of oppression within the society that Collins creates. The essay explores how the trilogy highlights the ways that people can perpetuate systems of slavery within a society when they become desensitized to violence and both benefit from and are entertained by the exploitation of others.

## KEY WORDS:

*The Hunger Games*, desensitization to violence, Roman gladiators, slavery and entertainment

The inherent problem that Collins saw on her television that night and the backbone of her trilogy is the blurring of reality with fiction, the seeing of something real (such as violence or war) and treating it as something fictitious or dramatized. Collins noticed this competition between actual and staged violence, and she used this concept to write a novel series centered on the dramatized and staged fighting of children in an arena. Not only does the violence that occurs in the arena include ties to ancient Roman gladiator fighting, but it is also reminiscent of modern-day reality television programs.

But, this focus on staged violence and the subsequent desensitization to that very same violence is not the only theme that appears in Collins's trilogy. The fighting that appears in the arena of the *Hunger Games* is situated in the larger society of Panem, which is the country in which *The Hunger Games* trilogy takes place. It is in this society where the citizens of the twelve districts are enslaved by the Capitol and forced to produce the commodities that are used by the citizens of the Capitol as they live their opulent lifestyles. The citizens of the districts are controlled by the Capitol and their peacekeepers, who punish anyone who does not comply with the Capitol's orders. Despite

the presence of brute force and violence, the actual structure of Panem's society – such as the physical layout of the districts and the role of the reaping and the Hunger Games – is instrumental in enabling the enslavement of the district citizens to occur. In this way, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy performs two crucial functions in its discourse on slavery. First, the resemblance of Roman gladiator fighting inherent in the annual Hunger Games provides us with a warning about the dangers of becoming desensitized to violence. Second, the structure of Panem's society, which I will analyze through the application of theories about slavery, provides us with a second warning about the effects that social structures can have on the existence and perpetuation of slavery. In the end, analyzing these two elements of Collins's trilogy highlights important issues present in modern-day society and its treatment of slavery today.

## BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS

Before I move on, I believe a brief reprise of the trilogy would aid in a clarification of my argument. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is set in a futuristic country called Panem that occupies part of North America. Seventy-four years before the start of the first book, there existed thirteen districts and a capitol that ruled over them. When the districts rebelled, the Capitol subdued twelve of the districts and destroyed the thirteenth. To punish the districts for their rebellion, the Capitol created an annual event called the Hunger Games. Every year, a male and a female child between the ages of twelve to eighteen are picked from each district and sent to the Capitol as tributes and retribution for the rebellion. Those children are then forced to fight to the death in an arena while the entire nation of Panem is forced to watch. Ever since the rebellion, the citizens of the districts are forced to work in their own districts for all of their lives, while the citizens of the Capitol live a luxurious lifestyle where they enjoy the fruits of the districts' labor. The trilogy is then focused on a girl chosen from District 12, Katniss Everdeen, and her ensuing fight against the control of the Capitol.

In this paper I will be exploring how slavery is presented in the trilogy; therefore, I believe it is pertinent to provide a concrete but not exhaustive definition of slavery. Sociologist Orlando Patterson defines slavery in terms of power and domination: "Slavery is one of the most extreme forms of the relationship of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave" (1). In his analysis of modern-day slavery, Kevin Bales describes the system of slavery as "the state of control exercised over the slave based on violence or its threat, a lack of any payment beyond sustenance, and the theft of labor or other qualities of the slave for economic gain" (9). Both of these scholars consider slavery in a way that includes a display of complete control and domination of one person over another. This is the definition on which I will base my analysis.

## ANCIENT ROMAN GLADIATORIAL EVENTS AND THE DESENSITIZATION TO VIOLENCE

The theme of desensitization to violence in *The Hunger Games* trilogy centers on the annual Hunger Games and the arena where the tributes are forced to fight one another. In order to fully understand this theme that Suzanne Collins presents, we must first examine the Hunger Games' resemblance to gladiatorial events in Ancient Rome. By doing this, we can better understand how the desensitization to violence occurs.

The earliest recorded gladiatorial event held in ancient Rome occurred in 264 B.C. The early gladiator games were called a *munus*, or a "duty" or "gift," which was done in honor of the dead. In

her research on Roman gladiators, Alison Futrell tells us that the early *munus* was connected with the funerals of deceased and prominent members of Roman society (19). But, as Roger Dunkle explains in his book on gladiatorial spectacles, the games would eventually cease to be associated with funerals and would stand as a spectacle in and of themselves (7). Dunkle also points out that we currently hold an incorrect notion that gladiatorial events were an everyday occurrence in Roman society. He notes, “In the Republic and the imperial period, gladiator games were a relative rarity, even under emperors who were active givers of spectacles, and that rarity was an important factor in the popularity of the games” (72). It stands to reason that the “rarity” of the games built up more hype surrounding the games themselves, which made it more effective and popular among the people. We can see this fact present in *The Hunger Games* trilogy as well. The infrequency of the annual Hunger Games mimics the timing of the Roman gladiatorial games, and the popularity of the games among the citizens of the Capitol could also be attributed to the rarity of the games.

The desensitization to violence originated in Ancient Rome because of the attitudes of the spectators towards the gladiators themselves. This will become apparent when we examine who the gladiators were. Among those fighting in the arena, there were typically two main types of people who became gladiators. The first were people who were forced to train and fight in the arena, usually as a form of punishment. These would consist of slaves, prisoners of war, and criminals convicted of capital crimes (Dunkle 30). An interesting fact is that there were also other criminals killed in the arena, but they were not gladiators. The criminals who fought in the arena as gladiators were called *damnati ad ludum gladiatorium*, but the other criminals were called *noxii*. Instead of fighting, the *noxii* were killed during the noonday festivities that split the morning and afternoon gladiatorial events. As Donald Kyle points out in his overview of gladiatorial events, the *noxii* were “men (and women) sentenced to execution, crucifixion, fire, or the beasts” (91). Punished for extreme criminal acts against the state, these criminals were deprived of the rights of Roman citizens and were thus given the worst forms of capital punishment. Unlike the gladiators who were given a chance to fight and survive, *noxii* had no chance of surviving the games. The two types of gladiators are also represented in *The Hunger Games* trilogy; interestingly enough, the tributes are actually a combination of the gladiators and *noxii*. They are allowed to fight in the game and thus have a chance of winning, and in that sense they are like gladiators. At the same time, twenty-three of the tributes are destined to die and, thus, have no chance of winning; in that sense, they are like the *noxii*.

The other group of gladiators was formed from people who were not forced to fight; instead, they were volunteers. In his book on the invisible people of ancient Rome, Robert Knapp states that, upon signing up for gladiatorial training, the volunteer “swore he would give up his rights to protection under the law, promising to allow himself to ‘be burned, chained, beaten, or killed’ in his contracted position” (267). In essence, the volunteer lost all of his legal rights in exchange for a chance to fight for fame and fortune. Similarly, those who volunteer for the Hunger Games are also treated in this manner; upon volunteering, they too lose all rights and are forced to fight to the death, just like the tributes who are picked by the reaping.

All in all, even though there were both gladiators who were forced to fight and those who volunteered, all of the gladiators were usually viewed as criminals. According to Roger Dunkle, this meant that spectators inevitably came to one conclusion about gladiators: “The prevailing feeling among Romans was that gladiators, given their background of slavery, crime or opposition to the Roman state as enemy soldiers, deserved whatever fate they suffered” (18). This feeling was also leveled against the tributes: because the tributes are all from one of the twelve districts, and

because the Hunger Games is a form of punishment and retribution for the rebellion, the Capitol believes all of the tributes, whether they were reaped or volunteered, deserve to die for the crimes their people committed in the past.

This level of dislike and contempt for gladiators and tributes also leads to a feeling of apathy toward the wellbeing of the fighters, which can be seen in the lives of the gladiators after they leave the arena. Many gladiators seemed to have died in the arena; of those who did not, the remainder of their lives was short-lived and painful (overall gladiators did not normally live past the age of thirty). An excavation of sixty-seven skeletons of gladiators in Ephesus, Turkey, revealed that most of the skeletons had sustained physical deformities and traumas from fighting in the arena (Knapp 277-278). Even if a gladiator survived the arena, the injuries he sustained from fighting ailed him for the rest of his short life. Not only did gladiators suffer from their fighting, but spectators also did not care what happened to the gladiators; spectators believed that gladiators deserved what they received from fighting, which made them apathetic toward the pain and suffering the gladiators endured. The Hunger Games also had similar impacts on the tributes. As Suzanne Collins points out in an interview she gave about the *Catching Fire* film in 2013, Katniss displays signs of post-traumatic stress disorder at the beginning of the second novel (Grossman). With the fact that Peeta is given an artificial leg after he left the Hunger Games in the first novel, even the victors do not escape the games unscathed. And, most importantly, after Katniss and Peeta win the Hunger Games, the citizens of the Capitol are much more interested in their love life than they are with their physical and emotional suffering.

This feeling of apathy toward other human beings is best appreciated when we understand that the gladiator games, and the annual Hunger Games as well, were about entertainment and “putting on a good show.” In this light, the gladiator’s life, and whether he lived or died, became irrelevant. If a gladiator found that he could no longer fight, he could ask the editor, or the person in charge of the games, for *missio*, which was basically an honorable discharge from battle. If the *editor* thought the gladiator had performed excellently, he would grant *missio* and allow both gladiators to leave the arena alive. If, however, the *editor* refused to give *missio*, then the defeated gladiator was instantly killed by his opponent (Dunkle 140-141). In this manner, the gladiator’s life was still completely in the hands of the *editor*; he could be killed or his life could be spared, but both choices were out of his hands. Most importantly, the *editor* often based his decision on the attitude of the crowd or the Caesar; the *editor*’s ultimate goal was to ensure that a good performance and entertainment was provided. Katniss and Peeta find themselves in the very same situation at the end of the 74th Hunger Games. The Capitol has complete domination over their lives; even though the Capitol chooses to let both of them live, it is only because the Capitol must put on a good show, and having a Hunger Games with no survivors would not make that happen. In the end, the fact that the life of a tribute is dependent on providing entertainment, and simultaneously that the citizens of the Capitol are only interested in being entertained, is evidence of the apathy and desensitization toward the violence unfolding before them.

Ultimately, the research into gladiators in ancient Rome highlights the desensitization to violence held by the spectators of those violent spectacles. As we’ve seen, when applied to *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the context of gladiator history warns us about the dangers of being desensitized to violence. The citizens of the Capitol are consumed with the entertainment aspects of the annual Hunger Games. Unlike the people in the districts, who are forced to watch the Hunger Games, the citizens of the Capitol freely choose to indulge in the fighting and suffering in the Hunger Games. Katniss sums up this view of Capitol citizens perfectly: “What do they do all day, these people in

the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 65). The citizens of the Capitol are so accustomed to the death in the arena that they no longer care that children are dying. As if that wasn’t terrible enough, the Capitol citizens also seem to be extremely oblivious to the plight of all of the other citizens of the districts. According to Tom Henthorne, the attitudes of the members of the Capitol toward the other district citizens is much worse: “[the] citizens are so caught up in the artificial drama that plays out on television that they pay little attention to the fact that their ‘president’ is, in fact, a dictator who attained power by murdering his rivals or that their affluence comes at the cost of great privation elsewhere” (105). The last part is extremely indicative of their knowledge of slavery: the citizens of the Capitol are so obsessed with the entertainment the Hunger Games provides that they are blissfully unaware that the citizens of the districts are being oppressed and enslaved. This type of ignorance is like a veil placed over the Capitol’s eyes so that they don’t realize the horrors of the existence of the districts.

### THE SOCIETAL STRUCTURE OF *THE HUNGER GAMES* AND THE PERPETUATION OF OPPRESSION AND VIOLENCE

We have already seen how the annual Hunger Games, in its connection to Roman gladiatorial events, highlights the dangers of becoming desensitized and apathetic to the suffering of other human beings. In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the social structure of Panem also warns us about the dangers that those very same societal structures can have in enabling slavery to occur. In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, this manifests itself in the physical layout of the districts, the reaping that chooses the children who will be the tributes, and the socioeconomic inequality among the district citizens.

One of the structures of Panem’s society is the layout of the districts, which utilizes the ideology of space and place. In the introduction to their book *Place of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, Greg Dickinson et. al. provide a definition for space and place. Even though their book focuses on the rhetoric within museums and memorials, their definition and distinction between space and place is, I believe, still relevant to my argument. They state, “Space and place [are used] ... to emphasize a difference in how physical situatedness is experienced. In such usages, a *place* that is bordered, specific, and locatable by being named is seen as different from open, undifferentiated, undesignated *space*” (23). Place is seen, then, as that which has a definite shape and border, and space is everything that has a lack thereof. But, I believe we can take this definition even further. We, as humans, build houses, walls, and even national borders; we like to inhabit places because their definite shape provides us with a sense of safety and identity. Everything not enclosed in those defined spaces is foreign and, therefore, for the most part, undesirable.

In *The Hunger Games*, the layout of Panem’s society constructs the twelve districts as places and the land outside those districts as merely empty space. The district citizens also seem to associate safety with their own districts. District 12, for example, is surrounded by “a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it’s supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods – packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, bears – that used to threaten our streets” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 4). The fenced-off edges of the district, which also make the district a distinct and safe place, serve to protect the citizens of the district from the “evil” lurking in the space outside their districts. Furthermore, this distinction between space and place causes the district citizens to actually desire to take refuge in their own districts. Katniss notes that, “In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples. But always in sight of the Meadow. Always close enough to run back to the safety of District 12 if trouble

arises” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 6). The districts have been instilled with the notion that their enclosed district is protecting them from the unidentified space surrounding them. If we examine this structure closely, however, we notice that the citizens prefer to remain in the very places where their enslavement simultaneously occurs. Instead of seeking refuge and freedom in the free space outside their districts (which would signify that they would have to leave the “safety” of their districts), the district citizens believe the only safe place for them is in the very site that enables their own enslavement. Ultimately, the layout of the entire nation of Panem, and the accompanying feelings of the citizens toward that layout, is used by the Capitol to perpetuate the enslavement of all of its districts. In the end, the physical layout of the districts does more harm than good.

Part of the social structure in Panem also includes the annual Hunger Games the Capitol puts on. In order to select the children who must fight in the Hunger Games, the Capitol holds a reaping which chooses a boy and a girl at random from each district to be the tributes. But, the reaping itself does more than simply pick the tributes for each district. Inherent in the reaping itself are two major facets of slavery that Orlando Patterson defines, and these help create the enslavement of the districts. These facets are “natal alienation” and “deracination.” Patterson describes natal alienation as the “alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood’ and from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth” (7). What natal alienation entails is the fact that a slave’s social connection and relationship to the people of his birth and heritage are not constituted as legally binding. Being natively alienated means that a parent and child may still have a relationship, but that relationship holds no legal standing or rights. Because of this, Patterson notes, “The master [has] the power to remove a slave from the local community in which he or she was brought up” (6). Patterson labels this action as “deracination,” or the loss of native status for any person by being physically removed from his or her home. In this way, natal alienation provides the threat of separation, and deracination fulfills that threat by physically uprooting slaves from their homes. But even though not all slaves are deracinated, Patterson states that the fact that separation is possible was enough to “strike fear in the hearts of all slaves” (6).

In *The Hunger Games*, the annual reaping enforces the natal alienation and enslavement of all of the district citizens while also providing the threat of deracination. At any moment, a child’s name can be called at the reaping. Because the threat of separation is always present in the reaping itself, the citizens’ relationships with their children are not legally enforceable. And, since every citizen is natively alienated, it is at the very moment in the reaping when the child’s name is called when the threat of separation is finally fulfilled and the child, now a tribute, is uprooted from his home and taken to the Capitol. Even though not all children are deracinated, the possibility of this occurring still has the same effect on all the citizens of the districts. Coupled together, the natal alienation of the citizens and the constant threat of deracination subject the citizens of the districts to a constant state of terror and fear, which subjugates them into submission and leaves them completely powerless to control and maintain their own relationships in society. These facets of slavery are created, as I said early, exclusively by the social structure that is the reaping.

The final element of the societal structure of Panem that perpetuates the cycle of oppression and enslavement in the districts is the presence of poverty and socioeconomic inequality, which leads impoverished citizens of the districts to take actions which put them at more risk of being selected for the annual Hunger Games. Poverty has long intersected with systems of slavery; those who study modern-day slave systems note that poverty often drives people to seek out work opportunities that may seem risky, which lead them to be taken advantage of and eventually, in some cases, to be enslaved. Kevin Bales notes that “while slavery may be linked to religion in one country, to caste

or ‘race’ in a second country, and to gender in yet another country, it always reflects differences in economic and social power” (10). The fact that poverty and low socioeconomic status drives people to seek opportunities that place them in a position to be enslaved is also present in the novels. This appears in the form of tessera in Panem’s society. When a child turns twelve, he or she can sign up for tessera, which is worth “a meager year’s supply of grain and oil for one person.” A person such as Katniss can apply for tessera for each of her family members, but each time a person signs up for tessera, their name is entered in the reaping an extra time. People can sign up for tessera each year, but the entries are also cumulative. By the time Katniss is sixteen, her name is entered in the reaping twenty times; Gale’s name is entered forty-two times (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 13). At the surface level, this appears like a way for families in poverty to receive extra food throughout the year. Another function of tessera is to make the poor more likely to be called for the annual Hunger Games. Children of financially sound families will only have their names entered once because they have no need for extra food. But, since those children in poverty are driven by a need for survival, they place themselves at a higher risk of being sent to the Hunger Games and, thus, of being subjected to further violence in the arena.

Another part of low socioeconomic status is the promise and lure to improve one’s circumstances in life. Every year after the boy and girl tribute have been selected, there is an option for citizens of the districts to volunteer. In places such as District 12, no one usually volunteers because “the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 22). In these districts, children hardly ever volunteer because they have almost no chances of winning. In the wealthier districts, such as Districts 1 and 2, children train for the Hunger Games their entire lives and volunteer just so they can win the Hunger Games. Despite their improved lifestyles, even the members of the wealthier districts are still forced to work their entire lives, meaning they too want to escape their lives of enslavement. Collins never addresses their desire for volunteering, but one could assume it is driven by the desire to want to live in a life of luxury and pleasure for the rest of their lives. In the end, the volunteering functions as a societal structure that provides a hope of escaping the miserable conditions; coupled with the structure of tessera, which provides relief to struggling families, these two social structures allow the children of the districts to be more susceptible to entering the annual Hunger Games and enduring further violence and oppression.

### MODERN-DAY IMPLICATIONS AND IMPORTANCE OF *THE HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY*

Some may believe that Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy is purely fiction and has no pertinence in our daily lives, but I believe these two themes present in the trilogy inform us greatly about problems in our modern-day society. According to a different interview with Suzanne Collins, conducted by Hannah Hudson, Collins believes that “watching people being humiliated or brought to tears or suffering physically” has an inherent “voyeuristic thrill,” one that is commonly present in reality television. Collins goes on to state that there is a “potential for desensitizing the audience so that when they see real tragedy playing out on the news, it doesn’t have the impact it should. It all just blurs into one program” (Hudson). Collins is clearly concerned with the fact that viewing dramatized violence and suffering can block out the reality of war and violence in the real world. She is deeply concerned with the fact that seeing fake suffering on reality television shows inhibits our ability to understand and comprehend the actual suffering of human beings in the world today. Remembering the way the Roman spectators and the citizens of the Capitol became desensitized to the violence they were viewing can aid us in remaining aware of

the actual suffering of real people enduring oppression and enslavement around the world.

Within Collins's novels there rests a second warning about allowing certain structures within society to remain that could lead individuals to be enslaved. As I've noted, the layout of the districts made the citizens feel like they needed to stay in their districts in order to survive and remain in safety. This construct was, as we have seen, a manifestation of Panem's society and the ideas instilled upon them, and when it was left intact, it persuaded more district citizens to stay where they could be enslaved rather than seek freedom. The poverty that was rampant in many of the districts also made some of the district citizens at a higher risk of going to the Hunger Games. If these social structures within the districts had been reformed and improved, those citizens would not have felt the need to place their lives on the line in order to survive.

Another construct that is quite prevalent in many societies today is the laws that require foreign citizens to have their passport to leave the country. It seems like a harmless law, one that is probably supposed to do more good than harm, but in reality it traps individuals in slavery. In Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten's book *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery*, many of the stories feature individuals who were trapped in foreign countries when they were enslaved because their passports were taken away and they could not leave the country. This construct of modern society effectively prevents modern-day slaves from fleeing their employers/captors because it is illegal to do so without a passport. Collins's novel warns us that if we do not change laws such as these that allow systems of oppression and violence to function, then the problem of slavery will not end but will actually continue to exist as long as these constructs are in place.

Finally, Collins's depiction of the reaping and the annual Hunger Games, and the fact that the citizens of the Capitol were completely oblivious to the suffering of the districts, reminds us of threatening social structures in the past, from the Japanese internment camps that were set up across America during World War II, to the concentration camps established during the Nazi Holocaust, to the military detention camps like Guantanamo Bay. These structures of oppression and enslavement are often created and sustained because the societies in which they are created either approve of their creation or are oblivious or unconcerned about their existence. Collins reminds us that if we do not recognize these systems of oppression in our world and become aware that a great violence is being committed, then there is no possibility of those systems of oppression and slavery being stopped. Thus, they will continue on indefinitely into the future and wreak havoc along the way.

## CONCLUSION

Estimates put the current number of slaves in our world today at 30 million worldwide. Between sex trafficking and child labor, there are people being enslaved in virtually every country in the world. There are signs of modern-day slavery in every direction we look, including literature. As we have seen throughout this paper, slavery is so prevalent in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy; and, from our analysis, we can see just how devastating it can be to become desensitized to violence and allow oppression to continue through current societal structures. *The Hunger Games* trilogy may be fiction and it may not include a story detailing the suffering of actual people in real enslavement, but the oppression they face mirrors that of modern-day slaves. If readers could learn to read literature and examine the systems of slavery in the novels they read, thus taking from them knowledge of the suffering and oppression that any human being can face, then perhaps we might become a generation of educated and insightful human beings who have the desire and will to end slavery in our own lifetime.



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