### Class Divide in the Hunger Games and American Society

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Writer's Reflection

We are all passengers aboard a colossal ship christened the S.S.C United States. Our hopes and aspirations rest upon this vessel as we sail through uncharted water to lands unknown. However, after numerous years of arduous voyage and unfavorable living conditions, a small group of passengers has grown progressively unruly and restless. They solicit the help of the ship’s captain who allows the group to migrate to the upper deck so that they may enjoy the spectacular view and cool sea breeze. He proposes to erect facilities and accommodations for the group’s enjoyment. The rest of the passengers are forced to relocate down to the lower decks in order to accommodate the group’s desires. This ensues in massive overpopulation of the lower decks, causing the ship’s foundations to be increasingly weakened, and cracks and fractures to emerge in its hull. Meanwhile, members of the group are spread out on poolside lounge chairs, enjoying the light breeze and warm sunshine, unceremoniously sipping coconut water from a bright yellow straw. They have been blinded by the surrounding comfort and luxury, unwittingly developing a dispassionate attitude towards the “cellar-dwellers”. This has caused them to become completely oblivious to the impending chaos and doom amassed beneath their feet.

The short story that I composed above provides an apt representation of the increasingly fragmented nature of contemporary society in the United States. An undesirable trend has developed within American society where the population has been divided into distinct classes based on each individual’s economic prowess. Over the years, the income gap between the upper and the lower classes has grown exponentially, leading to unrest among the lower classes who claim that they are constantly subjected to oppression from the upper classes. In my essay, I attempted to construct a relationship between the class warfare that Suzanne Collins portrayed in her novel, *The Hunger Games*, and the highly divisive state of American society today.

Personally, I found the research process to be the most challenging aspect of the essay. Due to the relative youthfulness in the publication date of the novel, the collection of scholarly articles available that addressed how the dystopian society depicted in it mirrored that of American society today was greatly limited. The few that I was able to find were inappropriate for application to the context of my argument. It turned out that only one of my sources actually bore a relation to both the novel and my argument. The other sources that I used were articles and abstracts from books and research papers that offered information regarding the income inequality in the United States, the disparities in power between the classes and the stereotypes that have been enacted by the upper classes towards the lower classes. I had to critically analyze the individual sources and develop a method to assimilate the information offered into the context of my argument. This process significantly encumbered my writing progress as there were numerous occasions when I would be forced to replace a source because its context was deviating away from the perimeters of my argument.

Although the research process was no doubt challenging, I felt that I have learned some interesting things from it. It was intriguing to discover that *The Hunger Games* was published on the day before the collapse of the Lehman Brothers. The research process also allowed me to gain a greater appreciation for the state of American society today where the trend of the lower classes being increasingly oppressed by the upper classes is prevalent. I also recognized the importance of starting the research process early in order to allow for sufficient time to judge the credibility, reliability and relevance of the sources.

Overall, Inquiry 3 is a greatly illuminating writing project that has enriched me in both my close reading and research abilities.

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In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins illustrates a desolate world where survivors of the post- apocalyptic North American continent of Panem are segregated into twelve separate districts and tasked with specific responsibilities of harvesting the Earth’s remaining natural resources. The districts are subjected to the cruel oppression and exploitation by the continent’s governing body, the Capitol, which exerts its sphere of influence over them through the employment of a tyrannical dictatorial regime, the keystone of which is the Hunger Games. In the novel, Collins highlights the contrast between the poverty and destitution experienced by the inhabitants of the districts, and the wealth and power possessed by the ruling class residing in the Capitol, detailing a futuristic dystopia civilization that is characterized by class warfare and bears an uncanny semblance to the highly divisive nature of American society today.

The novel was published on September 14, 2008, coincidentally the day before the Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy and exacerbated the already severe economic downturn in the United States. At the time of reading, many middle and lower class Americans were being confronted with the unappealing prospect of unemployment, making them more predisposed in identifying with the novel’s dominant theme of oppression from the upper elite class. Suggestions about the prevalence of class warfare in American society were rampant during this period of time and protests were demonstrated by the 2011 organization of the Occupy Wall Street Movement that targeted social issues such as income inequality, greed, corruption and oppression by the upper elite classes. The movement aimed to “fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future” (Occupy Wall Street). The state of American society as described by proponents of the movement mirrors the severe income inequalities and unfairness inherent in the society portrayed by Collins in *The Hunger Games*. Collins’ depiction of class warfare thus provides an apt reflection of the increasingly fragmented societal culture which has become an abominable quality of contemporary American society.

The vast economic disparity present in the United States has given rise to the formation of distinct classes in our society. Robert Hughes Jr. and Maureen Perry- Jenkins identified them to be the capitalist, upper middle, middle, working, working poor and underclass classes (177). Members of the upper capitalist class make up only one percent of the population while the other classes constitute the remaining ninety nine percent (Hughes, Perry Jenkins). A burgeoning income gap has developed between the two groups as a result of the simultaneous concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the economic elites and the deterioration in the living standards of the lower classes. David Harvey describes this trend as “an endeavor to restore class power to the richest strata in the population” (28). Overall economic wealth has not increased within the population. Rather, the unidirectional transfer of wealth from the lower classes to the upper capitalist class has allowed the latter to enjoy a larger slice of the economic pie (Harvey), thus widening the gap between the two classes. John Fund supports this argument by noting that in the United States, the majority of this “wealth and power seems to gravitate towards the Beltway and its suburbs” (Fund). He cites a survey conducted by Money Magazine that “looked at the 3,033 counties in the US and found that the top one-half of 1 percent is dominated by Washington, DC” (Fund).

The accumulation of immense wealth often corresponds to the possession of colossal power. This has become a characteristic of the upper capitalist class in our society today. Many of the politicians in Washington DC who are responsible for the most important decisions of the country belong to the upper capitalist class. The lower classes are severely underrepresented in the political arena as they are often labeled as unqualified to lead. Michael Zweig argues that “class must be understood in terms of power” (Zweig). His argument mirrors the vast power disparity between the upper capitalist class and the lower classes in our society today.

In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol’s residents and the district dwellers are the novel’s equivalent of the upper capitalist class and the lower classes in American society respectively. The wealth and power disparity between both parties is exceedingly conspicuous. In the novel, Collins portrays the Capitol as the epitome of success and eminence. When Katniss, the novel’s main protagonist, first arrived in the Capitol, she could not help but remark that:

The cameras haven’t lied about its grandeur. If anything they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. (Collins 59)

The “glistening buildings that tower in the air” appear to be a reference towards the numerous skyscrapers that adorn the skyline of many of America’s metropolitan cities. The construction of these buildings would require a substantial amount of economic input. Thus, their presence in the Capitol serves to highlight the abundance of wealth that it possesses. The height of these buildings can also be interpreted as a symbol of the Capitol’s power and authority over the districts. It articulates the hierarchical structure in Panem where the Capitol rests at the pinnacle of civilization while the districts are stranded at the bottom. Collins further emphasizes the wealth of the Capitol by describing the eccentric appearances (at least from Katniss’ perspective) adorned by its citizens. The superficiality of the citizens demonstrates the vast amount of financial resources which they possessed, as well as their ostentatious consumption practices.

The districts, especially the higher numbered ones, are rendered by Collins as grim habitations characterized by starvation and misery. Katniss describes her district as “District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety” (Collins, 6). Each of the districts was tasked with the specific responsibility of fabricating a particular resource for the Capitol’s consumption. For example, District 1 was tasked with the production of precious gems and stones, District 3 specialized in electronics, District 11 focused on agriculture and District 12 was responsible for the mining of coal (Collins). The Capitol exerted a monopolistic control over all of the resources produced without awarding fair compensation to the districts for their role in the production process. The unfair trading practice resulted in a huge wealth disparity between the districts and the Capitol, mirroring the arguments made by Harvey about the accumulation of wealth by the ruling elites at the expense of the lower classes. In this respect, Collins’ depiction of the unequal wealth and resources distribution in Panem is a reflection of the widening income gap and power disparity in the United States that is a major contributing factor towards the increasing fragmentation of American society.

The division of American society into social classes has also inevitably given rise to class discrimination that is represented by the development of popular stereotypes towards expected behavioral patterns of the different classes in society. Paul Piff explains that: “facets of social class shape the identity of upper and lower class individuals and, like other social identity constructs (e.g. ethnicity and nation of origin), influence an individual’s life circumstances and patterns of social perception and construal” (Piff, 2). The stereotypes are often enacted by the ruling class which “defines its goals and means not only for itself but for the whole society” (Skliar, 517). This means that based on its higher position in the class hierarchy, the ruling class has the power to enact classifications for the entire community without the consult of the lower classes. The establishment of stereotypes can be “a source of social stigma and rejection among individuals from lower class backgrounds” (Piff, 2). It could be interpreted by the lower classes as oppression from the upper class which could lead to social unrest, thus exacerbating the division in society.

Class discrimination in *The Hunger Games* was best symbolized by the character of Effie Trinket. Effie worked as the escort for the District 12 Hunger Games competitors and was a resident of the wealthy and powerful Capitol. She was a member of the upper echelon of the hierarchal system in Panem who had never experienced the suffering that characterized the living standards in the districts. Therefore, her knowledge of the districts was limited to the censored propaganda that the Capitol disseminated and her observations of the tributes whom she escorted to the Capitol each year.

Her ignorance was highlighted when she made a rather condescending remark to both Katniss and Peeta during supper on the Capitol bound train that “at least you two have decent manners” (Collins, 44). She continued by describing the previous year’s tributes as “a couple of savages” (Collins, 44) whose lack of table manners had upset her digestion. Her supercilious comment showed that did not think highly of the inhabitants of the districts. She had formulated an ill-informed opinion towards the behavior of the inhabitants of the districts that was based on a superficial understanding of the circumstances which had led to the kind of behavior displayed by the tributes. Her upbringing in a life of privilege had given her a superiority complex that she innately believed gave her the authority to cast judgments towards the appropriateness of certain types of behavior.

Effie further exemplifies the persona of class stereotyping during her attempts to win Katniss and Peeta sponsors in which she tries to communicate their successful “struggle to overcome the barbarism of your district” (Collins, 74) as an attractive proposition for sponsors to invest in. Her impulsive use of the word “barbarism” to describe the society of District 12 implies a form of arrogance and aloofness that she believed was afforded to her by the position that she occupied at the top rung of the class hierarchy in Panem. In response to her insensitive comment, Katniss discreetly commented, “Barbarism? That’s ironic coming from a woman helping to prepare us for slaughter. And what’s she basing our success on? Our table manners?” (Collins, 74). Katniss was clearly frustrated by the unreasonable amount of oppression and stereotyping that she was consistently being targeted with by the citizens of the Capitol. Effie’s discriminatory attitude towards District 12 is thus a befitting reflection of the upper class’ casting of stereotypes that have contributed to the increased marginalization of the lower classes in contemporary American society.

Society in the United States has also been divided such that each class has specific roles and responsibilities within the community. The capitalist, upper middle and middle classes are usually identified with a service based industry that offers moderate to high wages with working benefits. On the other hand, the working, working poor and underclass classes are often associated with labor intensive jobs with low wages and poor working conditions (Hughes, Perry Jenkins). The occupational system reflected in *The Hunger Games* bears similarities to contemporary US society. In the novel, the Capitol has a service based industry where the primary focus of the citizens was consumption. The intensiveness of labor would increase from the lower to the higher numbered districts, mirroring contemporary American society in which the lower classes usually perform the most labor intensive work. Income is often awarded disproportionately to the amount of labor performed. Workers with a more labor intensive line of work often earn a lower income compared to employees with a more service based line of work. This inequality in the designation of income is a key contributing factor towards the divisive nature of American society that is also related to the argument presented earlier regarding the widening income gap between the upper capitalist and lower classes.

There are members of American society who fervently deny the existence of class disparities in the United States. However, those claims have proven falsified, evidenced by the wealth and power divergence between the upper and lower classes, class discrimination, and the installation of specific roles and responsibilities for members of society. Class disparities have undoubtedly become both a valid and worrying concern in contemporary American society. While our society has certainly not degenerated to the extent of Panem, the undesirable components which it exhibits nevertheless possess the potential to undermine the values of democracy and liberty that have long been vaunted as the unshakeable pillars of American society. If these negative components in our society remain unattended, they could steer the United States on a path that is branded by oppression and exploitation by the upper capitalist class. It is irrefutable that the Hunger Games are right at our doorstep.

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Editorial Team's Note

In his Inquiry Two analysis, Brian Jong uses his research on the American class system as a lens for reading Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*.  Jong provides extensive background information that allows him to not only compare his source text (*The Hunger Games*) to that information, but also to deepen his understanding of Collins' text as a whole. Throughout the essay, the Jong examines specific details from the source textthat help him solidify his argument, such as the skyscrapers and the roles of each district. This strong analysis is aided by the inclusion of counter-viewpoints, specifically those of people who do not believe a class system exists in America. Acknowledging those opposing viewpoints demonstrates that Jong has considered the issue from multiple angles and has done extensive research (which helps establish his ethos as an author).  As you compose your Inquiry 2 essay, what opposing viewpoints might be worth acknowledging as you make your argument? In addition, how might you use specific details from the source text, alongside your research, to help strengthen your overall argument?