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Rhetorical Criticism- The Hunger Games Series

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Rhetorical Criticism- *The Hunger Games* Series

Introduction

Young adult novels have some of the highest sales rates of any genre on the market. Books like *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green and the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth both had runs atop the New York Times bestsellers list for weeks. But what is it about these young adult books that make them so attractive to today's millennials? Many young adult novels are beginning to feature strong, female protagonists as their main draw, giving young readers someone to admire and regard. In many cases, they are characters that start out just like them, making them more relatable to the readers themselves. These tough, feminist characters give off the impression that the books themselves will follow suit and support the principles of a feminist perspective. However, this may not always be the case. Does having a strong female lead necessarily guarantee that a story will support feminist ideals?

Artifact Description

The book series *The Hunger Games* is a young adult fiction series that has become a worldwide hit. The first book was published in 2008, with sequel following in 2009 and the third in 2010. The series tells the story of seventeen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, a poor girl living in the impoverished District 12 of the dystopian world of Panem. When her sister Prim is picked as tribute to fight in the Hunger Games, an annual fight to the death of district teenagers from across the nation, Katniss volunteers to take her place. Skilled with a bow, Katniss is able to steal the hearts of the crowd and fight her way through the games while winning the affection of her fellow District 12 tribute Peeta Mellark. The series continues on to documents what happens to Katniss and Peeta after the Games and the revolution that instills when they both manage to make it out alive.

Method of Analysis

The Hunger Games series is a highly rhetorical piece because of the dramatic elements and characters that make up the books. There are several facets of persona that go into making up the character personalities and how they interact with one another. Also, there are aspects of social power types when looking at the hierarchies of power of the Panem government. Both of these ideas will be explored and interpreted further on in this paper. They will specifically be viewed from the feminist perspective and how female protagonists affect the overall message of novels today. This is important because it will help to assess how readers interpret plots of novels as well as how characters affect the overall interpretation of those plotlines.

Analysis

One way that the *Hunger Games* series could be related to rhetorical criticism would be to look at the different facets of persona present throughout the books. A persona is the basic image that a rhetor gives off as during a rhetorical act. This image is constructed through the actions they do and how they present themselves. There are five main facets of persona: image, character, roles, identity, and authority (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 152). Each of these five facets have elements that can be clearly seen and related in the *Hunger Games* series. Each one of them

can be personalized to the idea of certain characters, but could also be looked at from a broader angle when looking at the series as a whole.

To start, the first facet of persona, image, is a verbal and visual representation, emphasizing particular qualities and characteristics that creates a perception of the rhetor in the audience's minds (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 166). It is essentially the overall idea and perception that the audience has drawn about a person based on their knowledge of them. It all revolves on the front that the rhetor puts up and what image they choose to show. An example of this in the *Hunger Games* series could be seen in the first book. When Katniss and Peeta were in their first Games, they played up the image of star-crossed lovers to gain sponsor support and favors. They gave the audience what they wanted to see and lived into a certain image because they knew that it was their best chance of making it out of the arena alive.

The issue that arises from this romantic ruse is that Katniss is forced into this feminine role of the ditzy girl in love against her will. Though she knows it is what will eventually keep her alive, she is looked at as only the silly girlfriend of the strong boy from District 12, despite her being the one doing most of the hunting. She is immediately feminized because of the gender roles that are defaulted upon them in the relationship. Even after the Games have concluded, the two are shoved into interviews about their relationship where Katniss is coached through lines such as "I just couldn't bear the thought of being without him" (Collins, 396). This immediately puts her back into this role of needing to be with him and not being able to handle life alone.

The second facet of persona, character, can be somewhat difficult to define. It involves the rhetor's personal connection and attachment with the audience and their perception and trust of the rhetor overall. It specifically involves how believing they are of the rhetor's practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 152). If they are believed to possess these three elements, there are said to be of good character. An example of someone with good character in the *Hunger Games* series would be to look at a comparison of Katniss and Peeta's personalities. Katniss is a very harsh person, with very little responsiveness and shows hardly any emotion. Peeta on the other hand is extremely empathetic and is extremely expressive with his emotions and opinions. There are fairly opposite of the typical gender roles that we are used to considering for males and females.

In Katniss' case, this makes it difficult to fit the light, bubbly personality that her publicity team wants her to portray. She is supposed to be the Capitol's sweetheart, but instead comes off with her true feelings of bitterness and disgust. In a review of the story by Michigan Technological University, the author discusses how Katniss never fit the Capitol's idea of femininity and that is part of the reason that she stood out as one of the more notable tributes. She refused to conform to their ideals of beauty and wealth. (Weber, 2012) Peeta, however, has the opposite issue. They expect him to be the stronger, quieter one of the pair because he is the male, yet he is the one giving most of the speeches and often expressing more outward emotion than Katniss. An article looking at gender role explored in the books takes particular notice to Peeta's character and how his gender role is challenged through his personality. It describes how he does not always follow the society's norms for gender expectations, and this confuses both readers as well as other characters within the books. It also discusses the tension it causes between Peeta and Gale, Katniss' childhood friend who creates a love triangle between the three (Woloshyn, Taber, Lane, 2013). Neither one of the two seem to fit into the gender roles that they are suggested to fit, making it hard for them to truly be themselves.

The third facet of persona, roles, are the different personas you play as depending on the situation and how people see you in these different personas (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 155). Roles

depend completely on the situation that the rhetor is put into and how they respond to it. There are several examples of roles in the *Hunger Games* series, but one of the most notable would be Katniss assuming the Mockingjay role as the head of the rebellion in the third book. Katniss does not necessarily want to be the leader of this rebellion, but she assumes this role of the Mockingjay because of the image that has been created for her and because of the people around her. They have created this role for her to fill because of how people in the audience will perceive her and she becomes the only person who will be able to fill this role. Eventually, she recognizes the significance of her public image and agrees to be the rebellion's mockingjay.

However, there is a backhand to Katniss agreeing to this position. Though she was the only one who could be the mockingjay, her position was not exactly what she was expecting. She wanted to be out fighting against the Capitol. But, it seemed that she was more likely to be shooting photo propaganda than shooting arrows. The rebellion action team had built up this position to make it sound so attractive to her because of what it would accomplish, but when it came down to the duties of the job, they wanted a face for the rebellion, not a leader or a fighter. She was cast aside because of her gender and the fact that it could be seen as a flaw in commanding ability.

The fourth facet of persona, identity, describes the physical and/or behavioral attributes that make a person recognizable as a member of a group. It represents how a rhetor fits into a certain group, such as race, sex, nationality, class, or sexuality (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 158). An example of identity in the *Hunger Games* series could be seen in the citizens of the Capitol. Capitol citizens are known for being very flamboyant and extravagant with their lifestyles. Specifically, this means their outward appearance of clothing, makeup, and accessories. To members of the twelve districts, Capitol citizens look like circus performers, dolled up in their craziest attire for show.

The outward appearances of these citizens can sometimes work to their disadvantage. As previously mentioned, the members of outlying districts do not understand their ways and make judgments about their culture, in some way attacking things like their sexual orientation or preference. This can cause them to discriminate against them, and can cause Capitol citizens not to express themselves the way that they feel the desire to. This can stifle how both males and females feel about themselves and about each other.

The fifth and final facet of persona, authority, is the rhetor's possession of socially recognized power. Social power requires the approval of the audience and must be earned by the rhetor. There are many underlying aspects of social power that can be considered and related directly to the *Hunger Games* series. To understand how these can relate to the series specifically, one must first take a more in depth look at the different elements of the social power types.

There are various social power types that can be found within the *Hunger Games* series. There are five types of social power: coercive, reward, referent, legitimate, and expert (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 163). Each of these has their own descriptors and factors that set it apart from the rest. In the *Hunger Games* series, characters use these different types of social powers to utilize authority over others and show status. It is typically used to gain power or show dominance in a situation. The authoritative actions are purposefully enacted and usually target a certain character, but can also be directed towards whole districts or the general public of Panem.

The first example demonstrates the use of coercive social power. Coercive power is when a character(s) uses authoritative power by using negative reinforcement and intimidation. This type of social power is typically very aggressive and can be brutal or violent (Palczewski, Ice,

Fritch, 164). An example of coercive power in the *Hunger Games* series would be the Peacekeepers. Peacekeepers are essentially the military and police force of Panem. They are found in all three books of the series and their main purpose is to enforce the laws of Panem as the Capitol sets them. They are to enforce these laws at any cost and will remove anyone who gets in their way. This can be seen in the second book of the series, *Catching Fire*, when the Peacekeepers begin to hunt down anyone who supports the mission of the rebellion that Katniss has started. They will stop at nothing to end the rebellion because it is what they have been ordered to do. People have come to fear them because of what happens when you disobey their orders, which is what makes their social power so coercive.

At first glance, peacekeepers may not seem to relate much to the feminist perspective. However, taking a more in-depth look into the second book, there is a part that explains just how peacekeepers come to be hired and trained. Katniss is explaining that nearly ninety percent of all peacekeepers are male (Collins, 231). Putting that into a feminist context is extremely sexist because of the brutality that is necessary to be a peacekeeper. It seems that the Capitol assumes that men are more qualified for the position than women, thus hiring nearly all males as peacekeepers, even though they wear uniforms covering them from head to toe so citizens would never be able to tell if it was a man or a woman coercing them.

The second example demonstrates the use of reward social power. Reward social power is when a character(s) uses power with the perceived meaning that they can provide a reward in exchange for success (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 165). This is often used when someone is in a supervisory position over another. An example of this in the *Hunger Games* series would be the idea of being the victor of the Hunger Games. The victor of the Games is spoiled with riches when they return home. They and their family are moved to Victor Village, a mansion filled with a terrace for champions like themselves. They are fed, clothed, and paid for the remainder of their lives. They also go on what is known as the Victory Tour, consisting of visiting the other districts to celebrate their victory. All of this, as well as the sheer assurance of being able to live, is the reward that is promised to anyone that can become a victor of the Games. In the first book, Katniss says "Winning means fame and fortune. Losing means certain death." (Collins, 147) This is a perfect representation of just how rewarding it can be to become a victor and win the Games.

Though it is the goal of every tribute in the Games to win, there are definitely different outcomes for the winner depending on if they are male or female. Like previously mentioned, a winning victor will commence on a Victory Tour after their games to the surrounding districts. If the victor is male, the tour will be spent reliving their victorious efforts in the Games and praising them for their efforts. However, if the victor is female, a larger portion of the tour will focus on the clothes they wear or the talents they present to the audience. It will focus on more dainty and feminine subjects and will stray away from the brutality of the Games, even though that is the very purpose of the tour in the first place.

The third example demonstrates the use of referent social power. Referent social power is when a character(s) uses authoritative power out of admiration or identification for another character (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 166). This can be out of professional admiration or romantic. An example of this in the *Hunger Games* series could be the relationship between Katniss and Peeta. Their relationship began in the first book when Peeta claimed he had feelings for Katniss in order to make sponsors support them in the Games. They played up the act of star-crossed lovers to gain sponsorship appeal and make it out alive. Their relationship progresses through the three books to the point that they actually fall in love with each other and their relationship is no

longer an act. The referent power in this example could often be applied specifically to Peeta because his feelings from the start were always sincere, even if Katniss did not reciprocate. He always wanted to protect her and keep her alive because he truly did care for her. An article reviewing the communication in Katniss and Peeta's relationship discusses how the two develop dialogue over the course of the books and the struggle that ensues due to Katniss' struggle to disclose and Peeta's desire to connect with her (Dubrofsky, Ryalls, 2014). This is especially seen in the second book when he volunteers to go into the Games again in order to keep her safe and how the two are expected to keep this act of love alive. This strong connection and admiration makes Peeta's social power very referent because his feelings are genuine and affectionate even when they are simply putting on a show to stay alive during their first time in the arena.

Though Peeta's feelings are genuine and loving, they also catch Katniss in a bit of a feminist trap. They reinforce this idea that the women needs to have a man to save her. It is the classic idea of damsel in distress. The most interesting part of this relationship, however, is that Katniss is often the one saving Peeta. This changes the gender roles and makes it more confusing for people to understand and accept their relationship. In a media review about the series, the authors point out how the relationship between Peeta and Katniss is out of the ordinary for lovers of series like these. Their relationship leaves readers unsure of how to feel about their gender roles and somewhat uncomfortable with where they stand as a couple (Latham, Hollister, 2013) This leaves Katniss in a lose-lose situation. If she does nothing, she looks weak and remains the damsel in distress. However, if she fights back and saves Peeta, she is not fulfilling the gender role she is condition to in the relationship and seems overbearing and out of line.

The fourth example demonstrates the use of legitimate social power. Legitimate social power is when a character(s) uses commanding power from a position of authority over someone else (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 166) This can be from any sort of higher-up position. An example of this in the *Hunger Games* series would be President Cornelius Snow. President Snow is the president and ruler of all of Panem. He is in charge of what each of the districts does as well as how the Peacekeepers are commanded and controlled. He gives all the orders and is feared by the majority of Panem. His social power type is clearly legitimate because he is in the highest point of authority in Panem. He controls the entire nation and is never questioned because of his place of authority. His position gives him immunity to be cruel and he is able to do whatever he feels necessary to suit his needs. He settles personal vendettas and goes after those who do him wrong because he has the freedom to do as he pleases do to his position of power.

The interesting comparison with feminist ideals comes into play when you compare President Snow with President Alma Coin. She is the leader of District 13 and has the same rank of power as Snow. However, with Plutarch Heavensbee, one of the escaped capitol members supporting the rebellion, starts working with president Coin, he treats her as if she is unqualified for her position and has no idea what she is doing. However, you see him earlier in the books with President Snow and his manner is completely respectful and considerate of him. Heavensbee's approach does not change until he begins to work with President Coin. Many would argue that he doubts her leadership abilities because she is a woman and he respects Snow more because he is a man. Though they hold the same rank, he treats them differently because of their gender.

The final example demonstrates the use of expert social power. Expert social power is when a character(s) uses knowledge as influence over other characters (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, 166). This can be seen in supervisory roles as well as authoritative situations. An example of this in the *Hunger Games* series would be the career pack in the Games. The career pack is a group

of tributes made up of the tributes from Districts one and two. Children from these districts train in special schools from a young age to be ready for the Games when they come of age. Then, they volunteer to be tributes for their districts. The show expert power because they are professionally trained in different areas of combat over the other tributes who have little to no training at all before beginning the games. It is likely that most years a member of the career pack will become a victor of the Games.

Looking at both *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, there were leaders of the career pack. In book 1, the leader was Cato, a strapping, sword-wielding hothead from District 1. He assumed the role of leader once the pack was formed. In book 2, the leader was Brutus, another burly tribute dedicated to winning at any cost. He took over as the leader of the career pack as soon as the group was assembled. Both of these characters show the male dominance that takes place in these groups, which both contain male and female members from different districts. Although there are mixed genders, the leadership of the groups always seems to fall to a male. This discourages the females from stepping forward and taking charge, both out of fear for they may be kicked out of the group, or worse, killed on spot for betraying the wishes of the leader. This leaves them at the full submission of the male leaders. In the book *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*, the author describes the career pack as a forceful and domineering. He discusses the leadership of the careers and how they are always lead by a male tribute and how this subtly signifies the gender roles in place in the Games and in the society of Panem as well. (Henthorne, 158)

Conclusion

The *Hunger Games* series is an extremely exciting and action-packed series. With an ample array of characters, the series is sure to relate to a wide audience, making it the worldwide hit that it is today. Author Suzanne Collins writes straight to the reader, making it easy to connect with the characters and understand the situations at hand. This also makes it easy to interpret the rhetorical aspects that comprise the series in many different lights. This series is full of social power types that explain how characters relate to and control one another. It also has facets of persona, making it easy to connect with characters because of how they are presented to the reader. This book series is a perfect rhetorical artifact to examine because of the rhetorical elements that it possess and the way that the books are written make it very easy to connect with and interpret for readers of all ages.

The feminist aspects of this series are evident throughout all three books. Though the series does have a strong, female protagonist, there are still many feminist ideals that are challenged throughout. Many gender roles and stereotypes are presented throughout the books and do not align with the ideals of a feminist perspective. Although a story may have a strong, female character leading the plot, this does not guarantee that the narrative itself will support and agree with any or all feminist perspectives overall.

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