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# I'm More than a Piece in Their Games

Contemporary American Dystopian Fiction  
for Young Adults

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**..... 3

### **PART 1: Defining the Genre**

#### Chapter 1: Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults

1.1 Dystopian Fiction..... 6  
1.2 A Dystopic World for Young Adults..... 10  
1.3 What It Means to Write for Adolescents..... 13

#### Chapter 2: Why a Teen or Pre-Teen Hero

2.1 Adolescence as a Hopeful Age..... 16  
2.2 Adolescence as Rebellious Age..... 22  
2.3 Adolescence as the Age of the Appearance of Social Consciousness..... 28

### **PART 2: Analyzing the Texts**

Chapter 1: Institutionalizing the Rites of Passage..... 33

Chapter 2: Forbidding Sexuality..... 46

Chapter 3: Death, Violence and Their Spectacularization..... 55

**Conclusion**..... 73

**Bibliography**..... 76

## Introduction

In this thesis I will analyze some representative example of dystopian fiction for young adults in contemporary American literature. This thesis is divided in two parts. The first introduces a definition of dystopian fiction for young adults, the second provides an interpretation of a series of novels.

In Chapter One I will provide a definition of the dystopian genre resorting to the studies of Tom Moylan and William Tower Sargent, and identifying the leitmotifs of the genre, such as technological development and its influence on human life, despotic governments and the restriction of human rights, the manipulation of love feelings and sexual urges in order to control population, the use of knowledge and memory, distorted or frustrated in order to adjust them to the principles of the government in charge. In this first chapter I will also trace a history of the genre by quoting from the most important novels that contributed to a definition of dystopianism. I will then trace a brief history of young adult (YA) literature from its origins in nineteenth century to its revival during the Sixties and Seventies; after that, I will isolate the distinctive features of this sub-genre in comparison with the classics of the dystopian genre. Subsequently, I will investigate what it means to write for a specific readership such as young adults, by analyzing some interviews delivered by the authors of the novels I investigated in this thesis.

In Chapter Two I will focus on the protagonists of some YA dystopian novels, namely *The City of Ember* (2003) by Jeanne DuPrau, *The Giver* trilogy (1993-2004) by Lois Lowry, *Matched* (2010) by Ally Condie and *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins. By doing so, I aim at understanding the characteristics which

distinguish a teenage protagonist from an adult one. I will explore such characteristics by resorting to three traits that (as I have derived from the textual analysis), are to be associated with the period of adolescence. The first is hope, a trait which is typical of both childhood and adolescence. Another trait of the YA hero in dystopian literature is his or her tendency to rebel against authority, something I will explain with the help of the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank. The third and last trait I will analyze is the appearance of a social consciousness during adolescence: the adolescent's social space opens up from the family and the clique of friends to his or her community, and he/she begins to understand the mechanics of a wider social life.

The study of the characterization of the adolescent protagonist of YA dystopian novels has been also useful to isolate a few leitmotifs specifically associated to those figures. In Part Two of this thesis I provide an interpretation of the novels abovementioned by recurring to the main leitmotifs. Chapter One is dedicated to the analysis of the leitmotif of the rite of passage that marks the line between childhood and adulthood and to which authors often give high relevance. Rites of passage are not seen as a form of individual achievement, but are publicly celebrated with a ceremony that can be more or less articulated according to the kind of society these novels depict.

In Chapter Two I analyze the way in which love feelings and sexual urges are treated and manipulated in order to control the members of society: since adolescence is a period in which the natural development of sexuality and feelings is fundamental for the development of a psychologically healthy adult, forbidding such a development is a crucial point for the despotic government, but it is also vital for the protagonists to overcome this prohibition.

Then, in the third and last chapter, I analyze the use of violence, a fundamental topic in all dystopian narrative, investigating how it is perceived and faced by the young protagonists: I will make examples of both physical and psychological violence and prove how the protagonists can endure such trials by finding their strength in the emotional domain.

I will conclude this thesis by investigating why the dystopian genre is so fascinating for young adults, why dystopianism fits this specific range of audience more than older ones, and why it can have a positive influence on adolescents.

## PART 1: Defining the Genre

### Chapter 1

## Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults

### 1.1 Dystopian Fiction

In his essay *Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited*, Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopianism as “the result of the human propensity to dream while both asleep and awake.”<sup>1</sup> It is this propensity that pushes humankind to improve itself in order to reach a society as perfect as possible; what dystopianism points out, instead, is that a society that claims itself to be perfect, may turn then from dream to nightmare.

According to Tom Moylan, dystopian narrative is mainly a product of the twentieth century, since it takes its roots from historical, economical and sociological disasters and such episodes have been very frequent in these hundred years.<sup>2</sup> Actually, there are examples of dystopian narrative already in the late nineteenth century, when technology was at its dawn; I refer here to works such as *Erewhon* (1872) by Samuel Butler or *The Time Machine* (1895) by Herbert George Wells.

Technology has always been a leitmotif in dystopian fiction: since these early novels, authors have used it in order to portrait a more or less advanced society; in the fin-de-siècle it was already evident that technology would evolve to be, in the future, a fundamental component of human life. The novels above mentioned fictionalize the suspect and fear that technology could turn to be so important for people so much as to

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<sup>1</sup> Sargent, William Tower. “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 5, N° 1 (1994), pp 1-37. Web: 23 June 2012: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>. p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the untainted sky*. Boulder: Westview Press; 2000. p. xi.

overwhelm people's rationality. This idea is perfectly portrayed in the novella *The Machine Stops* written by E. M. Forster and published for the first time in 1909. In this work, Forster describes a world in which humankind must live underground because the air has supposedly turned toxic; life is ruled by a Machine that provides everything one needs: in their single-room cells people are fed, washed and provided with social relations by a communication system that foresees the internet; first-hand experience is seen as dangerous and, therefore, forbidden. The protagonists are Vashti and her rebel son Kuno, who, by venturing himself on the surface, discovers that the air is not actually poisoned and that there are still human beings living there. In the novella, Kuno surfaces as the disenchanted rebel who understands that the Machine –considered almost a god– is slowly breaking down: admiration for technology has washed away rationality and when the Machine finally collapses, it brings 'civilization' down with it.

Another motif in dystopian fiction is the authoritarian or despotic government. As I already said, dystopian fiction often takes inspiration from historical reality and in the last hundred years the world has seen the rise and the fall of many totalitarian regimes, such as National Socialism in Germany, the Soviet Regime in Russia or Fascism in Italy – just to name the most known. In the early years after the Soviet Revolution, during the Russian Civil War, Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote *We* (1921), a short novel in which the author challenged the idea of equality at the core of socialism. In this novel, in fact, people are no more distinguished by name, but are simply numbers and even the word 'I' has lost its meaning; everybody does the same thing at the same time, and society is transformed into a perfect clockwork. Years later, while writing *1984* (1948), George Orwell had in mind

Zamyatin's work,<sup>3</sup> but in Orwell's novel the reader has not only the picture of a dystopian world in which freedom is suppressed and truth is manipulated, but is also given a deep and thorough explanation on the philosophy beneath the Big Brother's dystopia, during the protagonist's torture. Orwell's novel soon became a milestone of the genre due to its disturbing depiction of the obsessive control over people's life and mind: not even love can free the protagonist Winston Smith, since, through physical and mental torture, he is led to betray it.

Love and, consequently, sex, is another theme often analyzed in dystopian fiction, and it is at the core of another fundamental novel of the genre, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In this work love is an unknown feeling and sex has lost its reproductive function, becoming just a means to enjoy life and free one's mind from problems. In *Brave New World*, cloning is the primary reproductive technique and the idea of a 'viviparous mother' is considered an aberration.

Further common themes in dystopian fiction are knowledge and memory, since these two functions are both considered dangerous by the governments. We have an example of the manipulation of knowledge in *1984* (1948), since Winston Smith's job at the 'Mintrue' (Ministry of Truth) consists of re-editing news in order to let people think that everything is fine; moreover, Smith's job consist also in modifying history, so that the citizens of Oceania (the novel's setting) are not aware of the passing of time, living not in history but in a never-ending present. We have, though, a more concrete example of how knowledge is actually forbidden in *Fahrenheit 451*<sup>4</sup> (1953), in which firemen, instead of extinguishing fire, they burn books, that are completely forbidden, since every book is

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<sup>3</sup> Davison, Peter. Introduction. *1984* by George Orwell. London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1949. (Cons. London: Penguin Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1953.

considered ‘a loaded gun in the house next door’<sup>5</sup> for the capacity of books to foster independent thinking and so menacing sameness among people.

It is to be said that studies on dystopian fiction have pointed out several sub-genres according to the differences in the author’-s’ intent. Sargent determined three sub-genres of dystopia, defined as follows:

**Dystopia or negative Utopia** - a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.

**Utopian satire** - a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

**Anti-utopia** - a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

**Critical Utopia** - a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the Utopian genre.<sup>6</sup>

In this dissertation I will not stick to the distinctions suggested by Sargent, but I will refer to the novels analyzed, simply as “dystopias.” I made this choice because I want to focus on how the classic dystopian fiction undergoes some modifications in order to address specifically a young-adult readership.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Sargent, William Tower. “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 5, N° 1 (1994), pp 1-37. Web: 23 June 2012: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>. p. 9.

### 1.2 A Dystopic World for Young Adults

Looking for the origins of Young Adult fiction, we can go back till the second half of nineteenth century with novels such as *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*<sup>7</sup> (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*<sup>8</sup> (1885) by Mark Twain or *Little Women*<sup>9</sup> (1868-69) and *Little Men*<sup>10</sup> (1871) by Louis May Alcott. In the essay *The Adolescent in the American Novel 1920-1960*<sup>11</sup> (1964) Witham W. Tasker refers to *Freckles*<sup>12</sup> (1904) by Gene Stratton-Porter as one of the first novel of the genre (Tasker, 9); these early YA novels were frequently edifying stories that underlined the positive qualities of virtue and contact with nature that allowed miserable protagonist to hope and fight for a better situation. This approach to adolescence was typical of the genteel tradition<sup>13</sup> that influenced young adult writing till the rise of naturalism that led to a more realistic vision of this period of life. Another input to the genre has been given by the psychoanalysis that, with Freud and Jung's studies, highlighted the importance of childhood and adolescence in the development of the adult.

The figure of the adolescent in literature has changed aspect according to the passage of time: from a Romantic idea of innocence to the adolescent as evil, this stage of life has always been interesting for the adults. Another change in the shape of adolescent there has been after World War Second, as asserted by Tasker:

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<sup>7</sup> Twain, Mark. *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*. Hartford: The American Publishing Company, 1876.

<sup>8</sup> Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York, Charles L. Webster Company, 1885.

<sup>9</sup> Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868.

<sup>10</sup> Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Men*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1871.

<sup>11</sup> Witham, W. Tasker. *The Adolescent in the American Novel 1920-1960*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Stratton-Porter, Gene. *Freckles*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1904.

<sup>13</sup> For a definition of "genteel tradition" see: Tasker, pp. 7-9.

[...] those who came to maturity at the time of World War II had not known innocence or stability in childhood or adolescence, and the shadow of regimentation of war times has produced a 'beat' or 'silent' or 'cool' generation.<sup>14</sup>

From this generation we saw the birth of characters such as Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>15</sup> (1951) by J. D. Salinger, a novel originally written for adults, but that became popular among adolescent readers for the depiction of a confused and rebel adolescent. From now on, the adolescent protagonists of the young-adult novels became deeply analyzed from the point of view of their interior world made of contradictions and confusion, as asserted by Johnson in his article "The Adolescent Hero: a Trend in Modern Fiction:"

It is the unique achievement of the twentieth-century writer to have attained the perspective of the adolescent mind, an intellect lacking both the innocence of childhood and the pragmatic acceptance of childhood. [...] The modern fictional adolescent provides a point of view at once intensively emotional but objective, critical but receptive, curious but apprehensive. It is a mind half-child, half adult.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of this new way of writing for YA, we can find the sub-genre of dystopian fiction that has its appearance during the sixties and seventies with novels such as *The Tripods Series*<sup>17</sup> (1968-70) by John Christopher and *Z for Zachariah*<sup>18</sup> (1975) by

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<sup>14</sup> Witham, W. Tasker. *The Adolescent in the American Novel 1920-1960*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1964. p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: The Modern Library, 1951.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, James William. "The Adolescent Hero: a Trend in Modern Fiction" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 5 n°1 (Apr. 1959), pp 3-11.

<sup>17</sup> Cristopher, John [Christopher Samuel Youd]. *The White Mountains*. London: Hamish AHmilton, 1967. ---. *The City of Gold and Lead*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967.

---. *The Pool of Fire*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien, Robert. *Z for Zachariah*. London: Gollancz, 1975.

Robert O'Brien. During the eighties this genre proliferated under the threat of a nuclear war, with novels such as *Red Zone*<sup>19</sup> (1980) by Tom Browne, *Brother in the Land*<sup>20</sup> (1984) by Robert Swindells and *Children of Time*<sup>21</sup> (1989) by Deborah Moulton. It is in these late years, though, that this genre has its boom: dozens of dystopian novels for young adults appeared during these last two years and it seems as if this trend is not going to diminish.

These YA dystopian novels matches all the characteristics of the genre, but shows also some differences and peculiarities. To begin with, I will investigate the characteristics of the young protagonists of the YA novels, in order to shed light on the differences between an adult dystopian hero and an adolescent one and to understand the relevance of such a variation in the wider range of dystopian fiction.

According to the age of the protagonists, an important component of these novels is the moment of passage from childhood to adulthood, since the novels are actually written for an adolescent readership, the moment of passage is a vital point and it is often marked by a ceremony that can be about the entrance into the workforce or the sexual life.

As I already pointed out, sex and love are topics frequently discussed in dystopian novels and they have even a greater relevance in the YA subgenre: sexual development has in fact an outburst during adolescence and the suppression or deviation of this kind of feelings and urges has a deep impact on the development of the adult.

Also violence is a fundamental topic in dystopian fiction and I will analyze how this affects the teens protagonists and how there are going to manage with it and with death when they are institutionalized. In the novels I examined, not only violence is used by the governments in order to keep control of the society, but it is also spectacularized, as it

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<sup>19</sup> Browne, Tom. *Red Zone*. London: Macmillan Topliner Tridents, 1980.

<sup>20</sup> Swindells, Robert. *Brother in the Land*. London: Puffin Books, 1994 [1984].

<sup>21</sup> Moulton, Deborah. *Children of Time*. New York: Dial Books, 1989.

happens for instance in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where the massacre of a group of adolescent is televised as a macabre reality-show.

As conclusion I will try to understand why dystopianism fit and fascinate YA readers and if it can have a pedagogical relevance in the developing of a mature and critical point of view on life.

### 1.3 What It Means to Write for Adolescents

In her essay “The Struggle between Utopia and Dystopia in Writing for Children and Yung Adults,” Monica Hughes asserts: “I may lead a child into the darkness, but I must never turn out the light.”<sup>22</sup>

This sentence perfectly interprets Lois Lowry’s idea of writing for young adults; when asked about the open ending of *The Giver*, she says she wanted to allow each reader to interpret the end of the novel in his or her own way, but that she is disappointed each time a reader tells her that he or she thinks that Jonas, the protagonist, and Gabriel, the baby he takes with him in his escape from his dystopic society, have died of cold in the snow<sup>23</sup>. In another interview, Lowry concludes that she “can’t imagine writing a book that doesn’t have a hopeful ending;”<sup>24</sup> as far as she is concerned, in fact, writing for young adults is connected with hope; and talking about the dystopian genre in particular, she says that it is levering on the youths’ moral sense, before they lose it while entering adulthood:

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<sup>22</sup> Hughes, Monica. “The Struggle between Utopia and Dystopia in Writing for Children and Yung Adults.” *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. Ed. Hintz, Carrie, and Ostry, Elaine. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> Lowry, Lois. “A Reader’s Guide” p. 6. *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Hintz, Carrie and Elaine Ostry. Interview with Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver*. *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 199.

[...] I do think young people have a very strong moral sense before they enter the adult world with its unfortunate compromises and trade-offs. I think as readers they relate to a protagonist faced with moral dilemmas and acting heroically. And who knows... if perhaps as young people, they identify with such heroes, even fictional ones... they will be more inclined to back off from moral compromise in the adult world they'll eventually enter.<sup>25</sup>

In this statement, Lowry reveals a didactic intent that should be present in novels for young adults. Such an aim was in Suzanne Collins' mind while she was writing *The Hunger Games* trilogy: her intention was to expose adolescent readers to the horror of a war:

In *The Hunger Games* Collins embraces her father's impulse to educate young people about the realities of war. "If we wait too long, what kind of expectation can we have?" she said. "We think we're sheltering them, but what we're doing is putting them in disadvantage."<sup>26</sup>

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What Collins wants to do with her bloody trilogy in which violence is spectacularized, is to sensitize young readers about violence in the real world, as she also underlines in an interview released to James Blasingame: "I am fearful that today people see so many reality shows and dramas that when real news is on, its impact is completely lost on them."<sup>27</sup>

The ability to look at reality that Collins refers to, is strictly connected with the building of a critical sight over life and the world, a fundamental process for adolescents if

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Dominus, Susan. "I Write about War. For Adolescents." *New York Times*. 10 April 2011. Web. 28 Jan. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Blasingame, James, and Suzanne Collins. "An Interview with Suzanne Collins." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Vol. 52, N. 8. May 2009. Web. 2 Nov. 2012.

they wants to grow up into independent adults. Jeanne Du Prau, author of *The City of Ember*, explains her writing choices and the possible message of her novel as follow:

As for today's challenges—there are many of them, and to deal with them, young people are going to need not just courage and determination but the ability to think hard about problems that are very complex.<sup>28</sup>

Such novels can improve reasoning skills because the protagonists are put by the authors in the need to take important decisions that force them to choose between following wrong rules and doing the right thing by breaking them.

Asked about the reception of a message in her novels, Lowry answers:

From the response of readers, I know that both books<sup>29</sup> have caused young people—often guided by gifted teachers—to think, argue, debate, explore, and no longer to take certain things for granted.

I don't hope for young people to "learn" from my books, I hope only that they learn to question.<sup>30</sup>

Here Lowry pinpoints the aim of a genre that can, at its best, teach young people to question their society and to keep on doing it once turned to adults. It is remarkable, at this purpose, how Sherman Alexie closes his article "Why Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood":

I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. I write to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rivers, Robin. "An Interview with Young Adult Author Jeanne DuPrau." *Our Big Earth*. 30 Sept. 2008. Web. 28 Jan 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Here Lowry refers to the first two books of *The Giver* trilogy, since at the time of the interview *Messenger* was not yet released

<sup>30</sup> Hintz, Carrie and Elaine Ostry. "Interview with Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver*". *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 199.

## Chapter 2

### Why a teen or pre-teen hero

#### 2.1 Adolescence as a Hopeful Age

Despite inhabiting a world in which citizens are systematically brainwashed, drugged, or biologically engineered, thus being literally rendered powerless to exercise political resistance, child protagonists rarely ultimately suffer the despairing defeat of Orwell's Winston.<sup>32</sup> (Sambell, 172).

In her essay "Presenting the Case for Social Change" Kay Sambell summarizes in this way the difference between classical dystopias and YA dystopias. The protagonists are in fact the most important difference between the main genre and the sub-genre, since their age has in itself some peculiarities that mark the difference in how the protagonists manage the dystopian situation.

How many times have we heard the sentence 'Young people are the hope of the world?' Dystopian fiction for young adults seems to confirm this idea that youth hides the possibility of a better future, by retaining some characteristic that adulthood seems to have lost. The first peculiarity of youth that comes to light is the power of hoping and dreaming, if we compare the protagonists of YA dystopian novel with, for example, John the Savage, the outsider of Huxley's dystopic *Brave New World*: the novel, in fact ends with the discovery of John's corpse after his suicide.

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<sup>31</sup> Alexie, Sherman. "Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood." *Speakeasy*. 9 June 2012. Web. 7 July 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Sambell, Key. "Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative dilemma of Dystopian Writing for Children". *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. Ed. Hintz, Carrie, and Ostry, Elaine. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 172.

The ability of dreaming a better future is the spring that pushes the young protagonist of *The City of Ember* to go on in her search for a way out of the dying city.

There were drawings, too. Lina had done the drawings out of her imagination. They showed a city that looked somewhat like Ember, except that its buildings were lighter and taller and had more windows.

One of the drawings had fallen to the floor. Lina retrieved it and pinned it back up. She stood for a minute and looked at the pictures. Over and over, she'd drawn the same city.

[...]

Lina could see this city so clearly in her mind she almost believed it was real. She knew it couldn't be, though. The Book of the City of Ember, which all children studied in school, taught otherwise. "The city of Ember was made for us long ago by the Builders," the book said. "It is the only light in the dark world. Beyond Ember, the darkness goes on forever in all directions".

[...]

Still, Lina wanted the other city to exist. In her imagination, it was so beautiful, and it seemed so real. Sometimes she longed to go there and take anyone in Ember with her. (DuPrau, 24-26)

As we can see, there is nothing that allows Lina to think about the existence of a 'somewhere else' different from Ember: she cannot have any reminiscence of the outer world since more than two hundred years passed from the creation of Ember, and the very existence of the surface has been deleted. The only thing that nurtures her idea is her fantasy and her hope that she expresses through drawings. Her desire of a future is conveyed by the semi-unconscious act of drawing, since Lina herself is surprised by the fact that she imagines the sky of her city to be blue, even if reason tells her that the sky can be nothing but black (*Ember*, p 136). Fantasy is actually the reign in which an adolescent is

free to express his/her hopes and fears, a place in which he/she can find a spring to fight for his dreams in reality. Here Lina's drawings plays the key-role of conveying her fear for the future imagining an escapologist solution for problems of Ember. A similar role is ascribed to fairytales by Bruno Bettelheim:

In order to master the psychological problems of growing up – overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries; becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies; gaining a feeling of selfhood and of self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation – a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious. He can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature of content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams – ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures.<sup>33</sup> (Bettelheim, 6-7)

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In *The City of Ember* we see how Lina's escapologist dream enables her to instinctively understand the significance of the half-ruined sheet that describes how to exit from Ember, actually providing her a mean to comprehend reality and to manage it.

The power of imagination can sometimes be fictionalized in actual magic power, as it happens for the three protagonists of The Giver Trilogy, Jonas, Kira and Matty; the three different powers are strictly connected one to the other and within the time of the trilogy they compose a whole that symbolize and summarize the power of youth. In fact, if we put together the three powers, we see that Jonas can 'see beyond,' Kira can 'embroider the future' and Matty can 'heal.' It is interesting to notice that the powers do not appear as a

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<sup>33</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976. pp. 6-7.

whole during childhood, but reach their full expression during adolescence; for instance, we do not have a satisfactory description of Jonas' power till the third chapter of the trilogy, *Messenger*, when the exercise of the power by Jonas is described by Matty:

The young man's blue eyes remained open but no longer seemed to be looking at the ordinary things in the room or through the window. He had gone, eyes and whole being, far into a place that Matty could not perceive and where no one could follow him.

He seemed to shimmer. (Lowry, *Messenger*, 96)

In *The Giver*, Jonas is only twelve and he is just discovering his power, under the guidance of The Giver; when we find him again in *Messenger*, he is a eighteen-year-old young man that has taken the lead of a small utopian village (in this novel he is addressed as *Leader*) that uses the wisdom due both to his power and to his experience, for the good of all.

The same can be said about Kira, who has a first sign of her gift during the psychologically proving period of her mother's disease, but that discovers her real power only later: in *Gathering Blue*, in fact, she is almost unaware of her ability and the novel describes her struggle to grasp the truth. She begins to use consciously her gift only in *Messenger*, when again, the role of the witness is ascribed to Matty:

He peered intently as her right hand picked up the needle threaded with green. She inserted it into the fabric at an unfinished place near the edge of Forest. Suddenly both of her hands began to vibrate slightly. They *shimmered*. He had seen this once before, on the day that Leader stood at the window, gathered himself, and saw beyond.

He looked up at her face and saw that her eyes were closed. But her hands were moving very quickly now. They reached into the basket again and again, and the needle entered the cloth, and entered the cloth, and entered the cloth.

Time seemed to stop.<sup>34</sup> (Lowry, *Messenger*, 125)

Jonas' and Kira's gifts are strictly connected with future: only from their clear look on the world that surrounds them, only with their curiosity and their resolution to live a life of freedom and justice, they are able to change in better their societies. Jonas' and Kira's process of development from childhood to adulthood that concerns their power, is indeed marked by pain and sacrifice. In *The Giver*, Jonas is forced to isolation from his family and his friends by his gift while in *Gathering Blue* Kira is first cast out society because of her twisted leg and then kept secluded by the members of the Congress (that rules the village) because of her gift: in both cases the discover of their ability lead the protagonist to social conscience.

The third power that Lowry gives to her characters is Matty's capacity to 'heal:' this gift is, unlike the others, an 'active' one. Another difference that distinguish Matty's gift is that the boy faces it in solitude; Matty has a first sign of his power while walking through the Forest, a magic place with its own will, that allows nobody else but Matty to cross it.

He knelt to dig out a spot with his hands in the mossy earth. But when he tried to set the little body down, he found that he was connected to it in a way that made no sense. A painful kind of power surged from his hands, flowing into the frog, and held them bound together.

Confused and alarmed, he tried to scrape the sticky body of the frog off his hand. But he couldn't. The vibrating pain held them connected. Then, after a

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<sup>34</sup> Lowry, Lois. *Messenger*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

moment, while Matty knelt, still mystified by what was happening, the frog's body twitched. (Lowry, *Messenger*, 42)

The discovery of his gift is shocking for Matty, so much so he decides not to talk about it to anyone, not even to Seer, the wise, blind man with whom he lives. Gaining confidence with his power is for Matty a long and hard process that he faces in solitude: only when he decides to tell his secret to *Leader* (Jonas) the latter tells him not to waste it, and Matty does not completely understand the advice. At the end of *Messenger*, Matty is called to sacrifice his life in order to heal the world: in the last chapter of the novel, Matty's spirit can see how his power heals not only the corrupted Forest, but also his village and its inhabitants:

He saw Forest and understood what Seer had meant. It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that has disguised itself and almost destroyed everything. Now it was unfolding, like a flower coming into bloom, radiant with possibility. (Lowry, *Gathering Blue*, 168)

Here the metaphor of the forest is explained and so also the power of youth of healing society, giving it a new 'possibility.' Asked about Matty's sacrifice, Lowry said that the focus must not be on the boy's supernatural power, but on his desire to use it for others and on the selflessness of his act: only with altruism and selflessness every one of us can contribute to overcome the 'tangled forces of human greed and misery, the things that keep us separated as human in an complex world.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lowry, Lois. "A Conversation with Lois Lowry" in *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993; p. 6, 9.

Keeping together the three powers, Lowry vehicles a clear message: if people, while growing up, succeed in developing the power of youth of seeing beyond, imagining a better future and bound them together with selflessness and responsibility, a non-dystopian future is still possible.

### 2.2 Adolescence as Rebellious Age

In *Theories of Adolescence* (1962), Rolf E. Muuss discusses Granville Stanley Hall's definition of adolescence as a 'Sturm und Drang' period in the essay *Adolescence* (1916). Muuss summarizes Hall's thought about adolescence as a period of inner contradictions also expressed with a certain eagerness for authority that does not rule out "a revolutionary radicalism toward every kind of authority."<sup>36</sup> (Muuss, 42).

Sigmund Freud, instead, traces adolescents' rebellion back to their oedipal relationship with their parents. The sexual urges towards the opposite-sex parent suggested by the Id are suppressed by the Ego due to their incestuous nature: in such a situation the adolescent must 'detach' his urges from the object (his mother or her father) and this separation can lead to resentment and hostility towards not only parents, but also authority in general, seen as an extension of parental authority.

In his essay, Muuss quotes also Freud's right-hand-man Otto Rank, who, differently from his mentor, determines 'will' as the cause of adolescents' tendency to rebel. According to Rank, during the latency stage (which can last until age fifteen and during which the libido is temporarily asleep) the will gets stronger, gaining an

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<sup>36</sup> Muuss, Rolf E. *Le Teorie Psicologiche dell'Adolescenza*. Trans. Gabriella Rossetti Pepe. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1976. p. 42 (my translation).

independence that rebels against every imposed authority. This strong will, persists also during the next stages, when the libido rises again, thus inflaming aggressiveness.<sup>37</sup>

Adolescence's rebellion has been object of several psychoanalytic studies and, as I already mentioned, it is at the core of YA dystopian fiction. In this subgenre the adolescent is elected as the hero that can rebel against an unfair society; this sub-genre has, unlike classic dystopias, a teen or pre-teen protagonist that, after having understood how his or her society actually works, decide to rebel against it. If we take as examples Winston Smith, the protagonist of *1984*, John the Savage (Huxley's *Brave New World*) and Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>38</sup> (1985) by Margaret Atwood and we compare them with, for instance, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark (Collin's *The Giver* Trilogy), we can identify a deep difference in the way in which they rebel against their society. In classic dystopias, the protagonist's rebellion is mostly a individual upheaval against a government that keeps its citizens under a repressive regime. Smith and Offred begin a forbidden love affair that breaks the rules but does not interfere with the structure of society; John the Savage is too an outsider in Huxley's world to succeed in overcoming his inner contradictions and act to change the rules; even Guy Montag, the fireman protagonist of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) with his saving a book does not actually act against his society. As Kay Sambell asserts:

In Orwell and Huxley's conditioned worlds, protagonists possess literally no means to envisage an alternative and their potentially heroic struggles are

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985.

inexorably bound to fail. Their final defeat is necessary to highlight the dire consequences of the extinction of moral belief.<sup>39</sup> (Sambell, 166)

In YA dystopias, on the contrary, the protagonist is given the possibility to do something in order to change things; the decision to act against society, though, does not happen all of a sudden, but it is a long and often hard process that begins with an inner rebellion that then spreads out of the self and focuses on the unfair government.

In *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, we have three different adolescents that rebel against the government of Panem. The first one I will analyze is Gale. He is Katniss' eldest hunting-friend and while they are in the woods that surround District Twelve, Gale always talks against Panem and dreams of escaping from the government's control by taking refuge in the woods. Gale is two years older than Katniss and she herself tells the reader than even four years earlier, when he was only fourteen, 'he already looked like a man' (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 10). Gale is an adolescent forced to grow up prematurely, since his father died in an accident leaving a wife and three children, among whom Gale is the eldest; in such a context Gale is much closer to adulthood than Katniss: he has the eagerness of youth without the doubts that haunt Katniss. Gale's attitude turns out to be crystallized in an adult-like one-way-thought when, in *Mockingjay*, he completely adheres to the rebel government, not understanding its cruelty and similarities with the one that rules Panem. Gale has no doubt in choosing what is wrong and what is right, and that turns him from a potential hero of a dystopian world into a gear of a despotic new government.

On the opposite side we find Peeta Mellark: he is the male tribute of District Twelve and thus forced to kill Katniss or be killed by her. Peeta comes from a relatively

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<sup>39</sup> Sambell, Key. "Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative dilemma of Dystopian Writing for Children". *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. Ed. Hintz, Carrie, and Ostry, Elaine. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 166.

wealthy family of the District since his father is a baker, while Gale and Katniss are miners' children. His first encounter with the protagonist had happened years before the beginning of the story, a day in which Katniss was almost dying of starvation and Peeta allowed her to take some bread from his father's bakery. This episode allows the reader immediately to identify Peeta as good-hearted and to sympathize with him for being forced by the Games to kill or been killed. Later, the reader gets to know Peeta also as a smart and thoughtful boy: he himself has the idea of faking the star-crossed lovers in order to catch the Capital's and the sponsors' favor, but even if he uses tricks in the Capital's game, he intensely hates and refuses the role that society has arranged for him.

"[...] My best hope is not to disgrace myself and..." He hesitates.

"And what?" I [Katniss] say.

"I don't know how to say it exactly. Only... I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?" he asks. I shake my head. How could he die as anyone but himself? "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not."

I bite my lips, feeling inferior. While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self. "Do you mean you won't kill anyone?" I ask.

"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... to show the Capital they don't own me. That I'm more than a piece in their Games," says Peeta.

"But you're not," I say. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within the framework, there's still you, there's still me," he insists.

"Don't you see?"

"A little. Only... no offense, but who cares, Peeta?" I say.

"I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" he asks angrily. He's locked those blue eyes on mine now, demanding an answer. (Lowry, *The Hunger Games*, pp. 141-142)

In this passage we see how rebellion starts inside Peeta, with his refusal to lose himself: he knows he is going to die in the Games because he is not strong enough to defeat twenty-three rivals, he has already accepted it, but he is also determined to die as Peeta Mellark, a person, and not a toy used by Panem's regime. This focus on the inner-self as the only thing that the dictatorship cannot take out of him echoes a passage of James McTeague's movie *V for Vendetta* (2005) where the protagonist, Evey Hammond, finds a letter in a hole in the wall of her prison: the letter has been written by a former prisoner, Valerie:

I shall die here. Every last inch of me shall perish. Except one.

An inch. It's small and it's fragile and it's the only thing in the world worth having. We must never lose it, or sell it, or give it away. We must never let them take it from us.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, Katniss' process toward rebellion is longer and more troubled. At the beginning, as we see also in the passage quoted before, Katniss' only purpose is to find a way to win the Games and go back to her sister Prim: she surrenders to Panem's rules and only tries to survive despite them. Peeta's words, though, do not fall in the void, even if Katniss' path to uprising is still long. Her point of break is defined by Rue's death: Rue is the youngest tribute in the arena and Katniss forms an ally with her, even if she knows that the two of them cannot both survive. Despite being aware of the fact that one of them must die, Katniss grows attached to Rue and her death shocks her. Rue dies in

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<sup>40</sup> *V for Vendetta*. Dir. James Mc Teigue. Perf. Hugo Weaving, Natalie Portman. Warner Bros Picture, 2005. Film.

Katniss' arms, while she sings an old lullaby: in this moment all Katniss' hatred for the government and its inhuman rules rises and Katniss does her first real act of rebellion by covering Rue's corpse with wild flowers: since the girl's death is televised, Katniss' merciful tribute to her friend turns out to be a public denunciation of the cruelty and mercilessness of the Games. After this episode there seems to be a crack in the Game's system, since it is announced that, for the first time in the Game's history, there can be two victors if they are the male and female tribute of the same district. This change in the rules gives Katniss the hope that both her and Peeta could survive, but the rule is reversed just when she and Peeta are the only two tributes still alive: there is no mercy in the game-makers, there is no hope to survive in a society that plays with the rules and with the life of its citizens. Once again the government shows its lack of compassion and its will to manipulate the rules in order to obtain a dramatic ending for the Games, forcing the star-crossed-lovers to kill each other. This moment marks Katniss' second point of break and her second, unmistakable act of rebellion:

*We both know they have to have a victor.*

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capital. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.

If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...

[...]

I spread out my fingers, and the dark berries glisten in the sun. I give Peeta's hand one last squeeze as a signal, as a good-bye, and we begin counting. "One." Maybe I'm wrong. "Two." Maybe they don't care if we both die. "Three!" It's too late to change my mind. I lift my hand to my mouth, taking one last look at

the world. The berries have just passed my lips when the trumpets begin to blare.

The frantic stop of Julius Templesmith shouts above them. "Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentleman, I am pleased to present the victors of the seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you - the tributes of District Twelve!" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 344-345)

In her desperate act, Katniss does not only hope that she and Peeta will be stopped and saved, but by menacing the Capital of not having a winner for the Games she hopes to shake Panem's self-confidence; if the Games ends without a champion, then something is wrong with the rules, if there is a slight possibility to bypass the rules, then maybe the system is not as solid as it seems. What is more important, with her menacing a double suicide, Katniss affirms that dying at one's own conditions is a better choice than living under a government that claims for itself the right over human life. Katniss' act, in fact, becomes the starting point that will lead to the insurrection and the fall of President Snow's dictatorship.

### **2.3 Adolescence as the Age of the Appearance of Social Consciousness**

Adolescence is the stage of life in which the world of an individual opens up from the context of the family to the one of society. The adolescent thus turns his attention to the world that surrounds him and applies his knowledge in order to better understand the mechanics of society. Adolescence prepares a person to enter adulthood, a world made of independent choices: to make these choices it is fundamental for the young man and the young woman to develop a personal thinking and a personal view of the world. This development is depicted as impossible in dystopian narratives and I am going to analyze

two different cases in which the repression of thought is overcome by the capacity of the protagonists to distinguish truth behind the lies and the tricks of the power at the government.

In Lowry's *The Giver*, independent thought is not only prohibited, but even made impossible by the rigid educational structure that characterizes the dystopian world portrayed in the novel. In Jonas' world, history does not exist, since all the memories are kept in mind only by one member of the community, the Giver. While training Jonas, the Giver explains that all the memories are kept only by one person because knowing things such as passion, happiness or pain, would destabilize the perfection of their society. As a consequence of the lack of passions, a lot of words do not exist, thus avoiding the possibility even to think differently from the imposed way, in a situation that echoes Orwell's *1984*, in which the Party has created a special language called Newspeak, in order to make impossible for people to speak outside the principles of Ingsoc (English Socialism, the dominating political movement).

In a society like the one depicted in *The Giver*, it is clear that only Jonas has the possibility to develop a critical thinking, since he is the only one that has the instruments to completely understand reality. Knowledge itself, though, is not enough to push a person in the right way: actually, also the Giver himself, after his training, had been in the same situation as Jonas', but that did not push him so far as to find a solution to change things. Jonas instead, is determined not to accept passively such unfair rules and his eagerness to do something for justice is increased by the attachment he feels for Gabriel, a baby that is destined to Releasing: after Jonas learns that Releasing means death, he decides to save him, at the cost of his family, his community and maybe his own life:

It was possible. What they had planned. Barely possible. If it failed, he would very likely be killed.

But what did that matter? If he stayed, his life was no longer worth living.

"Yes," he told the Giver. "I'll do it. I think I can do it. I'll try, anyway. (Lowry, *The Giver*, 155).

In this case we see how, in a regime that keeps the citizens under ignorance, knowledge can lead the hero to develop a critical thinking and to take hard decision in order to overthrow an unfair regime.

On the other hand we have a situation in which a dictatorship does not prevent opposition through education, but by claiming to act for justice. In *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, every citizen of Panem (except the upper class living in the Capital and in the few rich districts) hates President Snow and his totalitarian regime, so it is quite easy for Doctor Coin, the rebels' leader, to collect consent and to use the common enemy as a scapegoat. In this subtle way, Coin is able to gain more and more power, convincing her collaborators and all the rebels that she is and must be the positive alternative to President Snow. Only Katniss and few others seem to realize Coin's plans and understand how much she shares with President Snow; even if many of her friends, as Gale, still believe in Coin, Katniss keeps on having doubts that increase after Snow's defeat. When Katniss goes to visit Snow, imprisoned in his own palace, the former president tells her that he did not ordered the final double-bombing that killed lots of Capital's children and also Prim, Katniss' sister, that was among the rescuers when the second rush of bombs exploded. At first Katniss refuses to trust him, but then she keeps on wondering about the attack and why her sister, too young to join the rebel army, was instead on the front line. At the end

she understands how her sister's death with Snow as scapegoat then turned out completely in Coin's favor.

Suddenly I'm thinking of Prim, who was not yet fourteen, not yet old enough to be granted the title of soldier, but somehow working on the front lines. How did such a thing happen? That my sister would have wanted to be there, I have no doubt. That she would be more capable than many older than she is a given, But for all that, someone very high up would have to approve putting a thirteen-year-old in combat. Did Coin do it, hoping that losing Prim would push me completely over the edge? Or, at least, firmly on her side? I wouldn't even have to witness it in person. Numerous cameras would be covering the City Circle. Capturing the moment forever.

No, now I am going crazy, slipping into some state of paranoia. Too many people would know of the mission. Word would get out. Or would it? Who would have to know besides Coin, Plutarch, and a small, loyal or easily disposable crew? (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 361)

Katniss' doubt about Coin's nature is cleared when the new president asks for a final edition of the Hunger Games played with the Capital's children, as a revenge for seventy-five years of cruelty. In this moment Katniss realizes that nothing changed and that Coin is no better than Snow:

Was it like this, then? Seventy-five years or so ago? Did a group of people sit around and cast their votes on initiating the Hunger Games? Was there dissent? Did someone make a case for mercy that was beaten down by the calls for the deaths of the districts' children? The scent of Snow's rose curls up into my nose, down into my throat, squeezing it tight with despair. All those people I loved, dead, and we are discussing the next Hunger Games in attempt to avoid

wasting life. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now. (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 370)

This happens few moments before Snow's execution, that Katniss has to carry out by shooting an arrow, as she herself asked in accepting her role in the rebellion; these few moments are enough for Katniss to bring to a conclusion her considerations about Coin and to decide to prevent a new dystopia to rise:

The point of my arrow shifts upward. I release the string. And President Coin collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead. (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 372)

Katniss is here perfectly aware of what she is doing, finally she has no doubt about the rightness of her acts; but she is also aware of consequences: she has just killed the President, so she will probably be tortured and executed. To avoid further pain, she immediately tries to commit suicide, again choosing death instead of pain, as she did at the end of her first Hunger Games.

We can therefore notice that Jonas and Katniss share a deep sense of sacrifice, since both are ready to jeopardize their own lives in the name of justice, in order to allow a better society to rise from the ashes of the one they helped to collapse.

## PART 2: Analyzing the Texts

### Chapter 1

#### Institutionalizing the Rites of Passage

According to Arnold van Gennep, every kind of society has to cope with a twofold problem: to keep its members cohesive and at the same time to provide the survivor of the society beyond its members' change<sup>41</sup>: a society, in fact is made of individuals that go on changing during their life, according to the passing of time, till death. Society is thus in endless movement and has to provide rules and mechanisms in order to maintain its unity despite the change of its members: this is made by fractioning population into smaller groups and by controlling the passage between a group to the other.

In fact, in every society there are internal subdivisions that contributes to keep the members cohesive, since unity among small groups of people is simpler than in bigger groups. The coming of age is one of the most common reason of internal subdivision, a reason that we can find both among semi-civilized tribes and still in our society. As a matter of fact, events such as the Sweet Sixteen in U.S.A and Canada, the Quinceañera among Latin-American people, graduation, marriage or retirement mark the passage from one stage of life to the next one.

It is no surprise that rites are an important issue in dystopian novels, since they are thought to cast control over citizens' or subjects' life. Referring again to van Gennep, an high ritualization of people's life is typical of semi-civilized societies; in this kind of culture, in fact, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is very defined and the

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<sup>41</sup> Van Gennep, Arnold. *Les Rites de Passage*. Paris: Librairie Critique; 1909. (Cons: Trans: Maria Luisa Remotti. Torino: Boringhieri; 1981.

second has a predominance over the former. In such a context, people are kept in a reverential awe of the unknown, fearing to break the rules and to run into god's anger, with a consequent punishment. In dystopian fiction this sacred aura is moved from a religious sphere that is, actually absent, to the state, in order to shift the reverential awe from an absent god to the government. In such a context, the rites of passage before or during adolescence are the first step for the government to keep control of the younger part of the population, while admitting it to the world of adults.

One of the most important passage is the one from childhood to adulthood, since it marks the shift from dependency to responsibility, and it opens the doors to the universe of work, marriage and sex. YA dystopian novels often focus on this very important passage in the life of adolescents, seeing it as regimented by society's rules in such a way that rites and the ceremonies surface only as a mean to wield authority on the adolescent population.

In dystopian novels this is a crucial moment, because the passage from childhood to adulthood must take place softly, in order to allow the adolescent to perfectly fit his or her society: in this way the adolescent will grow up and become a man or a woman that does not challenge the rules he or she has to follow.

In YAD novels, the real moment of passage does not take place at a specific time of adolescent's life, but it varies depending on the novels, since it is different, for example, if the rite concerns the working sphere or the sexual.

At the beginning of *The City of Ember*<sup>42</sup> (2003) by Jeanne DuPrau, for example, we find the two protagonists Lina and Doon on the verge of attending the ceremony during which they are going to be assigned with a job. In this novel the would-be-perfect society built underworld by 'The Builders' in order to save people from a not specified danger, has

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<sup>42</sup> Du Prau, Jeanne. *The City of Ember*. New York: Random House. 2003.

collapsed; after two hundred and forty-one years, the city store lacks in tools and daily objects and the generator is breaking down. To preserve the delicate balance that makes life still possible in Ember, people are not allowed to choose their own job: Ember's job system, in fact, is structured in order to answer the needs of the city and every year only certain kinds of job are available. In order to grant Ember the workforce it needs, the jobs are assigned with a brief ceremony called Assignment Day during the last school day, when boys and girls are twelve:

"Young people of the Highest Class," the mayor began. He stopped and scanned the room for several moments; his eyes seemed to look out from far back inside his head. He nodded slowly. "Assignment Day now, isn't it? Yes. First we get our education. Then we serve our city." Again his eyes moved back and forth along the rows of students, and again he nodded, as if someone has confirmed what he'd said. He put just the little bag on Miss Thorn's desk and rested his hand on it. "What will that service be, eh? Perhaps you're wondering." He did his smile again, and his heavy cheeks folded like drapes.

[...]

"Something to remember," the mayor said holding up one finger. "Job you draw today is for three years. Then, Evaluation. Are you good at your job? Fine. You may keep it. Are you unsatisfactory? Is there a greater need elsewhere? You will be re-assigned. It is extremely important," he said, jabbing his finger at the class, "for all... work... of Ember... to be done. To be properly done."

He picked up the bag and pulled open the drawstring. "So. Let us begin. Simple procedure. Come up one at time. Reach into this bag. Take one slip of paper. Read it out loud." (DuPrau, 7-8)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pp. 7-8.

In this passage, we see that society's decline surfaces in the official realm as a would-be vital ceremony as the Assignment Day; here children join the workforce and, therefore, adulthood without any possibility of choosing their future, as if their childhood and the years spent at school were useless. The dystopia portrayed in *The City of Ember* is actually the decay of an utopia, caused by the selfishness of a single man, a past city mayor who failed his duty of passing the escape instructions to his successor. In a city in which everything is falling apart, also the rite that marks the passage from childhood to adulthood has lost its respectability: the mayor arrives late and after a brief speech that seems to be always the same, he goes on hastily with the ceremony. The mayor's haste mirrors the indifference of the Emberian society towards the younger part of its population, that is considered merely as a new work-force for a job the boys and the girls did not choose. The dryness of a ceremony such as the Assignment Day here described is nothing more than the perpetuation of a sterile rite that, by the time, does no long produce prosperity. Its continuous repetition is a refusal by the adults to see the real situation and to act for a renewal.

The character of the young Doon perfectly fits this context: Doon is in fact very concerned with the decadence of the city and he challenges the mayor's blindness with his lapidary "But Ember is *not* prospering!<sup>44</sup>". With this sentence Doon denounces the reality of facts and, at the same time, the sterility of the mayor's speech that opened the ceremony. Here the mayor is taken as representative of the worse side of the adult world, the one that is by that moment crystallized in routine. That is why the city of Ember is bound to perish, were it not for the young protagonists' ability to see beyond the rules. In fact Lina and Doon begin to get around the rules soon after the Assignment Day, when they exchange

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

their jobs, actually emptying the rite of its meaning and thus denying the dominating role of the adults who are incapable to save the city. It is therefore significant that the first to reach the surface are only Lina, Doon and little Poppy, which, once they have discovered that Ember is built underground, can only throw a hint to the adult world by tying a message to a rock and letting it fall through a hole above the city. In such way it is left to the adults the decision to trust or not the young generation and to undertake a path of renewal.

Job is at the core of the Ceremony of Twelve, another rite of passage described in *The Giver*<sup>45</sup> (1993) by Lois Lowry. The society pictured in this novel is far more complex than the Emberian: here the rules are very rigid and people's life is highly ritualized. In fact the Ceremony of Twelve is the last of the ceremonies of childhood, the one that marks the passage into adulthood:

Very soon he [Jonas] would not be an Eleven but a Twelve, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still.

[...]

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Twelve was made by the Chief Elder, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignments, the seriousness of training to come.

Then the Chief Elder moved ahead in her speech.

"This is the time," she began, looking directly at them, "when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group.

"But today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures."

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<sup>45</sup> Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

She begun to describe this year's group and it's variety of personalities, though she singled no one by name.

[...]

He heard nothing that he recognized as himself, Jonas.

Finally the Chief Elder paid tribute to the hard work of her committee, which had performed the observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Elder stood and was acknowledge by applause. [...]

Then, at last, the Chief Elder called number One to the stage, and Assignment began.

Every announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed to the new Twelve. Jonas tried to pay attention as One, smiling happily received her Assignment as Fish Hatchery Attendant along with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours there, and her obvious interests in the important process of providing nourishment for the community.

Number One -her name was Madeline- returned, finally, amidst applause, to her seat, wearing the new badge that designed her Fish Hatchery Attendant.

(DuPrau, 51-53)<sup>46</sup>

In open contrast with the Assignment Day of *The City of Ember*, the Ceremony of Twelve has kept its magnificence through the years: it takes place in the Auditorium, in front of the whole community, at the end of the two-day ceremony that concerns the children. Here, the Chief Elder gives two speeches: while the first one is more or less the same every year, the second one is specific to that year ceremony, as she refers to the group of children that is actually entering adulthood: this choice of the double speech perfectly fits in the meaning of the rites of passage as explained by van Gennepe. In fact, the Chief Elder actually maintains the cohesion of the community by speaking generally of the Ceremony of Twelve as it is every year for all the members of the community that passed

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pp. 51-53.

from childhood into adulthood; at the same time, the second speech refers to the boys and the girls that are actually entering into adulthood, that is to say, a small, cohesive group that has just finished to learn the rules.

In this ceremony there are various factors that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood and the first one, the protagonist, Jonas, mentions is that this is the last time his age would be remembered: if every year during childhood there is a different ceremony that marks the children with their age, after an individual has entered adulthood, he or she is only an adult, at the same level of all the other ones. It is in a certain way the same thing that happens with children born the same year: they do not have a birthday to celebrate because this would emphasize a difference among them; the members of the same age-group are distinguished only by the birth order and so addressed with a number. Here comes the second difference between childhood and adulthood: once a person crosses the line of adulthood, he or she would never again be addressed with his or her birth-number: in fact if we compare the Ceremony of Twelve with the Releasing Ceremony, we see that in the second one the person who is going to die is called by name.<sup>47</sup> In the perfection of the Ceremony of Twelve, though, we have a discrepancy that concerns exactly the order in which Twelves are called to acquire their new position in society: in fact Jonas lives a moment of panic when the Chief Elder skips his number and goes on with the following boy; as we understand by reading further, this discrepancy is part of Jonas' peculiar status.

The main passage of the rite remains, though, the entrance into the work-force. In *The Giver*, as in *The City of Ember*, people cannot choose their job. In the society depicted in *The Giver*, however, the Elders who assign the job to the new adults, have spent a whole year studying the Twelves' behavior, evaluating their attitudes and the choices made

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

during the compulsory volunteer work. This way of assigning a job is quite utopist, since someone with experience and wisdom (the Elders) is supposed to make the better decision in order to let everything go in the right way: it is the protagonist himself who justifies this way of handling things, when The Giver, during the training year, explains him that in ancient times there was freedom to decide and that freedom was dangerous.<sup>48</sup>

If in *The City of Ember* everything in the ceremony of the Assignment Day is a sign of indifference to the children turning adults, in this novel the assignment of a job according to one's attitudes is a way to ensure loyalty to the community. As a matter of fact, if one is always given a job one likes, one would never doubt society. Actually the only one for whom things change is Jonas, because he is called to be the next Receiver of Memories: instead of securing him a position within society, Jonas' role puts him on the edge of his world, allowing him (and the reader with him) to have a detached view of his own society, the same role that in *Brave New World*<sup>49</sup> is given to John the Savage. In this way Jonas' Ceremony of Twelve marks a failure for the falsely flawless society in which he lives, since it gives him the chance to build a critical view of the world that surrounds him, paradoxically making an adult out of him.

In fact, the adults in *The Giver* are not mature, since they are not given the possibility to make their own decisions by, which is the step that marks the difference between childhood and adulthood. In such a way, people that compose the adult society are only grown-up children, in a world that again echoes the one portrayed by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 98.

<sup>49</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1932.

Entering adulthood is not only a matter of getting a job, but also involves the possibility of building a family: the rite of passage described in *Matched*<sup>50</sup> (2010) by Ally Condie, concerns exactly this aspect of adulthood. One of the most depicted rite of passage into adulthood, in fiction and film about adolescents, is prom (short for 'promenade', a formal dance for high school students, usually held at the end of the senior year). Condie herself admits that she was thinking about the prom while describing the Matched Banquet, the ceremony that allows Cassia, the protagonist of the novel, to enter the next stage of her life. Here Cassia describes the procedure of the ceremony:

There is a system, of course, to the Matching. In City Halls across the country, all filled with people, the Matches are announced in alphabetical order according to the girls' last names. I feel slightly sorry for the boys, who have no idea when their names will be called, when they must stand for girls in other City Halls to receive them as Matches. Since my last name is Reyes, I will be somewhere at the end of the middle. The beginning of the end.

The screen flashes with the face of a boy, blond and handsome. He smiles as he sees Lea's face on the screen where he is, and she smiles, too. "Joseph Peterson," the announcer says. "Lea Abbey, you have been matched with Joseph Peterson."

The hostess presiding over the Banquet brings Lea a small silver box; the same thing happens to Joseph Peterson on the screen. When Lea sits down, she looks at the silver box longingly, as though she wishes she could open it right away. I don't blame her. Inside the box is a microcard with background information about her Match. We all receive them. Later, the boxes will be used to hold the rings for the Marriage Contract. (Condie, 11-12)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Condie, Ally. *Matched*. New York: Dutton Books, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 11-12.

In the world portrayed by Condie, the system determines whom and when one is going to marry, following a rigid timetable studied in order to give people the healthier and happier life possible<sup>52</sup>. The only choice allowed is between the possibility of building up a family or passing the whole life as a Single; this life-long decision needs to be taken by the age of seventeen, since this is the time in which future married couples are matched.

The Matched Ball scene is set in the City Hall, decorated for the event, shining in white and blue lights; in the main room, the Rotunda, the finely-dressed Matches and their parents are going to have a banquet before the out-and-out ceremony. Nothing seems unusual, except the words used by the first person narrator Cassandra, for instance, when she refers to the Matches' parents as dressed in 'plainclothes' or when she describes the meal comparing it to a dance.<sup>53</sup> Later, we come to know that the Matches' dresses and the food served during the banquet are special permissions granted to people usually wearing same simple brown dresses and eating the food delivered by the Nutrition Department, according to individual need but regardless of taste. As happens in *The Giver*, in *Matched* the rite of passage is spectacularized and has a glow that makes the protagonists feel the importance of the moment; what is more, the beauty of the ceremony strengthens the faith of the Matches in the system and in its ability of perfectly guiding their lives. Another similarity that the ceremony in *Matched* shares with the others already analyzed is that it features a deviation from the custom: if Doon and Lina exchange their jobs and Jonas is left at the end of the ceremony, called as the last one, here Cassandra is matched not with a boy from a different city, but with her long time friend Xander. As happens in the other

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp. 9-10.

cases, this deviation is the starting point for the protagonist to become the hero of the dystopian world he lives in.

The rite of passage we find in *The Hunger Games*<sup>54</sup> (2008) by Suzanne Collins is completely different from the ones previously analyzed, since the 'Day of the Reaping' is a ceremony marked by blood. In the dystopian world created by Collins, every year a boy and a girl chosen by chance from each of the twelve districts of Panem are sent to an arena where they will fight each other to death, until only one victor survives. Unlike the other rites, this one casts a dark shadow over adolescence, since the Hunger Games concerns people between twelve and eighteen: here adolescence is literally depicted as a period of survival. Since the Hunger Games are a punishment of the government for a failed attempt of revolution in the past, every aspect that concerns them is thought to be as painful as possible for the entire population. From the 'Day of the Reaping' that begins the games, till the 'Victory Tour' that marks their end, everything is televised and the participation to the ceremonies is mandatory, so that parents are forced to see their children sent to slaughter. What is more, people are compelled to behave as if the Hunger Games were a celebration and that requires assisting the ceremonies properly dressed, clapping when it is needed and acclaiming the victor during his or her tour around the districts.

The novel begins in the morning of the 'Day of the Reaping' so that the reader has immediately the idea of the horror of this dystopian world and what it means to be an adolescent in a society that tries to kill you. The whole story is narrated by the protagonist, Katniss.

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<sup>54</sup> Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*, New York: Scholastic Press, 2008.

Then he [the mayor] reads the list of past District 12 victors. In seventy-four years we have had exactly two. [...] He quickly tries to pull the attention back to reaping by introducing Effie Trinket.

Bright and bubbly as ever, Effie Trinket trots to the podium and gives her signature “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be *ever* in your favor!” Her pink hair must be a wig because her curls have shifted slightly off-center since her encounter with Haymitch. She goes on a bit about what a honor is to be here, although everyone knows she’s just aching to get bumped up to a better district where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the entire nation. [...]

It’s time for the drawing. Effie Trinket says as she always does. Ladies first!” and crosses to the glass ball with the girls’ names. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the ball, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, an I’m feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it’s not me, that it’s not me, that it’s not me.

Effie Trinket crosses back to the podium, smoothes the slip of paper, and reads out the name in clear voice. And it’s not me.

It’s Primrose Everdeen. (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 19-20)<sup>55</sup>

Since the Tribute chosen is her little sister, Katniss instinctively volunteers to take her place and save her life, without waiting for the proper time to do it and actually beginning the process that would lead to the uprising of the districts against the Capital. Her act of unselfishness in a society in which poverty, starvation and continuous danger have led people to think only to self-preservation, hits the other members of the district that, instead of an applause, honor her with the old traditional goodbye of the district. As in the ceremonies portrayed in *The City of Ember*, *The Giver* and *Matched*, here we have an unexpected event that prevents the protagonist to be completely integrated in society, if not at its very edge. It is this position that begins the protagonist’s growth and leads him or her

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. pp. 19-20.

to develop awareness and an ability to think critically in a society in which free thought is prohibited.

From the analysis of this four rites of passage we can infer that Du Prau, Lowry, Condie and Collins consider adolescence a phase of discovery of the self and, above all, a period during which one begins to understand society and its rules. That is why, in a dystopian world, where the system claims to be the only repository of truth, the road to self-consciousness and knowledge passes through a deviation from the rules. The authors of these novels give their protagonists the chance to assume an independent role by turning a symbolic rite of passage and integration into society, against the very same system that created it. In doing so, a ritual moment that should mark the entry into an unconscious or subdued (Collins, *The Hunger Games*) adulthood, turns out to be the offspring of rebellion and renewal.

## Chapter 2

### Forbidding sexuality

One of the most important change that occurs to the human body and the mind during adolescence concerns the sexual and affective spheres.

Love and sex are very strong drives that can lead people to develop extreme courage and take risky decisions, that is why in dystopian fiction these drives are always manipulated or destroyed. In a classic of the genre, *Brave New World*, Huxley pictures a society in which love does no longer exists, and the preservation of human kind is provided by cloning, while sex is merely a safety valve for urges. In YA dystopian fiction, this side of manipulation assumes a even higher relevance.

The first way to control sexual urges is by denying them and this is what happens for example in *The Giver*:

Pedaling rapidly down the path, Jonas felt oddly proud to have joined those who took the pills. For a moment, though, he remembered the dream again. The dream had felt pleasurable. Though the feelings were confused, he thought he had liked the feeling that his mother had called Stirrings. He remembered that upon waking, he wanted to feel the Stirrings again.

Then, in the same way that his own dwelling slipped away behind him as he rounded a corner on his bicycle, the dream slipped away from his thoughts. Very briefly, a little guiltily, he tried to grasp it back. But the feelings had disappeared, The Stirrings were gone. (Lowry, *The Giver*, 39)

In *The Giver*'s society, sexual urges are kept at bay by a pill that every citizen must take after the first appearance of the so-called 'Stirrings', that usually happen after an

erotic dream. That is why every morning the family members must tell their dreams. This is a form of control in which every citizen acts the guard of the other. In the passage abovementioned Jonas has just taken his first pill and the reader shares his feelings while the sensations of the dream are washed away by the pill.

In this novel, the negation of sexual urges creates a placid and easily-controlled adulthood that is merely physical, since there is no possibility to learn how to deal with pulses and how to control them. The adults are thus kept in a prelapsarian state of innocence that perfectly fits the total absence of sentiments in every aspect of life. This innocence is mirrored in the reproductive system that allows a man and a woman to build up a family without giving birth to their own children; giving birth to children is actually a job that can be assigned to a woman who would have up to five babies; the children are then assigned to a family unit that has proved to be suitable to raise a son. As we can see, sex and love are kept outside the family, whose structure follows specific rules imposed by the Elders rather than individual feelings, since feelings are not measurable and rationally manageable.

Moreover, the absence of love feelings inside a family unit leads to a slackening of family bonds and so to a decrease of the sense of loyalty among the family members. In such way, the individual is led to pour his or her devotion to society and to the power in charge. Even if in *The Giver* this alteration in the object of loyalty does not reach the extreme of *1984*, where children are trained to betray their own parents, the habit of always discussing dreams in the morning and of talking about the day at the dinner table, together with the imposition of always telling the truth, clearly implies the possibility that even a family member can denounce a deviation from the rules. As Erika Gottlieb asserts in her essay *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (2001)

The overall effect is that actions and emotions that were previously associated with the individual's private world suddenly become public domain, fully under the punitive control of the state machine.<sup>56</sup>

The suppression of love feelings and sexual urges within a family has also direct consequences on the development of the adolescent. Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic studies, elaborated the theory of the psychosexual development, a theory based on the assumption that human beings have, from birth, an instinctive sexual appetite called 'libido' that develops through five stages and determines the psychic development of the individual. In a dysfunctional family, like the one in which neither love nor sexual appetites exist, the development of the individual through psychosexual stages is actually made impossible. We can see how, by avoiding sexual urges, the society portrayed in *The Giver* raises a mass of physically and emotionally castrated adults.

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Negation and frustration are not the only ways of controlling people: in fact, in *Matched*, feelings are allowed, but it is not possible to choose the object of one's love: there is a mathematical system that makes the choice on behalf of the citizens. In Condie's novel every boy and girl at age seventeen must decide if they are going to marry and have children, or stay alone all their lives long. Still there are two no better specified categories of people, 'Aberrations' and 'Anomalies', who are prevented from the possibility to lead a married life.

*If you choose to be Matched, your Marriage Contract will take place when you are twenty-one. Studies have shown that the fertility of both men and women peaks at the age of twenty-four. The Matching System has been constructed to*

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<sup>56</sup> Gottlieb, Erika. *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*. Montreal: McGill – Queen's University Press, 2001. p. 12.

*allow those who Match to have their children near this age - providing the highest likelihood of healthy offspring. [...]*

That's what the Society has given us: time. We live longer and better than any other citizens in the history of the world. And it's thanks in large part to the Matching System, which produces physically and emotionally healthy offspring. (Condie, 17-19)

Here health and a better life are secured through the assurance that society provides the best match possible for every citizen that chooses to have a family: as we have seen, in this novel sexual urges are not repressed but conveyed and rigidly controlled. In the world depicted by Condie, even if it is officially allowed, sexuality is so regimented that the adolescents do not even feel sexual urges before it is allowed by law.

In the passage quoted above, we see how Cassia, the protagonist and first-person narrator, talks about the life of a couple in a detached way. The system is so rooted in her habits and in her mind that she does not express any sentiment about it. Cassia only feels excited and impatient to know who her match will be, but, for example, she does not feel love or desire for her friend Xander: conscious of the fact that he cannot be her Match because the System usually matches people from different cities, she allows herself to feel for him nothing more than friendship. When Xander actually turns out to be her Match, an apparent error in the microcard that contains the information about him confuses Cassia: after the appearance of Xavier's face on the screen in which she inserted the microcard, the face of Ky (another member of Cassia's community) appears. The fact is explained by an Official, an agent of the state system, as an error occurred in the System because Ky is an 'Aberration,' but at the end of the novel the supposed error turns out to be a cruel experiment on Cassia and Ky's sentiments. After this accident, in fact, Cassia and Ky

happen to spend a lot of time together and eventually fall in love: Cassia tries to fight against the sentiment rising in her, but she suspects that Ky should have been her Match tortures her. What is more, Ky happens to catch Cassia while she is doing something forbidden by the law and sharing such a secret links them together; also Ky's status as an aberration (that prevents him to be someone's Match because of a non-specified crime committed by his father) pushes Cassia towards him, for Ky's condition is that of an innocent unfairly condemned.

The system of *Matched* shares with the one portrayed in *The Giver* a claim to perfection, but in this case it is the system itself that breaks its rules in order to test its citizens. In this case, the adolescents' emotional and sexual development is manipulated twice: first, a rigid code is instilled in the individual's mind so deeply that he or she will never doubt of the righteousness of the system: second, the same system breaks its own rules in order to throw confusion in the individual's mind. The uncertainty about what the object of her love should be pushes Cassia to breach more and more rules and to question the whole system: she wonders about the righteousness of the Matching System, but she cannot come to a resolution about its being unfair, since she starts to be threatened by an Officer. She tells her that she has to put an end to the love affair with Ky if she wants her family and friends not to be hurt. In this case society plays with its members creating a context of sexual and emotional frustration, in a climax that echoes Freud's theory on the role of society in the individual's unhappiness. Freud, in fact, in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) asserts that society imposes on its members restrictions that in the end frustrate the individual's instincts leading him/her to develop neurosis and unhappiness:

[...] it is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression, or something else?) of powerful instinctual urges. This cultural privation dominates the whole field of social relations between human beings;<sup>57</sup>

Cassia's unhappiness is expressed by her sense of guilt towards her Match Xander and towards her family, which she puts in danger through her behavior. In this case, though, the threat of society does not prevent Cassia to act according to her feelings, pushing her rebellion so far as to kiss Ky, a 'sexual act' that, since she is already Matched, is allowed only with Xander; in the novel, in fact, it is implicit that not only society chooses everyone's emotional and sexual partner, but it also excludes the possibility of pre-marital sex.

We find a different situation in *The Hunger Games*, where love and sexuality are distorted by society not by imposing specific rules, but by creating a context of terror in which the citizens live. In a world in which children are threatened with death for six years (the tributes to the Games are chosen among people between twelve and eighteen) it is a very hard decision to give birth to a child. Katniss herself needs years and years to get over the fear of death and to decide to have children (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 389) and still after her decision she has difficulties to cope with all the horrors she and Peeta had to face. In this context we see how the situation prevents a normal development of feelings and sexuality: throughout the three volumes of *The Hunger Games*, in fact, very few space is left to Katniss to think about her confused feelings towards both Gale and Peeta. At an age in which is normal for boys and girls to think about 'the other,' Katniss is instead forced to

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<sup>57</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929). Downloaded from the web, 25 July 2012.

think about how to survive: if we analyze Katniss' behavior we see how far she is from love feelings apart from those who link her to her little sister Prim.

It is interesting to see how, in this novel, love feelings are used and distorted not by society itself, but by the protagonists in order to deceive the leading elite and turn a desperate situation to their advantage. Just before the beginning of the first Hunger Games in which Katniss and Peeta are involved, Peeta, without Katniss' approval, starts to play the role of star-crossed lover:

"This was your [Haymitch's] idea, wasn't it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?" I answer.

"It was my idea," says Peeta, wincing as he pulls spikes of pottery from his palms. "Haymitch just helped me with it."

"Yes. Haymitch is very helpful. To you!" I say.

"You *are* a fool," Haymitch says in disgust. "Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own."

"He made me look weak!" I say.

"He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in this department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!" says Haymitch.

"But we're not star-crossed lovers!" I say.

Haymitch grab my shoulders and pins me against the wall. "Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you're heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?"

[...]

But now Peeta has made me an object of love. Not just his. To hear him tell it I have many admirers. And if the audience really thinks we're in love... I

remember how strongly they responded to his confession. Star-crossed lovers. Haymitch is right, they eat that stuff up in the Capital. Suddenly I'm worried I didn't react properly. (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 135-136)

Haymitch's words 'Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived.' give the reader the dimension of the emptiness of a society in which human life is not held as sacred. Since human life is not at all valued, it is right to lie in order to avoid death. Peeta's lie is useful because it increases both Peeta and Katniss' quotations among the wagerers and the sponsors, but it also forces Katniss to fake emotions she does not really feel. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, the trick of the star-crossed lovers saves both Katniss and Peeta's lives. However, instead of being finally free to live her life and to make space for a natural development of her emotions, Katniss is forced by President Snow to keep on with the show.

Here the attempt to fool the government turns out to be a double-edged sword, a trick that turns into a prison for both Katniss and Peeta. In fact, since President Snow does not believe in their performance and does not want the people of Panem to understand that a girl undermined the system he manages, he threaten Katniss by telling her that if she and Peeta do not go on with their fake love affair, he will destroy everything they love. The dystopic government of Panem intrudes so much in the protagonist's life as to impose on her whom she has to love, precluding her even the little whit of happiness that is granted to the others. Katniss and Peeta go so far as to pretend they are married and that she is pregnant, in a continuous bounce of constrictions by the government and tricks by the supposed couple in order to move the audience to pity and try to save their lives. In this struggle for survival the sexual instincts of both the boy and the girl are suppressed and, if on one side Peeta actually loves her, on the other Katniss feels passion only in two

situations, both in the arenas, when they are supposed to be close to death (*The Hunger Games*, 298; *Catching Fire*, 352). Katniss' feeble sexual urges are actually an ultimate desperate sign of life of a someone forced to repress its bodily needs because of a hostile atmosphere: Katniss is so far from the hope of an emotional and sexual fulfillment that she thinks that, among her and Peeta, the one who deserves to be a parent is Peeta (*Catching Fire*, 354). At the end of *Mockingjay*, though, we can see how the terrifying atmosphere has still aftermaths on Katniss's sexuality fifteen years after the abolition of the Hunger Games, when she still has to fight against the fear of motherhood.

As we can infer from the analysis of the passages above, sexuality is such a powerful source for rebellion that in one way or the other it is necessary for dystopian societies to control it, either by suppressing it, channeling it or by making it impossible through terror. Despite these trials, however, the protagonists of the novels analyzed are able to find enough strength to fight against the system in the very emotional domain they are forced to repress: Jonas wants love to be back in his world, Cassia is determined to fight for the possibility of a life with Ky, and while Katniss' love for her sister helps her to endure the hardest trial, Peeta's love for Katniss helps both to overcome the horrors of the Hunger Games.

## Chapter 3

### Death, Violence and Their Spectacularization

In his article “Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood,” Sherman Alexie asserts:

And there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults<sup>58</sup>, that books –especially the dark and dangerous ones– will save them.

As a child [...] I read books about monsters and monstrous things, often written with monstrous language, because they taught me how to battle the real monsters in my life.<sup>59</sup>

The treatment of death and violence is a thorny topic on YA novels, but it is also an important point in dystopian narrative; novels such as *The Hunger Games* and its sequels have been accused to be too violent and gruesome for an adolescent audience: since death is central in dystopias, YA dystopian fiction is actually in the middle of the debate. According to Meghan Cox Gurdon, whom Alexie refers to in the article quoted above, YA fiction is too explicit and detailed in the description of sexuality and violence and this is dangerous for ‘children’ that are deprived of their ‘innocence’ being exposed to such brutality.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Alexie claims that it is silly to think that an adolescent of the twenty-first century, at age thirteen or fourteen, is still unconscious of how violent life can be.

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<sup>58</sup> Here Alexie refers to Meghan Cox Gurdon’s article “Darkness Too Visible” (see footnote 41).

<sup>59</sup> Alexie, Sherman. “Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood.” *Speakeasy*. 9 June 2012. Web. 7 July 2012. p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Cox Gurdon, Meghan. “Darkness Too Visible.” *The Wall Street Journal*. 4 June 2011. Web. 11 July 2012.

There are, according to Alexie, so many cases of violence that concern adolescents, that is it impossible that a boy or a girl at that age still maintains his or her childish innocence; drugs abuse, bullying, domestic violence, rapes, pedophilia: even if such criminal episodes do not happen to every adolescent, everybody knows of their existence and their being perpetrated. Daily news on television and the internet show and describe violent scenes, both from from the suburbs of a city or a war field: according to Cox Gurdon, this is not a good reason to put the same violence and crudeness into a novel addressed to young people.

In my opinion what Cox Gurdon forgets is that cruelty has always been a component of stories, even those addressed to children: if we think about classical fairytales such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Hop-o'-My-Thumb* or *Bluebeard*<sup>61</sup>, we see that there is nothing innocent in a wolf devouring a little girl, a group of brothers menaced to be eaten by an ogre, and a man who kills his wives one after the other, keeping their bodies in a secret room of his castle. In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim explains how cruelty and violence are essential parts of tales, since they are devoted to give shape to children's fears: only if evil is openly embodied in an ogre or in a witch, the child is able to make a choice between good and evil, a dichotomy always present in classic tales as it is present in human nature.<sup>62</sup>

Cruelty and violence, though, may have an educational value and this is true in particular for dystopian novels: there cannot be heroism without risk, or redemption without ruin. In dystopian narrative, the cruelty of a society towards its members is the condition *sine qua non* of the genre. This cruelty can take the form of both psychological

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<sup>61</sup> Perrault, Charles. *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*. Paris: Barbin, 1697

<sup>62</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976. p. 8-9.

or physical violence, but it is fundamental, and even when it appears to be legitimate and just whispered, as it is in Lowry's *The Giver* where nobody even knows that violence is perpetrated, violence screams of injustice once discovered. Dystopianism represents the nightmare of a society so degenerated that it kills its own members or put them in unsafe life conditions; so, through death and torture, dystopia levers on the readers' instinct of survival that is the most powerful and deepest of instincts: only if we are openly threatened with the horror of the worst of the possible worlds, we can face the reality that surrounds us and avoid that a nightmare becomes true; and the worst of the possible worlds is always a violent one.

Since death and violence are important topics of dystopian narrative, it is important to see how they are managed in YA dystopias. In dystopianism in general, both societies that assume to be perfect and negative ones (societies in which the human rights are openly disregarded), need to hold power over death, for different reasons. In perfect societies, as the ones portrayed in *The Giver* and *Matched*, the problem is that, since society provides a healthy life, it becomes necessary for the government to think of how to get rid of people when they become too old to be socially useful. In this case, death is not administered through violence, but it is institutionalized in order to keep the population under control.

In Lowry's *The Giver*, nobody knows people's final destination except for The Giver and the doctors entrusted to inject the venom. Since the novel has an internal focalization, neither the protagonist nor the reader knows what the procedure of 'Releasing' actually consists of: it is the procedure destined to elders, weak or twin children, or people that commit serious infractions, but since it is assumed as a just procedure of a perfect community, the reader is in some way distracted from the fact that 'Releasing' can be a synonymous of 'euthanasia' or 'death penalty'. The discovery occurs

both to the reader and to the protagonist when Jonas asks The Giver what 'Releasing' consists of; instead of an answer, the man shows him the record of the releasing of a twin child: since for elders 'Releasing' is a ceremony with a party to say goodbye (*The Giver*, 32), Jonas thinks that a small, private ceremony will take place also for children; this does not happen and, what is more shocking for Jonas, is that the man that makes the fatal injection is his father:

Obediently Jonas concentrated on the screen, waiting for what would happen next. He was especially curious about the ceremony part.

His father turned and opened the cupboard. He took out a syringe and a small bottle. Very carefully, he inserted the needle into the bottle and began to fill the syringe with a clear liquid.

Jonas winced, sympathetically. He had forgotten that newchildren had to get shots. He hated shots himself, though he knew they were necessary.

To his surprise, his father began very carefully to direct the needle into the newchild's forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed, the newborn squirmed, and wailed faintly.

"Why's he-"

"Shhh," The Giver said sharply.

His father was talking, and Jonas realized that he was hearing the answer to the question he had started to ask.

[...]

As he continued to watch, the newchild, no longer crying, moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion. Then he went limp. His head fell to the side, his eyes half open. Then he was still.

With an odd, shocked feeling, Jonas recognized the gestures and posture and expression. They were familiar. He had seen before. [...] The memory came back.

*He killed it! My father killed it!* Jonas said to himself, stunned at what he was realizing. He continued to stare at the screen numbly. (Lowry, *The Giver*, 149-150)

The detachment of the scene, seen by Jonas on a screen, in addition to Jonas' unconsciousness of what he is going to see, gives to the act of euthanasia a surreal light. The procedure is seen in complete silence by Jonas and the man, while, on the screen Jonas' father hums and talks with the special voice he deserves to children, completely unaware of the deep meaning of what he is doing: the rules of the community say that, in case of twins, the weaker must die and so he kills him without remorse. In this scene, the reader understands what is actually going on far before Jonas, that needs more time to grasp the truth because he needs to collect memories in order to understand. This break of time increases the pathos of the scene because the reader is suspended while Jonas achieves the truth and in this way the brutality of Jonas' discovery erupts more vehemently. Here the physical violence of the society towards its members becomes a psychological violence towards Jonas who is forced to be the only one who understands what really happens and bears the pain of the releasing of a weak child he feels affection for, Gabriel. It is actually the sense of justice and his affection for the child that will make Jonas to decide to do something to change his society.

Also in Condie's *Matched*, death is provided by society for old people in the day of their eightieth birthday; in this case, though, it is openly said that the man or the woman is going to die, even if the possibility of a rebirth is given by a sample that will be kept in sight of a future cloning technology. In this novel death is delivered through poison in the food: sharing food is strictly forbidden for everybody, since the meals are prepared in the 'food distribution block' and each person receives exactly the food he or

she needs to be healthy. In *Matched*, the protagonist, Cassia, is directly touched by the death theme since her grandfather, whom she really loves, is going to die at the beginning of the novel, but the system is called to be so perfect that, while suffering for the idea of losing her grandfather, Cassia legitimates the system.

People used to wake up and wander, "Will today be the end?" or lie down to sleep, not knowing if they would come back out of the dark. Now we know which day will be the end of the light and which night will be the long, last one. The Final Banquet is a luxury. A triumph of planning, of the Society, of human life and the quality of it.

All the studies show that the best age to die is eighty. It's long enough that we can have a complete life experience, but not so long that we feel useless. That's one of the worst feelings the elderly can have. In societies before ours, they could get terrible diseases, like depression, because they didn't feel needed anymore. We can't hold off all the indignities of aging much past eighty. Matching for healthy genes can only take us so far. (Condie, 69)

As we can notice, here Cassia speaks as if she is reciting something she learned by heart; at this point of the novel her grandfather has not yet given her the forbidden poems that will start to change Cassia's point of view on her society and that will allow her to rethink the rightness of the world she lives in.

The rule that fixes eightieth birthday as the last day of one's life, though, does not apply to everybody and Cassia gets to know it when she has to attend a test for her future job in a building in which menial workers cleans up the leftovers of meals. Here, as part of the exam, an Official lets her know that the ones that do that kind of job, that are mostly Aberrations, do not usually live till their eightieth birthday: from the tone of the Official, Cassia understands that the food for elders is poisoned and that the

continuous contact with the dangerous material shortens the workers' life. In this moment, the protagonist understands deeply how her society works and that its claim to perfection is far from the truth:

It's all clear now. Our society prides itself on never killing anyone, having done away with the death penalty, but what I see here and what I've heard about the Outer Provinces tells me that they have found another way to take care of things. The strong survive. Natural selection. With help from our Gods, of course—the Officials. (Condie, 287-288)

It is interesting to notice, in this passage, how the principles of natural selection have been distorted so much by Cassia's society that the very meaning of these terms, 'natural' and 'selection,' have been turned upside down: there is nothing natural in a society that decides whom one has to marry and how long one is allowed to live, but it has acquired the idea of the selection that kills the weak and let the strong to survive.

Not only the society in *Matched* wields power on death, but it also uses psychological violence over its citizens; as I pointed out in Part Two Chapter One, Cassia's forbidden relationship with Ky is managed by the Officials in order to put the protagonist in a constant state of mental stress that becomes a torture for the girl. By the end of the novel, however, the reader gets to know that Cassia is not the only member of her family to be threatened by the Officials: the night in which all the trees of the neighborhood are cut down, Cassia's mother, shocked, says "It's a warning for *me*."<sup>63</sup> At this point of the novel, in fact, the reader does not know yet that Cassia's mother has to take a difficult decision that concerns her job; in fact she has the suspect that there are people that grows illegal plants for food, but she has still not decided whether denounce

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<sup>63</sup> Condie, Ally. *Matched*. New York: Dutton Books; 2010. p. 254.

it or not. It is clear from this passage, that Cassia's mother is convinced that the Officials already knows the results of her researches (even if she did not write the report yet) and are trying to force her decision to one direction. Also Cassia sees the cut of the trees as a warning for her to put to an end her love affair with Ky and Cassia's little brother Bram complains that he did nothing wrong to deserve the loss of the tree in their garden. This is an example of how a government, with an arbitrary act that represents a punishment and that apparently has no meaning, succeeds in threatening all those have a secret or have doubt about the righteousness of their behavior. In her novel, Condie depicts a society in which violence is not wielded on the physical level, but mostly on the psychological, through restrictions and psychological games played on the citizens by the Officers

Both physical and psychological violence are the cornerstones of *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins. The use of violence in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, perfectly mirrors what Erika Gottlieb asserts in her essay *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (2001):

acts of terror are no longer a means to an end; they have become the very language in which the elite in power addresses the population<sup>64</sup>

In these novels, in fact, society is divided in two categories: the rich elite that lives in the Capital almost unaware of the poverty of the other inhabitants of Panem, and people living in the twelve districts. In this world, the Hunger Games are a punishment for 'the Dark Days,' a failed uprising of the districts driven by District Thirteen (officially destroyed after the repression of the revolt) and occurred seventy-four years before the

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<sup>64</sup> Gottlieb, Erika. *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*. Montreal: McGill – Queen's University Press, 2001. p. 39.

beginning of the story; to prevent the inhabitants of the districts to forget their powerlessness towards the Capital, each year each district has to send a boy and a girl from twelve to eighteen to the slaughter of the Hunger Games: honor and richness are provided for the one that survives all the others, a faint reward after the waste of so many lives. This distinction among citizens recalls the situation that again Gottlieb ascribes to the two big dictatorships that marked the European history of the twentieth century, Hitler's and Stalin's regimes:

The leader of the party in both cases functioned as the head of the state religion, where "justice" was preserved for members of an inner circle, while those outside the circle were declared "outside the law," stripped of their rights and possessions, and deported and exterminated "justifiably," under due process of such law.<sup>65</sup>

Gottlieb's description perfectly fits a society that reaches the lowest level of humanity, since violence is perpetrated on innocent adolescents as a punishment for something occurred far before their birth. For the majority of the districts, the Hunger Games are a tragedy, but there are districts such as One, Two and Four in which boys and girls are trained since childhood in order to volunteer for the Games and be treated as heroes by the inhabitants of their district.

The brutal violence of the Hunger Games is a powerful means of control for the people of the districts: by taking the lives of the district's offsprings, the government prevents every slightest idea of a further rebellion, that can have even worst consequences. At the time of the narration, Panem is ruled by President Coriolanus Snow that embodied the very essence of violence: his omnipresent, wonderful-smelling white rose is the symbol

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<sup>65</sup> Gottlieb, Erika. *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*. Montreal: McGill – Queen's University Press, 2001. p. 35-36.

of the inner violence of this man, since Snow uses the rose's perfume in the attempt to cover the smell of blood emanating from his mouth. Snow's violent nature overlaps with the violence of the Hunger Games, in a *mise en abyme* that becomes a lens: in Panem's society nobody is sacred and vital, nor youth nor the closest Snow's collaborators, as the reader understands at the beginning of *Catching Fire*, the second novel of the trilogy:

"If the Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane, had had any brains, he'd have blown you to dust right then. But he had an unfortunate sentimental streak. So here you are. Can you guess where he is?" he [Snow] asks.  
I nod, because by the way he says it, it's clear that Seneca Crane has been executed. (*Catching Fire*, 20)

This is the first time President Snow and Katniss meet and it happens because Snow needs to menace her: since her trick with the poisonous berries has been interpreted not only as the desperate act of two lovers, but also as a defiance of the system, Katniss now must go on with the fake love story with Peeta to convince everybody that she did not want to defy Panem. In order to make her understand that he will not be merciful, Snows discloses that Seneca Crane, the mind behind the Hunger Games, has been executed because he has not been capable to carry out successfully Katniss and Peeta's plan to survive. The sly way Snow uses to inform Katniss of how dangerous could be for everyone to disappoint him is a peculiarity of his snaky nature and reinforces Katniss' fear to damage her beloved.

Snow's subtle menace is only the first psychological trial that Katniss and the other main characters who rebel against Panem have to endure; not only physical, but also psychological violence is highly used in Panem in order to control the population and to tear down whomever openly acts against Snow's authority. In *Catching Fire*, for example,

one of the horrors of the arena of the Quarter Quell (a special edition of the Games that occurs every twenty-five years) is the use of 'jabberjays' a kind of mutated birds that can reproduce human voices: in order to torture the tributes in the arena the jabberjays are programmed to reproduce the screaming voice of people the tributes love, so Katniss hears Prim's and Gale's voices and Finnick Odair (the male tribute of District Four) hears his girlfriend's screams, throwing both Katniss and Finnick into such a distress that they almost go mad (*Catching Fire*, 339-344).

As I mentioned before, the arenas of the Hunger Games are not the only spaces for violence, since it is used by President Snow in order to prevent every dissent. For example, after Katniss again defies the system by destroying the arena of the Quarter Quell, Peeta is kept by Snow in the Capital as weapon against Katniss: he is interviewed and forced to ask Katniss, that joined the rebels, to give up with the rebellion. During one of these televised interviews, he warns the rebels of an attack the Capital is planning in order to destroy the rebels' refuge. After this act of betrayal towards the Capital and President Snow, Peeta is 'hijacked' (brainwashed) so that, when he finally reaches the rebels, he is programmed to kill Katniss every time he sees her, because the venom that has been used on him connects his memories of Katniss with pain, fear and danger. In this case, Katniss has to face the huge sense of guilt for the tortures Peeta had to suffer: actually the sense of guilt plays an important part in Katniss' psychological torture. Once out of the arenas the only power that Snow can wield upon Katniss is by leveraging her sense of guilt towards people he may kill in order to defeat her.

President Snow and his collaborators, though, are not the only ones to use the power of violence. In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, in fact, the distinction between good and evil is not taken for granted: even if the rebels want to put Snow's power to an end, they do

not worry about using the very same methods; under the leadership of Doctor Alma Coin, in fact, not only the rebels are organized as an army, but also subtle war technique are used in order to defeat the 'regular' army. In this case, Katniss is the critical witness, in contrast with her friend Gale who, blinded by his hate for Snow, does not see how similar the two leaders are and falls in the mechanics of violence:

This is what they've been doing. Taking the fundamental ideas behind Gale's trap and adapting them into weapons against humans. Bombs mostly. It's less about the mechanics of the traps than the psychology behind them. Booby-trapping an area that provides something essential to survival. A water or food supply. Frightening prey so that large number flee into a greater destruction. Endangering offspring in order to draw in the actual desired target, the parent. Luring the victim into what appears to be a safe heaven - where death awaits it. At some point Gale and Beetee left the wilderness behind and focus more on human impulses. Like compassion. A bomb explodes. Time is allowed for people to rush to the aid of the wounded. Then a second, powerful bomb kills them as well.

"That seems to be crossing some kind of line," I say. "So anything goes?" They both stare at me - Beetee with doubt, Gale with hostility. "I guess there isn't a rule book for what might be unacceptable to do to another human being." "Sure it is. Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when hijacked Peeta," says Gale. (*Mockingjay*, 185-186)

In the passage abovementioned Gale's answer sounds more like a revenge than a plan that takes justice in consideration and it is as if he voices a rebellion that risks to lose sight of its purpose. Justice is therefore re-established only by Katniss, with a last violent act: her killing the new president Coin.

The main method of diffusion of psychological violence in *The Hunger Games* trilogy is television: the Hunger Games, in fact, are a big and pitiless reality show that everybody in Panem must follow. In the Capital, since the children of the city are not involved in the games, the show is seen as a thrilling spectacle, so much so the rich members of this elite are used to bet on the tributes as if they were gambling on horses or dogs; on the other hand, for the people of Panem who watch their own children in the tributes, they are a torture. Panem's society combines together brutality and spectacularization in a reality show that succeeds in keeping Panem's population subjected to power, in a sort of fake unification that Guy Debord in his essay *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) summarizes as follow:

The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a mean of unification. As a part of society, is that sector where all attention, all consciousness converges. Being isolated – and precisely for that reason – this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.<sup>66</sup>

As Debord points out, the Hunger Games are thought to be a mean of unification for the people of Panem since every part of the games, from the Day of the Reaping to the Victory Tour, is a mandatory spectacle for all the citizens; the unification, however, is only an illusion because, as I already said, the two parts in which Panem's population is divided, look at the games with opponent feelings. Paradoxically, in a space that is separated from reality, the Hunger Games succeed in representing both faces of Panem's population: among the tributes, in fact, the ones from the districts One, Two and Four are traditionally

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<sup>66</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. p. 12

Capital-oriented, they are always volunteer tributes trained since childhood and they usually ally together in order to kill the other tribute before killing each other (that is why, in the novels they are called 'Career Pack' or 'careers'). On the other hand there are the boys and the girls that comes from the other districts for which the games are only a cruelty from which nobody can escape.

Such a unification is possible only in the enclosed space of the arenas of the games; outside the games, in fact, the two worlds are ideologically and physically separated. The Capital, for instance, is surrounded by mountains that, during the Dark Days, condemned the rebels to the defeat; moreover, the citizens cannot move outside the territory of their district: the only place in which the districts meet to fight each other while the Capital enjoys the spectacle, is the arena of the Hunger Games. It is important to notice that the Hunger Games are supposed to be a 'reality show' but, as it usually happens in such a show, the word 'reality' loses its meaning. There is nothing real, in fact, in adolescents killing each other and neither the landscape in which they are called to carry out the massacre is real, or natural. In fact the arenas of the Hunger Games are designed by the Head Gamemaker in order to make the games more exciting for the audience. At the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Gale recalls past editions of the games talking about the various scenarios: they recall the time in which most of the tributes died of cold and starvation because the arena was a frozen land with no possibility of fire or food and the cold reaction of the public demotivated by the boredom of that edition of the games (*The Hunger Games*, 39). The conversation is significant because it allows the reader understand how much the spectacle conditions Panem's life.

The spectacle of violence has been a part of dystopian narrative since the great dystopian novels of the twentieth century such as Zamjatin's *We*, Orwell's *1984* and

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: in all these novels in fact we find the public execution of the dissidents used as warnings for the citizens. As I already said, also in the dystopic Panem the Hunger Games are the constant menace for possible insurgents, but as violence itself is not due only to Snow's government, also the spectacle is used by Coin's rebel in order to gain consent among the people of the districts and to destroy the image of President Snow. After the Quarter Quell, in fact, Katniss is asked to be the 'face of revolution' in order to take advantage of the popularity she gained after she twice defeated the system through the games; after Coin agrees to the conditions she poses, Katniss accepts her new role, still unconscious of what she is supposed to do. Even if she is no more in the arenas, she is still under the eye of the cameras: the rebels want to make her the catalyst of people's anger against the Capital, so they make a footage of her visiting an hospital that the Capital's army bombs while she is there:

At first my screen is black. Then a tiny spark flickers in the center. It blossoms, spreads, silently eating up the blackness until the entire frame is ablaze with a fire so real and intense, I imagine I feel the heat emanating from it. The image of my mockingjay pin emerges, glowing red-gold. The deep, resonant voice that hunts my dreams begins to speak. Claudius Templesmith, the official announcer of the Hunger Games, says, "Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, burns on."

Suddenly, there I am, replacing the mockingjay, standing before the real flames and smoke of District 8. "I want to tell the rebels that I am alive. That I'm right here in District Eight, where the Capital has just bombed a hospital full of unharmed men, women and children. There will be no survivors." Cut to the hospital collapsing in on itself. The desperation of the onlookers as I continue voiceover. "I want to tell people that if you think for one second the Capital will treat us fairly if there's a cease-fire, you're deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do. Back to me now, my hand lifting up to

indicate the outrage around me. "This is what they do! And we must fight back!" Now comes a truly fantastic montage of the battle. The initial bombs falling, us running, being blown to the ground - a close-up of my wound, which looks good and bloody - scaling the roof, diving into the nests, and then some amazing shots of the rebels, Gale, and mostly me, me, me knocking those planes out of the sky. Smash-cut back to me moving in on the camera. "President Snow says he's sending us a message? Well, I have one for him. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground, but do you see that?" We're with the camera, tracking to the planes burning on the roof of the warehouse. Tight on the Capital seal on a wing, which melts back into the image of my face, shouting at the president. "Fire is catching! And if we burn, you burn with us!" Flames engulf the screen again. Superimposed in them in black, solid letters are the words: IF WE BURN YOU BURN WITH US.

The words catch fire and the whole screen burns to blackness. (*Mockingjay*, 105-106)

We can notice how the beginning of the footage aims to grip to the emotional side of people, with the use of the flames and the mockingjay-pin that are directly connected with the popular image of Katniss; then, to stress the memory of the Hunger Games she won, they use the recording of the voice of Claudius Templesmith, the anchorman of the games, announcing her. The rest of the footage, then, is aimed at unmasking the Capital's brutality towards their citizens, since they do not spare even wounded and desperate people in hospitals, while the rebels and Katniss on the frontline fight to defend them against any hope. Again, the end of the footage appeals to the idea of a purifying fire that is going to burn up President Snow, the Capital, and all the falsehood and the cruelties they hide. Katniss' speech is direct propaganda against the government in power that ends up with a slogan, underlined by the graphic of the footage.

Even if she is the ‘face of revolution,’ Katniss’ image is not the only one exploited by the rebels in order to mine Snow’s consent: Finnick Odair, the beautiful winner of the Sixty-fifth Hunger Games and again District-Four-tribute for the Quarter Quell, decides to reveal secret information that traces a horrible portrait of President Snow by revealing his habit to force the victors to prostitution or that Snow’s political career is based on murders of his opponents (or dangerous allies) by poison. Also Finnick’s speeches is, of course, broadcasted on TV.

The rebel’s propaganda goes so far as to send the victors who joined the rebels (the ‘Star Squad’) to fight in the Capital while being shot: in this final part of the war against the Capital, many members of the team die along the way under the eye of the camera, in a new, distorted, but again bloody, reality show.

Spectacularization is so rooted in Panem’s society that also the execution of the former president, Snow, is televised:

The last touch of powder, the instructions from Plutarch as I'm guided to the front door of the mansion. The City Circle runs over, spills people down the side streets. The others take their place outside. Guards. Officials. Rebel leaders. Victors. I hear the cheers that indicate Coin has appeared on the balcony. Then Effie taps my shoulder, and I step out into the cold winter sunlight. Walk to my position, accompanied by the defeating roar of the crowd. As directed, I turn so they see me in profile, and wait. When they march Snow out the door, the audience goes insane. They secure his hands behind a post, which is unnecessary. He's not going anywhere. (*Mockingjay*, 371)

Collins describes the scene in a way so that the reader can easily imagine it happening on the stage of a theater: the detail of the powder on Katniss’ face; the presence of the ‘balcony’ that is both an architectural structure and a part of the theater; the use of

the verb 'to direct' that recalls the theatrical jargon, together with Katniss placing herself in a way that the audience can see her in a specific view, contributes to the idea of this scene as the final act of a tragedy. In the perspective of the scene as pure spectacle, Katniss' unexpected decision to kill Coin instead of Snow is the *coup de théâtre* that allows both the reader and the inhabitants of Panem to wake up and open their eyes on Coin's attempt to establish a new dictatorship on the ashes of the one she fought to destroy; an awakening from the spectacle to reality that resembles the one experienced by the protagonist of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*<sup>67</sup> (1959).

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<sup>67</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovič. *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Putnam, 1959.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I analyzed the dystopian fiction for YA through a range of novels of such genre. I demonstrated that, though the main characteristics of classic dystopias are maintained also in the YA sub-genre, there are important differences that typify dystopian fiction written for an adolescent readership.

The main one consists in featuring a teenager hero who, despite the aversive situation and the trials he or she has to endure, succeeds in defeating the dystopic society.

We find three leitmotifs linked to the adolescent protagonist. The first is the relevance given to the ritualized moment of passage from childhood to adulthood, a passage that can concern different aspects (from work to marriage) but that is always publicly performed in a ceremony. A second aspect I analyzed concerns the natural development of sexuality, which is denied by the dystopic society in order to control population. This denial is particularly important as it affects the protagonists in a fundamental age for sexual development. A third one is the use of violence towards the adolescent protagonists and their reaction to such violence, and the use of violence as a spectacle.

Let me conclude by briefly expanding why young adults are fascinated by dystopias. In the article "Fresh Hell" Laura Miller asserts that adolescents are fascinated by dystopias that has a peer as hero, because they simply see in dystopias the reflection of their daily life, especially in high-school:

A brutal social hierarchy prevails, with the rich, the good-looking, and the athletic lording their advantages over everyone else. To survive you have to be totally fake. Adults don't seem to understand how high the stakes are; your whole life could be over, and they act like it's just some "phase"! Everyone's

always watching you, scrutinizing your clothes or your friends and obsessing over whether you're having sex or taking drugs or getting good enough grades, but no one cares who you really are or how you really feel about anything.<sup>68</sup>

It is undeniable that an adolescent's life can be (and actually *is*) seen as completely dystopic and tragic by the adolescents themselves, but it is an understatement to deny the educational potential of dystopias only because adolescents "don't run the world."<sup>69</sup> Even if adolescents cannot take political or economical decisions, it is true that they will be able to make such decision in the time span of few years and it is fundamental that they reach maturity (and, therefore, power) with the capacity to make the right decision. This aim is openly explained by Suzanne Collins in opposition to Miller's assertions, as reported by Susan Dominus:

Many of Collin's fans can surely see *The Hunger Games* through this prism. [...] But this is not a theory that appeals to Collins. "I don't write about adolescents," she said. "I write about war. For adolescents."<sup>70</sup>

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74

Putting adolescents in a different world from the one in which they actually live, can help them to see their lives and their societies from a different point of view, giving them a more critical perspective on the world that surrounds them, as Philip Reeve points out in his article "The Worst is Yet To Come: Dystopias are Grim, Humorless, and Hopeless—and Incredibly Appealing to Today's Teens:"

But by visiting such woes on teenagers like themselves, these stories may make it easier for young readers to think about them, and to imagine what it might be

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<sup>68</sup> Miller, Laura. "Fresh Hell." *The New Yorker*. 14 June 2010. Web. 7 July 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Dominus, Susan. "I Write about War. For Adolescents." *New York Times*. 10 April 2011. Web. 28 Jan. 2013.

like to live in a police state or a shantytown. [...] The settings may be nihilistic, but the message that an individual can make a difference and that courage and ingenuity can triumph even in the most dreadful circumstances, is anything but.<sup>71</sup>

As I demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis (1.3) by quoting the interviews released by the authors, there is an educational purpose in the mind of authors writing dystopian fiction for YA. In a stage of life in which the light-heartedness of childhood is to be left behind and the responsibilities of adulthood must be welcomed, it is crucial that the adolescents are given the instruments to develop a personal and critical thinking, in order not to fall victim of mass thought and ignorance.

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<sup>71</sup> Reeve, Philip. "The Worst is Yet To Come: Dystopias are Grim, Humorless, and Hopeless—and Incredibly Appealing to Today's Teens." *School Library Journal*. 1 Aug. 2011. Web. 10 July 2012.

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