The Food and Hunger behind *The Hunger Games*

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Authors have a variety of options and literary devices to choose from when incorporating subtle messages and themes into their works. Whether it is through the use of character choices, beliefs, or values, the author is always trying to put forth a deeper meaning than simply the words on the page. Food, a common everyday item and necessary part of life, is often used by authors to signify deeper meanings about their characters or plots as a story progresses. Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a prime example of a contemporary book series that exploits the possibilities of food symbolism in order to deliver messages to the audience that go beyond the letters on the page. Her books are filled with references to food and recurring symbolism in their use of specific food items, which this paper will analyze to reveal the deeper meanings that food takes on within the fictional world of the novels.

*The Hunger Games* focuses on the life of Katniss Everdeen, a young woman from District 12 who has been the sole provider for her family ever since her father passed away. The story takes place in the fictional country of Panem, which consists of the Capitol and twelve districts. The Capitol is the elite part of Panem where rich, upper-class citizens and President Snow, the oppressor of the twelve districts, reside. Each district is responsible for providing a resource to the Capitol, such as coal or grain. The majority of these resources are shipped to the Capitol with very little left for the districts, creating a visible stratification of wealth and power within Panem. Due to an uprising of the districts against the Capitol that happened many years ago, each district is obligated to offer two “tributes” to a national competition called the Hunger Games each year: one male and one female between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Tributes are chosen randomly during the “reaping,” a lottery-like process during which names are picked.
out of a bowl. Once chosen, twenty-four tributes battle to the death in a designated arena and the winner is rewarded with money, food, and a house to live in, and extra food is provided for their entire district.

From the outset, it is clear that the Capitol controls the neighbouring districts through their control of the food supply. Food is used as power to force the districts into submission, as well as a reward for those who are skilled enough to make it out of the Hunger Games alive. The name of the country itself signifies the importance that food holds in this society: panem is the Latin word for bread and is often associated with the phrase panem et circenses, which translates to “bread and circuses” and refers to a government using superficial means such as circuses and games to provide citizens with the necessities of life (such as bread) while distracting them from more pressing matters (Despain 70). The Romans employed such a technique through their use of gladiators and President Snow similarly uses it in his support of the Hunger Games (Anthon 52), which enables him to provide those living in the Capitol with all of the food that they need to survive while using the Games as a distraction to keep attention away from any uprisings that might be happening within the districts.

Naming this competition the “Hunger Games” also raises the question of how food and hunger fit into the equation. The Capitol continues to thrive while the districts starve, despite that a majority of the nation’s production and agriculture is conducted by said districts. While tributes for the Games seem to be chosen at random during the reaping, a deeper analysis of the selection process reveals that such is not the case. Every citizen of the districts between the ages twelve and eighteen has their name entered into the reaping once, but these same citizens can enter their name a second time in exchange for a “tessera”: a small supply of oil and grain that will sustain one person for a single year. Poorer citizens have little choice but to take this option and enter
their names more frequently into the reaping than others, potentially trading food for their lives. Faced with starvation, citizens have two choices: increase their likelihood of being chosen for the Games or die. In Panem, it is clear that food symbolizes life, as those citizens with access to food are less likely to be chosen for the Games and therefore less likely to put their lives in jeopardy.

In addition to being represented in the name Panem, bread serves as a key symbol in the novels by representing hope and change. Immediately in the opening scene, Katniss’ close friend Gale brings a loaf of bread to her in the forest on the day of the reaping and wishes her a “Happy Hunger Games!” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 7). This signifies the hope that they share to remain safe from the Games, even though both of them carry increased odds of being chosen as tributes, each having already accepted multiple tesserae. Furthermore, this gesture foreshadows the choice that Katniss will make that changes the path of her life forever by volunteering to take the place of her sister, whose name is drawn during the reaping as tribute. Thus Katniss is made the female tribute from District 12 and Peeta Melark, the son of a baker, is selected to be the male tribute. It is also at this moment that Katniss recognizes Peeta from a key moment in her childhood.

After Katniss’ father died, her family came dangerously close to starvation. In a final act of desperation, Katniss went to the town bakery and searched its dumpster for any bread or food that might have been thrown out; however, she was unsuccessful in her search. Peeta saw Katniss in her search and purposefully burnt a batch of bread, earning him a beating from his mother. When told to feed the burnt bread to the pigs, Peeta quickly went outside and threw it to Katniss (Collins, *Hunger Games* 30). Bread once again represents hope as it renews Katniss’ strength and gives her the opportunity to feed her family a decent meal—something that they had not had in a long time. Bread also represents change because it is at this moment that Katniss realizes she must do as her father taught her and hunt for food in the forest in order to provide for
her family, thus changing her role from daughter to provider.

Bread continues to play a prominent symbolic role as the Games begin, particularly when Rue, the female tribute of District 11 and Katniss’ ally, is stabbed in her stomach by a spear. As Rue slowly dies, Katniss stays by her side, sings to her, and surrounds her body with flowers (Collins, *Hunger Games* 234). In an act of gratitude, District 11 sends Katniss a loaf of bread (238)—which is significant because districts only ever send food to their own tributes during the Games, making this the first time that a district sent any item at all to a tribute from a competing district. This bread represents the changing political atmosphere in Panem. Prior to this moment, the Capitol had maintained its power by pitting the districts against one another and minimizing communication between them in order to prevent another uprising. District 11’s act of sending bread to Katniss shows that the districts may begin to work together towards a common goal in the near future. It further represents hope by renewing Katniss’ spirits and motivating her to carry on and win the Games.

This bread symbolism persists not only through *The Hunger Games* but also in its sequel *Catching Fire*. In this second novel, the districts attempt to rescue the tributes from the arena and start a rebellion against the Capitol. A code is developed to inform the tributes of the rescue plan and signal when it would take place: bread from District 3 is sent to the tributes, indicating that the rescue would happen on the third day of the Games, and twenty-four rolls of bread are sent, informing them that it would happen during the twenty-fourth hour of the day (Collins, *Catching Fire* 385). In this case, bread signifies the hope that the victors have of being rescued, as well as their hope for a successful rebellion against the Capitol. It also represents the moment where life in Panem completely changes. At the moment indicated by the bread code, the rebellion against the Capitol officially begins and everyone is forced to pick a side. This conflict culminates in the
bombing of District 12, turning the district into a wasteland and forcing its people to migrate to neighbouring districts.

Bread is the most significant and prominent example of food symbolism that appears in The Hunger Games trilogy, but there are many more examples. Immediately after being chosen for the Games, Katniss and Peeta board a train that takes them to the Capitol. On the train they are fed a multi-course meal, which they can barely keep down after eating out of pure excess. Coming from the impoverished District 12, Peeta and Katniss are in awe at the amount of food on the train (Collins, Hunger Games 45). This multi-course meal represents the overindulgence, excessiveness, and ignorance of the Capitol. While the districts are starving and barely making ends meet, the citizens of the Capitol indulge in multiple courses per meal and consume more food than a single citizen of the districts eats in an entire week.

The overindulgence and ignorance of the Capitol is further emphasized in Catching Fire when Peeta and Katniss attend President Snow’s banquet. There is an excessive amount of food at this banquet and two citizens of the Capitol urge Peeta to keep eating. Peeta responds by saying he wishes he could, but is too full to try all of the food. They laugh and offer Peeta a drink that will make him throw up so that he can make room for more, explaining, “Everyone does it, or else how would you have any fun at a feast?” (Collins, Catching Fire 79). While the citizens of the districts starve, the citizens of the Capitol are shown to intentionally throw up the food that they eat, all for the sake of “fun.”

The dinner table is also viewed as a neutral territory throughout the novels and is often a place where matters which may be difficult to talk about are confronted and discussed. Similar to how food symbolism is deployed in contemporary Italian cinema, as in the case of the 1992 film Benvenuti al Nord, the dinner table is perceived in the novels as a safe place where characters
can voice anything that they need to say (Lobalsamo, “Movies”). This is seen at multiple instances in the novels, such as when Katniss and Peeta’s trainer Haymitch decides to tell Katniss that Peeta has asked him to be trained separately (Collins, *Hunger Games* 113). Haymitch chooses to tell Katniss about Peeta’s request while they are seated at the dinner table because the neutrality of the dinner table provides the environment that he needs to break the difficult news to her, which he knows will cause her to feel a strong sense of betrayal.

The food symbolism continues through the use of apples in the novels, which represents the forbidden nature of various places and objects. Apples are first seen during Katniss’ private skill performance for the Gamemakers. In this scene Katniss picks up a bow—something that she is normally extremely skilled with—but the composition of the bow is different from what she is used to and the difference causes her to completely miss the target. The Gamemakers laugh and proceed to ignore Katniss by talking amongst themselves. After becoming accustomed to the new bow Katniss manages to hit a bullseye, but the Gamemakers fail to notice and instead focus their attention on a roasted pig that was brought into their private area. Katniss is furious and fires an arrow at the apple in the pig’s mouth, pinning it to the wall (Collins, *Hunger Games* 102). The pig represents the greed and ignorance of the Gamemakers that feast while a young girl’s life hangs in the balance, behaving as though her life does not matter. The pinned apple represents the forbidden nature of the area into which Katniss launches an arrow and those individuals that she challenges. No glass is needed to protect the Gamemakers from arrows because the tributes know their place and would never harm them out of fear for what might happen to themselves, their families, and their districts. Katniss defies this power hierarchy by deliberately firing an arrow into the Gamemakers’ lounge.

Apples make a further appearance in the novels when Katniss sabotages a stockpile of
supplies left by the Careers: tributes from richer districts who were trained to fight in the Games from a young age. In this scene, the Careers build a pyramid of supplies and surround the area with mines so that anyone who tries to steal or sabotage the stockpile risks tripping a mine and being killed. At the top of the pyramid is a sack of apples, representing the forbidden nature of these supplies (Collins, *Hunger Games* 218). Similar to the story of Adam and Eve, the supplies are there for the taking to any willing victim, but stealing anything from the stockpile could cost that person his or her life. Again Katniss challenges this forbidden nature and uses her bow to fire an arrow at the pyramid and tear a hole in the sack, causing the apples to fall to the ground and trigger the mines, thereby destroying the supplies (220).

A final example of food symbolism in *The Hunger Games* trilogy is the use of berries to symbolize sacrifice. At the beginning of the first novel when Gale brings Katniss a loaf of bread, the two friends also eat berries together (Collins, *Hunger Games* 8). The berries foreshadow the sacrifice that Katniss will make by volunteering as tribute in place of her sister. Berries are seen again when Katniss uses them to mask the taste of the sleeping potion she gives to the wounded Peeta. Despite promising him that she would not go out on her own to get more supplies after he is wounded, Katniss deceives Peeta and uses the sleeping potion to buy herself enough time to find a way to help him. She states, “Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I’ve done is unforgivable” (277). The berries signify the continuous sacrifices that Katniss makes in order to save her loved ones. Only by betraying Peeta’s trust does she gain the time she needs to look for the supplies to save him.

Berries make a final appearance in *The Hunger Games* when Peeta and Katniss are the only tributes left and realize that only one of them can survive. Katniss pulls out a handful of nightlock berries from her pocket and states, “Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor,
the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 344).

Katniss proposes that she and Peeta use the berries to kill themselves at the exact same time, thus preventing the Capitol from having a victor and rendering the Hunger Games useless. The berries represent the willingness of Katniss and Peeta to make the ultimate sacrifice and give up their lives in exchange for the repercussions and possible rebellion that their actions could incite against the Capitol.

Lastly the Cornucopia, which is placed in the middle of the group of tributes at the start of every Hunger Games, plays an extremely important role in both the plot and symbolism of the story. When the Games first begin, all of the supplies and weapons that are made available to the tributes are placed in the Cornucopia. Tributes must decide whether to run toward the Cornucopia and gather as many weapons and supplies as they can, or take shelter in the surrounding forest. The first option provides them with the tools that they will need to survive the Games, but this is bought at an increased risk of being killed in the open by other tributes. The second option offers safety from being killed in the opening minutes of the Games, but contributes to a greater chance of dying from a lack of supplies later on. Cornucopias traditionally serve as symbols of endless nourishment, most commonly associated with produce (Leeming 13). Suzanne Collins utilizes this symbol in a similar fashion, but rather than with food, she associates the Cornucopia in *The Hunger Games* with weapons. This symbolically compares the tributes’ need for weapons in the Games to the role that food plays as a source of nourishment in everyday life. Furthermore, this Cornucopia reinforces the control that the Capitol has over all forms of nourishment within the districts as it is the Gamemakers who decide what is placed inside for the tributes.

On the whole, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy is filled with food symbolism
from start to finish and the examples provided above only scratch the surface. The novels are ripe with further examples that emphasize the importance of food within the society of Panem and the complex symbolism that underlies it. Collins masterfully employs the use of food symbolism to develop her characters and the world of Panem to heights that are only achievable by the greatest of writers. Olindo Guerrini states, “A great artist is one who can make a reader savour the words on a page” (qtd. in Lobalsamo, “Art”). Based on this statement, readers and authors internationally can surely agree that Suzanne Collins is, by all means, a great artist.

Works Cited


---. “Food and the Movies; Food And Fashion.” 10 Nov. 2015, University of Toronto Mississauga. Lecture.