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Making Students Hungry for *The Hunger Games*

- A Didactic Approach to Suzanne Collins's Bestseller

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1. Introduction

Published in September 2008, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins immediately became a bestseller and was highly acclaimed by several recognized critics in several equally recognized newspapers. “A violent, jarring, speed-rap of a novel that generates nearly constant suspense ... I couldn’t stop reading.”, wrote the well-known author Stephen King in *Entertainment Weekly*. “Brilliantly plotted and perfectly paced.”, asserted John Green in the renowned *The New York Times Book Review*. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark went as far as to say that it “may be the fastest page-turner in publishing history (Pharr&Clark 9). The book remained on the *New York Times Bestseller* list for 100 consecutive weeks and it has also received numerous prestigious literary awards in its genre, for instance *Kirkus Reviews*’ “Book of the Year” for young adults and the *Cybil Award* for science fiction and fantasy. In the US alone, more than 28 million copies of the book have been sold and it has been translated into 51 different languages and sold in 56 different territories (Collins’s homepage). In 2012 *The Hunger Games* was adapted for the movie screen and it was an instant box office success. The film stars such Hollywood celebrities as Donald Sutherland, Woody Harrelson, Lenny Kravitz and Jennifer Lawrence (as the protagonist Katniss Everdeen) and during the 24 weeks you could catch the movie at the cinema it generated nearly \$ 700 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo).

The Hunger Games is the first book in a series of three (the other two are called *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010)) and the novel is constructed much in the same way as for example *The Twilight Saga* and the Harry Potter series; we follow the young protagonist through a series of hardships in her quest for survival and ultimate glory. There is also a secondary plot line in which we see a love triangle develop between the protagonist and two of her male acquaintances. However, *The Hunger Games* is, at least at first sight, primarily a story of survival with a female protagonist, and it deals with and gives references to several phenomena and events of both the present and the past, for instance today’s reality television and the gladiator games of Ancient Rome. Thus it broaches various themes which could be of specific interest when studying the text in a language classroom.

This essay will show how fiction in general and *The Hunger Games* in particular can be used in the language classroom. The first part of the essay deals with literature in the classroom from a general perspective. This is important in order to establish why literature is important for adolescents and how teachers might work with any work of fiction in the language classroom. The Curriculum for the compulsory school and other relevant sources will be used to justify my claims. I specifically aim at introducing the novel in the grades 7-9, which means that the pupils are between the ages of 13-16. Then I will discuss the novel from a gender perspective. How are the different characters in general, and the protagonist Katniss Everdeen in particular, depicted in the novel? Does the novel challenge the stereotypes of gender? I will also discuss why this issue is important to discuss with pupils. Following that, I will show the connection between the novel and reality TV. In what ways does the novel remind the reader of a reality show and why might this be interesting and important to talk about with adolescents? Finally, the link between the novel, the Roman Empire and the American society of today will be analysed. How does the author manage to create a fictive world which in many ways resembles both the present and the past? How and in what ways can the novel be seen as criticizing the US and is this critique something which can be applied to Sweden as well? The themes chosen are themes that I find suitable and important to work with and discuss with 15-year-old pupils because, speaking from experience, these are issues which are too often neglected in school due to the fact that they might be difficult to discuss and the teacher may feel uncomfortable discussing these themes. This is why I will also suggest cross-curricular activities where teachers can help each other deal with these questions.

English as a subject in the Swedish compulsory school is a core subject which means that all students need to pass this subject in order to be eligible for upper secondary school. For teachers of English in Swedish compulsory schools (grades 7-9), one of the aims, as stated in the syllabus, is that “teaching in English should essentially give pupils the opportunities to develop their ability to understand and interpret the content of ... different types of texts” (Skolverket 2011: 32). *The Hunger Games* is a novel which can help the pupils understand and interpret different aspects of the world around them, such as the importance of gender issues and the impact of reality TV. The novel can also help them understand the relationship between the present and the past.

For many pupils it is not easy to see the connection between historic events that may have shaped today's society. These vital aspects make the novel suitable to study in the language classroom.

2. Working with Literature

Young people's pastimes have radically changed over the last few decades. With the extremely powerful and rapid development of new technological products it is fairly easy to understand that books are no longer as interesting and appealing as they perhaps once used to be. While reading certainly provides a certain kind of pleasure, it might not be able to measure up to the immediate pleasure given by computers, movies and video games among today's adolescents. A recent report has shown, not surprisingly, that there has been a marked decline in the reading of fiction among American adults. Actually, in 2012 "fewer than half of all U.S. adults (46.9 percent, or 110.2 million) read a novel, short story, poem, or play" (NEA 24). And if adults do not read it is more than probable that they pass on this unwillingness to read to the next generations.

Evidently, this does not concern Americans exclusively but is more likely to be a phenomenon throughout the Western world. As this essay mainly concerns the Swedish compulsory school, grades 7-9, it is interesting to notice that in the latest PISA¹ report we can clearly see how Swedish 15-year-olds' reading comprehension has markedly deteriorated since 2000. In 2000 and 2003 Sweden was well above the OECD² average in reading, but now it is the opposite. In fact, since 2000 Sweden is the OECD country where reading performance has deteriorated the most (Skolverket 2013: 8-9). This might simply be due to the fact that children do not read as much as they used to because of other interests (computers, TV, mobile phones etc.). Another reason might be that parents today do not encourage their children to read because they themselves do not realize how important good reading skills are.

Whose responsibility is it to make people read? When it comes to children and young adults, the responsibility rests largely on schools. It is a teacher's job to motivate

¹ Programme for International Student Assessment

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

his³ students to read and also to try to create a pleasure in reading, meaning that students will also read literature outside of school. This is why it is so important that language teachers themselves are passionate about literature and the value of reading, or it is unlikely that they will be able to convey to students why reading is worthwhile (Vischer Bruns 6).

Still, all teachers of English have to make sure their planning of students' learning is in accordance with the core content. For the grades 7-9 there are no less than 22 items in the core content which must be covered during these three years and evidently not all of them entail literary reading. However, one of these points specifically states that students should meet "literature and other fiction in spoken, dramatised and filmed forms" (Skolverket 2011: 34). Hence, no teacher can disregard bringing literature into the classroom.

But why does the syllabus encourage us to work with literature and what are the rewards for doing so? In their book *Literature in the Language Classroom* (1987), Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater list four important aspects: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Authentic material is needed as a contrast to the course material used in class, which is often designed and adapted to the corresponding level of the class. Authentic material allows the learner to meet and deal with the "real" language which native speakers themselves meet and the learner will this way acquire a greater understanding of the language as a whole with idioms, collocations, irony etc. When it comes to cultural enrichment Collie and Slater say:

It is true of course that the 'world' of a novel, play, or a short story is a created one, yet it offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors. (4)

³ In the following, when referring to the teacher I will use the pronoun "he" as I myself am a male teacher.

Language enrichment speaks for itself; you increase your vocabulary and by reading and understanding what others have written you automatically enhance your own reading skills and get a better reading comprehension. Personal involvement is basically the idea that you are “drawn into the book” and really want to find out what happens next (Collie & Slater 3-6).

According to Eddie Williams (1984, in Hedge 2000) teachers should try to adopt a “three-phase procedure involving pre-, while-, and post-reading stages” when working with a text (209). The pre-reading phase basically involves the teacher preparing the students for the text. It can be done in many different ways and may include introducing key vocabulary, talking about the setting and discussing the characters’ names for instance. The purpose of while-reading activities is to “encourage learners to be active as they read” (Hedge 210). Here the teacher can for instance ask the student to guess what is going to happen in the next chapter or to keep a reading journal. Post-reading activities can focus on both content and language. You could set up a role-play or a debate, focusing on the content or work with the language through vocabulary exercises or writing exercises for example. Preferably the post-reading activities should be connected to previous reading phases in a clear way (Hedge 211).

While working with a text it is also essential to have the students increase their vocabulary. One very influential way of enhancing students’ vocabulary when it comes to reading texts is to make them guess the meaning of words based on the context and the background knowledge. Provided the text you are working with is at an adequate level and thus containing an adequate number of unfamiliar words, students should be able to guess about 60-80 % of these words (Hedge 193). Paul Nation (1990, in Schmitt 2000) agrees and claims that this strategy, also known as “inferencing”, is very useful for learning low-frequency words (153). However, having guessed a word correctly does not mean that it will automatically be remembered. A rule of thumb is that the harder the word is to guess, i.e. how much cognitive effort is needed, the likelier it is to be retained in your memory (Schmitt 155).

When it comes to learning vocabulary, two terms are frequently used: explicit learning and incidental learning. According to Norbert Schmitt explicit learning is when you learn words “through the focused study of words”, whereas incidental learning is when you learn words “through exposure when one’s attention is focused on the use of

language, rather than the learning itself” (116). Explicit learning is then most likely what students in schools are mainly used to, for instance to learn a number of words from a text. You focus your attention on a specific area that needs to be learned and it is likely to give an immediate result. Incidental learning, on the other hand, is what happens when you in one way or another are exposed to the language or forced to use it, i.e. you learn without really taking notice of it. It is less immediate due to the lack of focus and you need frequent exposure to these words in order to learn them, but Schmitt gives two reasons why incidental learning should be included in language teaching: “[M]eeting a word in different contexts expands what is known about it (improving quality of knowledge), and the additional exposures help consolidate it in memory” (146). It is of major importance that these two ways of learning vocabulary be present simultaneously in the language classroom in order to achieve the best result possible and the general consensus on how to implement more incidental learning seems to be “to have the students read more” (150).

An important and sometimes also difficult aspect of teaching languages is to get your students to speak the target language. And speaking in this case should not just involve answering factual questions where only one answer is the correct one. In their book *Teaching Literature in the Language Classroom* (2000), Brian Parkinson and Helen Thomas mention that “... in traditional classrooms almost all learner turns are answers, but in real-life FL⁴ use people mostly need to ask questions, and start conversations” (148). This might sound obvious, but there are undoubtedly many teachers who only let their pupils answer questions, whereas the pupils should also be taught to ask questions and participate in discussions.

A more natural approach would be to form small groups and ask the students to discuss open questions which will make the students think and reflect in such a way that the answers will give you their opinions and feelings. This is of great importance, not only for their grade in English, but also for their ability to really communicate in English. Most people come into contact with the English speaking world quite a lot and if you only know how to answer factual questions and not how to participate in discussions, the people you try to communicate with will probably soon lose interest in

⁴ Foreign language

you. Such questions could start with “How did you feel when...?” or “What did you think about...?” Working in groups is also a matter of “turn-taking and turn-giving” (Parkinson & Thomas 148). Some students feel at ease speaking English, whereas others may be shy and not say very much. Hence it is very important that the classroom is a safe place where everyone feels comfortable enough to use the language and make mistakes without feeling humiliated (Hedge 293). Before engaging in such discussions it would be advisable to supply the students (especially the more avid speakers) with some strategies on how to include the others in the conversation. This could include tag questions and more general questions like “‘What do you think’ and ‘Would you agree’” (Hedge 268). In the syllabus for English it says that pupils should use “[l]anguage strategies to contribute to and actively participate in conversations by taking the initiative in interaction, giving confirmation, putting follow-up questions, taking the initiative to raise new issues and also concluding conversations” (Skolverket 2011: 35). This excerpt from the syllabus is not at all about answering yes or no to the teacher’s questions, but rather quite a complex way for many teenagers of participating in actual conversations in which there often is no right or wrong answer.

One of the trickiest parts in school today is to make time for everything that needs to be done, and that goes for all subjects, not only English. In the curriculum teachers are encouraged to “co-operate with other teachers in order to attain the goals of the education” (Skolverket 2011: 16). There are so many goals to attain in so brief a time that this is necessary to make it work. When working with a literature project in English it would also be advisable to connect other subjects to this project. In her book *Why Literature* (2011), Cristina Vischer Bruns describes a project by Jeffery D. Wilhelm in which he was assigned to teach a group of students who were very reluctant to read, so called remedial readers. He soon found that the major problem was that these students, as opposed to more avid readers, had difficulties in plunging into the imaginary world and could therefore not visualize an alternative world far from their own. In other words, these weaker readers do not “see” what they read which makes it hard for them to be engaged with a text. And if you are not engaged in a text and if you do not feel or experience anything while reading, it is undoubtedly difficult to profit from it let alone participate in classroom activities.

To help these students develop an experience from their texts, Wilhelm let them engage in drama and art. For example they acted out certain parts and made cut-outs of characters. The effect was significant and the students' responses were overwhelming. Reading had for them, through the use of art and drama, become a meaningful activity (45-50). This way of working with reluctant readers could very well prove highly beneficial. You could involve subjects like Swedish and Art as a way of helping other subjects attain their goals, but more importantly to help students get a better reading experience as soon as possible in life.

3. Gender Issues

“Whenever I write a story, I hope it appeals to both boys and girls. But maybe in its simplest form, it's having a female protagonist in a gladiator story...” (Q&A with ... Suzanne Collins)

Traditionally fiction for young adults has been divided into boys' books and girls' books, but with much of the recent literature this division hardly applies anymore (Lem & Hassel in Pharr & Clark 120). However, there still appears to be a need for the authors to appeal more to the boys than to the girls to increase their sales. For example authors have been asked to change their female protagonists to male ones and J.K. Rowling's agent insisted she only use her initials as to conceal the fact that she is a woman (Lem & Hassel in Pharr & Clark 120-121). Thus, a large part of the contemporary young adult fiction, whether it be literature or other media (e.g. TV, films, computer games), is still male oriented. The protagonist is often male and has certain typical masculine characteristics such as strength, courage and self-confidence. Names like Superman and Batman easily come to mind. Then we have the kind of characters who develop into heroes, who little by little become aware of their powers. Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins and Percy Jackson are recent examples of this kind of hero. Female characters who appear in young adult fiction are seldom protagonists, but more like an appendix to the male protagonist. And even if they are protagonists, Lem and Hassel point out that a typical female one would rather possess feminine qualities such

as “idealized physical female beauty and vulnerability” (Lem & Hassel in Pharr & Clark 118).⁵

However, in *The Hunger Games* there is a female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen (and two male appendixes, Peeta Mellark and Gale Hawthorne). Yet, Katniss belongs to neither of the two categories mentioned above. Lem and Hassel (in Pharr & Clark 118) also point this out and she is, one could argue, a hybrid of the two who possesses both traditionally feminine and masculine features; Katniss is clearly courageous, which is shown in the way she defies the rules of her district when she goes hunting and in the fact that she takes her sister’s place in the Hunger Games. Doing so also shows that she has a strong affection for her little sister, which shows again when she takes a young girl, Rue, under her wings and the way Katniss reacts when Rue is killed:

I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair behind her ear ... My throat is tight with tears ... My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheek ... I lean forward and press my lips against her temples. (235-236)

Quite early on in the novel we learn that Katniss’s father is dead and it is clear that Katniss is the one who provides for the family. She goes on illegal hunting trips with Gale and she trades some of her prey for other things they need. Thus Katniss becomes, as Tom Henthorne points out, “the man of the family” (Henthorne 44-45), her sister being too young and her mother too emotionally detached and worn after her husband’s death five years earlier to be able to help Katniss. She hunts with a bow and arrow and kills animals efficiently. She expresses no sorrow at having to do so, almost the contrary: “I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. ... But I got a decent price for his pelt” (7). This shows that she is more pragmatic than she is affectionate.

This absence of feelings for animals is also present when it comes to dealing with people as she rarely expresses typical feminine feelings, such as vulnerability as previously mentioned. When talking with Gale about killing people in the Hunger

⁵ During this part of the essay the concept of masculine and feminine will be referred to in these stereotypical ways which may not necessarily be in line with neither the author’s nor the reader’s notion of this.

Games, Katniss says that “The awful thing is that if I can forget they’re people, it will be no different at all” (40). She is concerned with what other people will think of her behaviour though: “... this is upsetting me and I don’t want to cry. ... everyone will make notes of my tears, and I’ll be marked as an easy target. A weakling” (23). The clothes she wears (leather boots, trousers, a shirt, a cap and a forage bag (4)) are not what a typical female protagonist would wear. In fact we do not see anything concerning Katniss’s appearance that resembles feminine attributes in the beginning of the novel. After she has been out hunting she “scrub[s] off the dirt and sweat ...” (15) and when she puts on an old dress of her mother’s to wear for the reaping⁶ Katniss claims she looks “nothing like myself ...” (15). This way the text lets the reader see Katniss as a female character but with strong masculine qualities. Lem and Hassel (in Pharr & Clark 2012) call Katniss “a ‘male-identified’ female character ... that appeal[s] to all readers” (118).

However as the novel progresses we learn of her feminine sides too. In the preparations for the Hunger Games Katniss has her legs waxed, she puts on make-up and beautiful clothes and as they parade in front of the crowd Katniss catches a glimpse of herself and Peeta, and she is (though not literally) “floored by how breathtaking we look” (70). There are also the feelings of love. As mentioned before, there are two male characters contending for Katniss’s attention; Gale, who is the traditional masculine character – strong, courageous and rebellious and Peeta, who is also strong, but at the same time he has a few distinct feminine qualities such as affection, sensitivity and consideration. In the beginning of the novel Katniss feels close to Gale, but it is interesting to notice that the more time she spends with Peeta in the Games, the more her feelings for him develop and Katniss almost ends up having guilty feelings towards Gale: “... I feel like I’ve been lying to someone who trusts me” (371). So we see the female protagonist develop gradually from a girl with strong masculine qualities into a girl who, while still clinging to the masculine side, also possesses typical feminine qualities.

Talking about what is masculine and feminine with a group of teenagers is not an easy task, which is why it would be a good idea to begin with a general discussion about

⁶ The process of choosing one male and one female candidate (tribute) for the Hunger Games.

prejudices to make the pupils realise that our society is actually full of prejudices (piercings/tattoos, religion, appearance, etc.) and that they exist within every person. It is important to make the students understand that basically everything that is different from yourself could be a matter of prejudice and talking about masculine and feminine is not a matter of right or wrong. Adolescents today are often very afraid to be different. It is almost considered wrong for a boy to show feelings, emotions and to be vulnerable. For a girl it could be difficult to show that you are physically strong and you are often supposed to behave more correctly and politely. This is very noticeable in Swedish schools today and is something that all schools and all teachers need to work with. Skolverket says:

The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation. (Skolverket 2011: 10)

Given that the book has a female protagonist but who still has both masculine and feminine characteristics and also two male characters, one of whom possesses more stereotypical feminine qualities and the other one more masculine qualities, this would be an excellent opportunity to discuss this matter. As has been shown earlier, the novel does to some extent challenge what most people perceive as masculine and feminine and this is something which is important to discuss with pupils in the compulsory school. Some possible questions may include:

What is masculine and what is feminine according to you?

Do you think that all people have both feminine and masculine qualities? Motivate.

Is it okay for boys to be feminine and for girls to be masculine? Motivate.

What do you think are Katniss's main traditional masculine and feminine characteristics? What about Peeta?

After having discussed these questions the pupils write a short argumentative essay on gender roles in which they express their own opinions on the subject, but they can also use the input from the discussions and search for material on their own. They will be encouraged to think beyond the traditional gender patterns, as expressed in the

curriculum. This theme will then cover the all-round communicative skills of reading, speaking and writing, which Skolverket also emphasizes: “[t]hese skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one’s thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language ... ” (Skolverket 2011: 32).

4. Reality Television

“The Hunger Games is a reality television program. An extreme one, but that’s what it is.” (Q&A with ... Suzanne Collins)

Oxford Dictionaries (2013) state that reality TV is “television programmes in which real people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative.” Most people have probably watched or at least caught a glimpse of one of the innumerable reality television programmes which are broadcast virtually around-the-clock on practically all channels available. Nowadays reality TV is extremely common and popular and it exists in all forms (dating, makeovers, lifestyle changes etc.). One thing that makes these shows so popular is that they are about real people, not actors. It is easy for people to identify with them and as anybody can enter these shows and be viewed by millions of spectators you get a feeling of “that could have been me”. People today seem to compete for attention and in their article “Why America Loves Reality TV (2001), Steven Reiss and James Wiltz hit the nail on the head: “We think we are important if others pay attention to us and unimportant if ignored.” This is something which is very common in schools these days. Many teenagers feel that they constantly need to be the center of attention and that the number of friends you have is more important than how good friends you have. Much of this is based on pupils’ self-esteem, which in some cases may be low. Therefore the school must aim at reinforcing pupils’ self-esteem and try to make them realize that each individual is unique and good the way he/she is. Skolverket says: “The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby be able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom” (Skolverket 2011: 9).

Another reason why reality shows are popular is the concept of competition combined with the possibility of revenge and betrayal. A common concept for reality

shows is that you compete against others for several weeks and that every week a contestant is voted off the show until only the winner remains. But to be the winner you will most likely have to form alliances with people which you will later have to break, which of course may very well result in your own voting off the show. This is perhaps even more noticeable in Swedish schools today. Pupils form their own small alliances in school, sometimes without thinking of the consequences but sometimes, which is more serious, consciously and thereby excluding others, which might lead to serious cases of bullying. It is absolutely vital that the school and its staff do everything they can to counteract this behaviour in their everyday teaching. Skolverket says:

All who work in the school should contribute to developing the pupils' sense of togetherness and solidarity, and responsibility for people outside the immediate group [and] actively resist discrimination and degrading treatment of individuals or groups ... Teachers should clarify and discuss with the pupils the basic values of Swedish society and their consequences in terms of individual actions, openly communicate and discuss different values, views and problems [and] be observant and together with other school staff take the necessary steps to prevent and counteract all forms of discrimination and degrading treatment. (Skolverket 2011: 14-15)

This is one of the most important issues Swedish schools need to work with today in order to make each and every pupil feel comfortable and welcome every day in school.

And as Suzanne Collins herself acknowledges, *The Hunger Games* really gives the reader a feel of an extreme version of a reality programme. Twenty-four contestants, or tributes as they are called in the book, are sent out into the Games and it could really be anyone as long as the person is between twelve and eighteen years old. However, the contestants do not so much choose to take part in the Hunger Games as they are forced into it by drawing lots. Since participating in the games almost certainly equals death (there can be only one survivor), the audience will undoubtedly be torn between hope and despair.

The concept of competitiveness and revenge/betrayal is also very prominent throughout the Hunger Games. Of course the contestants do not get voted off the Games as much as they get killed off, but the principle is the same; eliminate all the other

contestants one way or another in order to achieve the prize as winner. The element of betrayal is more noticeable in other characters than in the protagonist who more often acts morally. She forms a kind of alliance with Rue (201), the youngest tribute, but Katniss acts more like a mother to her and makes sure that Rue is safe while she exposes herself to all the danger. Later, when the rules are changed⁷, she finds Peeta and forms an alliance with him. Katniss never has the intention of breaking either of these pacts by killing her ally.

On the other hand, Katniss experiences the bitter taste of betrayal herself. First when Peeta decides to be coached individually in preparation for the Hunger Games (113-114) and then when he forms an alliance with some other tributes (160-161). As before, she does not let it affect her though. She does not get emotionally involved, but rather shows vindictiveness as she hopes she will be the one who kills Peeta: “I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death, if I don’t kill him first myself” (162).

The resemblance to actual reality shows is remarkable. The organization of the Hunger Games (participants in a designated area fighting for food and survival, forming alliances and trying not to get voted off) is very much like that of *Survivor* (Henthorne 97). The way Katniss’s body is prepared for the Games and the clothes she gets to wear reminds the reader of reality shows like *Extreme Makeover* and *Top Model*. In those kinds of shows it is common to see a woman changing from ordinary to stunning. This is exactly what happens to Katniss when, after having gone through all the required changes, she looks at herself in a mirror and thinks: “I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun” (121).

We also see the impact of the audience. In reality shows the audience sometimes has the possibility to influence the shows in one way or another. For instance, in *American Idol* the votes decide who stays on the show and in *Big Brother* the audience is involved in decisions which influence the situation in the house (Henthorne 103). In The Hunger Games the audience also comes into play. They obviously do not decide who gets killed, but the more appealing the tributes seem towards the audience the more

⁷ The rules of the Hunger Games clearly state that there can be only one winner, but partly because of Katniss and Peeta’s spiring love the rules are changed so two people can win, provided they are from the same district.

likely it is that they send them gifts through sponsors⁸. Henthorne also observes this and says that Katniss acts smartly in front of the camera. Even though she does not like the Hunger Games she is aware of the importance of having sponsors and knows how to appeal to the viewers (Henthorne 103). This is a phenomenon which is also present in reality shows on TV in which the audience may affect the outcome of the show. In those cases participants who seem nicer than others might stay on the show longer.

This is a theme that most pupils are likely to have an opinion about. Reality television is a phenomenon which is subject to much debate these days and many of them are designed especially to appeal to young adults, such as *Paradise Hotel*, *Big Brother*, *Jersey Shore* and *Teen Mom* for instance. Considering that *The Hunger Games* can easily be perceived as an extreme reality show and that reality shows are in fact a part of young people's lives, to a greater or lesser extent, discussions about this topic can be very productive. Skolverket also states that the content of communication in English should include “[c]urrent and subject areas familiar to the pupils” and “[i]nterests, daily situations, activities, sequences of events, relations and ethical questions (Skolverket 2011: 34). It seems evident that reality shows fall under these phrases. Questions regarding this area might be:

What is a reality show and what characterizes a reality show? Are there different kinds?

In what ways might you say that *The Hunger Games* is like a reality show?

Do you follow any reality shows regularly? Why/why not?

Do you think certain kinds of people are more likely to appear on reality shows than others? Motivate.

Would you ever consider participating in a reality show? Motivate. If yes, which one/s/?

Following this oral discussion I will also have the pupils write a short essay in which they compare a reality show with their own school. This is to make them think about their own actions and their friends' actions. Once again, this theme will cover the all-round communicative skills of reading, speaking and writing, as encouraged by Skolverket in the curriculum.

⁸ Sponsors are able to provide the tributes with necessary gifts during the Games. It could be medicine if you are sick or food if you are starving.

5. Panem (or a Future America) vs. Ancient Rome

“I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment.” (Interview with Suzanne Collins)

In many ways Panem is quite similar to Ancient Rome with its gladiator games. In fact much of the story and its names derive from the Roman Empire. We encounter characters called Claudius, Octavia, Flavius and Caesar, they ride in chariots and the Hunger Games arena is very similar to the Colosseum in Rome, where gladiators fought to the death for the amusement of the Roman people. The whole concept of the Games is actually much like a huge gladiator fight where all gladiators fight to the death until a sole winner remains, with the audience following the development closely. Collins also admits this in an interview: “The world of Panem, particularly the Capitol, is loaded with Roman references.” (Interview with Suzanne Collins). This creates an excellent opportunity for the English teacher to cooperate with the history teacher. Besides collecting Roman references as the pupils read the book, the history teacher can give lectures about the Roman Empire and thus both improve the understanding of the novel and broaden the pupils’ knowledge of the Roman Empire and relate it to the present, because teaching in history should, among other things, cover “[a]ntiquity, its characteristic features as an epoch and their importance in understanding our own age” (Skolverket 2011: 166).

However, there is yet another reference worth mentioning. As already stated, Panem is the fictive nation in which *The Hunger Games* is set. Still, the country may not be all that fictional as Panem is “...the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America” (18). Hence, Panem is not only similar to Ancient Rome, but by placing the nation where North America is today, it can also be seen as a mirror of the US.

In *The Hunger Games* we know already from the beginning that food is scarce in the Districts (as opposed to the Capitol) where Katniss and her family live, because Katniss has to hunt to put food on the table. The Capitol is a place of wealth and lavishness for a few elect, whereas the districts are poor, the people oppressed and

surviving from one day to the next is all that matters. Thus there seems to be no evident middle class which can be seen as a way of bringing the American population's attention to their own problems. Starting during Reagan's presidency, the middle class has gradually become less prominent as the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer (Henthorne 117). Katniss expresses her feelings about her district by saying: "District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety ..." (6). With safety she is referring to the Peacekeepers who, as the name implies, guard the districts in order to preserve peace. This is another reference to the Roman Empire as they much resemble the Praetorian guards whose function it was to keep peace and make sure the emperor was safe. As a contrast to the difficulties in her district, the first time Katniss sees the Capitol with her own eyes, she ponders:

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

Again, this passage shows the existing inequality in Panem. Katniss has to work hard to find food for herself and her family whereas in the Capitol everything is served for those who are lucky enough to be living there.

Adding to the Roman references, Panem itself is a Roman word meaning "bread". This comes from the Roman expression "Panem et Circenses" which translates into "Bread and Circuses" (Frankel in Pharr & Clark 55). To put it simply, in Ancient Rome the idea was to provide the, often famished, population with bread and entertain them with gladiator games (circuses) to keep them happy, faithful to their rulers and as not to care about politics. Juvenal, a Roman poet at the time when the Roman Empire was at its peak, noticed this and warned the Roman citizens that their lack of involvement in politics could be devastating by declaring: "Only two things really concern them: bread and the Games" (Clemente in Pharr & Clark 21-22). This sort of diversion from politics to food and entertainment is exactly what the Capitol is doing to its population. As Katniss observes:

What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? ... What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment? (65)

This passage clearly shows that the Capitol is trying to keep its population happy by providing them with food and entertainment. On a larger scale, though, this passage also functions as an alarm bell for, in particular, the American nation and its citizens.

In keeping with the quotation from Juvenal above, the text shows us the possible effects of the decadent lifestyle of many Americans today, where no one seems to care about each other and the well-being of the nation. Instead of taking an active part in society and actually try to make a difference, people lead frivolous lives and tend not to engage in serious matters. As pointed out by Henthorne:

Like those living in the Capitol, Americans by-and-large are more likely interested in who wins *American Idol* or how Whitney Houston died than they are about the consequences a U.S.-led embargo on Iran will have upon civilians in Iran or how the presence of U.S. troops in Haiti are likely to affect governance in that nation. (106)

Furthermore, Frankel argues that “...we Americans are also living in a world of bread and circuses, filled with more entertainment channels than news. We are kept amused, distracted, fed to the point of being overfed” (quoted in Pharr&Clark 55). In James Blasingame’s article “An Interview with Suzanne Collins”, Collins herself says that people today “see so many reality shows and dramas that when real news is on, its impact is completely lost on them” (727). Even though these ideas relate to the US, Sweden is not far behind. We also have all these reality shows and it seems as if that is what people care most about. Swedish adolescents absolutely need to open their eyes to the outside world and realise that there are people in our society who do not have a place to live, people who die of cold or starvation and all this while we cannot decide which reality show to watch.

Balancing Roman references with references to modern America, the book ingeniously captures the idea that the US is a nation on the verge of a national crisis which may ultimately lead to its fall, just like the fall of the Roman Empire (Pharr&Clark 9). Seeing as the novel gives references to the current state of the US, it might be a good idea to involve the civics teacher. As the pupils read they will become aware of the financial status in Panem and also the economic inequalities that exist. The civics teacher can more explicitly explain and refer to the current financial state in the US and thereby discuss some of the core content he is supposed to cover, for example

[h]ow the economies of countries and regions are interlinked and how different regions' economies are changing in a globalised world “and “[d]ifferences between people’s financial resources, power and influence related to gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, the relationship between socio-economic background, education, housing and welfare [and] the concepts of equality and gender equality (Skolverket 2011: 193).

This cross-curricular approach where the civics teacher can talk about the current state in the US with regards to the financial and social situation and have the pupils compare it to our current situation in Sweden, and where the history teacher can lecture about the Roman Empire will give the pupils a greater sense of coherence. Besides helping them understand the novel better and improve their English skills, the pupils will also see how different subjects in school are interlinked and this will improve their general knowledge. Skolverket also considers this to be of importance as one of the aims in the content of communication for English is “[l]iving conditions, traditions, social relations and cultural phenomena in various contexts and areas where English is used” (Skolverket 2011: 34). However, it is vital that these parts be taught by professionals and not by the English teacher as that may undermine his authority should he prove himself unable to clearly deal with these matters. Having talked about these issues pupils can then proceed to consider and discuss questions such as:

What references to the Roman Empire can you find in the book?

Why do you think the author has chosen to use these kinds of references?

Do you think Swedish society today in any way resembles American society? Motivate.

How would you describe the kind of society depicted in the book? Consider both positive and negative sides.

Finally, the pupils will write a short essay in which they predict the state of the Swedish society in 20 years' time. In twenty years the pupils will themselves be grown-ups and hopefully responsible citizens in the Swedish society and to start thinking about this already now might be an eye-opener to them. They should consider the aspects which have been covered during classes, such as peoples' lifestyles, social welfare and economic conditions. They can consult books and Internet sites for further information.

6. Conclusion

Using literature in the language classroom is no longer optional for the language teacher. The new syllabus encourages teachers to use literature as part of their teaching and doing so can be very rewarding for both teachers and pupils. By using the three-phase procedure including pre-, while-, and post-reading activities in a structured manner, the teacher can introduce practically any literary work to the students and get them motivated.

Moreover, it is almost a prerequisite that teachers co-operate, using a cross-curricular approach to teaching, in order to reach all the goals that need to be attained over a three-year period. This way of working thematically will also help especially less proficient students to understand the meaning of the activities suggested and they will likely be more motivated than through standard teaching.

The Hunger Games is in all ways a suitable novel to study at upper secondary school. What may at first sight seem to be a regular survival story for adolescents actually turns out to contain many different layers which makes it a suitable novel to study. It is of course a story of survival, but a close reading of the book reveals topics which contemporary readers may perceive as complex and controversial such as gender issues and the current state of the US with a poor economy and increasing social gaps.

Furthermore, the three themes suggested in this essay are all themes which pupils in upper secondary schools can relate to in one way or another and they are also important themes which deal with everyday problems and situations. With the help of other subjects and a little effort in the pre-reading phase and with the first crucial chapter, even reluctant readers will undoubtedly enjoy this book.

Concluding, with *The Hunger Games* Suzanne Collins has truly accomplished a modern classic masterpiece which keeps the reader riveted from the first page. The book is, within the young adult genre, one of the most popular books of all times and has justly earned its place among other top sellers in the genre such as *The Twilight Saga* and the Harry Potter series. The novel is possible to analyse and work with from many different angles in an educational context and this essay has but presented a few of them. This multifaceted aspect makes the book perfect to study in the language classroom, leaving the pupils hungry for more.

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