

***EXPLORING MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM AND SUZANNE
COLLINGS'S THE HUNGER GAMES AS CRITICAL UTOPIAS***

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Abstract: Recent transformations of perception within the Utopian fiction determined theoreticians such as Lyman Tower Sargent to introduce a third major type of utopia, namely critical utopia. This reunites some of the characteristics presented by eutopia as well as dystopia, bringing forward a society which can be good but also bad, which offers advantages but also disadvantages. Critical utopias expose the limitations of the Utopian tradition and the fact that perceiving a place as being positive or negative is not sufficient. Nowadays writers and readers need to bring together the polar opposites and pay particular attention to the dynamic process by which a society collapses under its own weight and flaws while hoping to be reborn from its own ashes. Starting from these premises, this article focuses on two recently published trilogies which have a huge impact on the young readership – Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam and Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games – and defines them as critical utopias. It underlines the fact that both works prove to be something more than they are generally expected, precisely because of the time and great effort invested in the construction of two near future American societies. They encompass the longing for perfection as well as the seeds of disaster. In the end, this article invites the reader to meditate upon a series of contemporary problems and acknowledge the various ways in which Atwood and Collins processed and translated them into literature.

Keywords: critical utopia, narrative structure, dynamic alternative, difference, prediction

Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* and Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* are two recently published trilogies with a huge impact on young readership. World-wide acclaimed these books have been classified in various ways – 'science fiction', 'speculative fiction' or 'young adult fiction' – though none of these labels seems to be appropriate. Nevertheless, such terms proved to be very slippery themselves, too narrow or reductionist and even discriminative. Therefore, the best way to explore these trilogies is by studying them in the light of the scholarship on utopian fiction; an attempt which proves to be really challenging. Exposing the fouls of the socio-politic and economic mechanisms, satirizing behaviours, speculating upon numerous contemporary fears and predicting apocalyptic changes, *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* are usually called 'dystopias'. However, we cannot stop wonder whether these

novels can really be seen as ‘dystopias’. Are they similar to George Orwell’s *1984* (1948) or William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) or they tend to be something else?

Less of a theoretician and more of a practitioner, Suzanne Collins accepts the label of ‘dystopia’ for her books without questioning it. Moreover, in a 2010 interview, she claims that dystopian stories offer her a great advantage as a writer because they are “places where you can play out the scenarios in your head- your anxieties- and see what might come of them” and help her influence readers hopefully in a positive way, making them “head things off”(Perlmutter 2). Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, is more sceptical regarding this term. She argues in her 2011 non-fictional work, titled *In Other Worlds*, that *MaddAddam* depicts a society which is simultaneously good and bad, bringing advantages as well as disadvantages. Thus, she pleads for the use of a new term–‘ustopia’, a combination of ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’ (66). Although we acknowledge Atwood’s invention–‘ustopia’– and salute its simplicity and ingenuity, we stress that it does nothing more but replace an already consecrated one, namely ‘critical utopia’.

Researchers generally agree that Utopian fiction was born in 1516 together with the publication of Sir Thomas More’s book, *Utopia*. However, it did not receive academic attention until the 1960s when the Association for Utopian Studies brought it into the spot light. In his study on *Utopianism*, Lyman Tower Sargent proposes a classification of the utopian works. According to him, *utopia* is “a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and located in time and space” (188). He stresses the fictional character of the society and the effort invested in elaborating its socio-cultural system as well as locating it within a certain historical and geographical context. Function of the connection between the author’s vision and the principles of his real society, Sargent develops a typology containing “the three faces” of the Utopian narrative form. The first one is “eutopia” or “positive utopia”. Its name is derived from the Greek εὖ (‘good’ or ‘well’) and τόπος (‘place’), means ‘good place’ or a ‘place (where all is) well’ (Cuddon 750). Due to homophony, ‘eutopia’ has usually been confused with ‘utopia’ which erroneously replaced it in the general consciousness¹. Eutopia is defined by Sargent as “a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived” (188). Such a society is idealistic and programed to eliminate all inequalities and sufferings. The reverse of ‘eutopia’ is called ‘dystopia’ or ‘negative utopia’. The term ‘dystopia’ (from Greek δυσ- and τόπος) means “bad, abnormal, diseased” and was firstly used by John Stuart Mill in one of his parliamentary speeches from 1868 with the meaning ‘too bad to be practicable’(Milner 827). As a literary form, dystopia emerged during the last century. This is a “a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and 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” (188). Such a society is characterized by tyranny, oppression of all kinds, suffering and alienation. Eutopia and

1. The inventor of these terms, Thomas Moore, himself, emphasized the distinction between ‘utopia’ and ‘eutopia’. He chose to name his imaginary island *Utopia* (a ‘non-place’) although the good society existing there could have also been called ‘eutopia’.

dystopia do not find themselves in an antagonist relation; each one contains the seeds of the other. The third category in Sargent's typology is a hybrid utopia, known as "critical utopia," which should be perceived 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" (188). Critical utopias reunites some of the characteristics presented by eutopia as well as dystopia, bringing forward a society which can be good but also bad, which offers advantages but also disadvantages. Differentiating critical utopias from other utopian works is quite difficult however, Tom Moylan highlights a few points that can be taken into account. First of all, these texts reject "Utopian as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream" (Moylan, *DI* 10). This means that although the idea of a better society is dismissed as unrealistic, there still remains an impulse or a longing for it. Secondly, critical utopias "dwell on the conflict between the original world and the Utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated" (Moylan, *SUS* 11). The fictional world described is in conflict with that of the author's as it exposes the ways in which society changes and draws attention to the fact that problems can get bigger just like a snowball falling down the hill. Finally, critical utopias focus on "the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within Utopian society itself and thus render a more recognizable and dynamic alternative" (Moylan, *SUS* 11). In other words, while the "imperfection" of society is accepted as a state of fact, there is also a pressure for making a "difference", a change which does not guarantee that things will be better or worse but which will mark social evolution. Critical utopias expose the limitations of the Utopian tradition and the fact that perceiving a place as being positive or negative is not sufficient. They bring together the polar opposites and pay a particular attention to the dynamic process by which a society collapses under its own weight and flaws while hoping to be reborn from its own ashes. They make the reader acknowledge the *difference* and *imperfection* of this world, by presenting a sequence of images. These can reflect the same place before and after a major event (a war, revolution, pandemic, apocalypse etc) or compare it with others. All good or virtuous things have their level of evil and viciousness, and vice versa.

MaddAddam and *The Hunger Games* are actually a combination of 'utopia' and 'dystopia'. They pack in both the image of a perfect society and its opposite, and we consider that a proper term to define them is 'critical utopia' or as Atwood says 'ustopia' (*OW* 86). The societies described in great detail by Margaret Atwood and Suzanne Collins, are characterised by veracity— a trait inherited from Sir Thomas More's 'Utopia'. However, they are not hidden or unknown but set in a familiar space, right within the former borders of the United States. Atwood keeps her country officially unnamed but offers plenty of clues, which indicate that this is actually a futuristic version of America. There are mentioned different places such as *Dallas*, *Seattle*, *New New York*, *Texas*, *California*, *San Francisco* and there are made numerous allusions to the American lifestyle, corporations and products. On the other hand, in Collins's trilogy, Katniss, the main character, says right from the beginning that her country "rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" (Collins *HG* 16). Additionally, she and talks about geographical regions such as the

Appalachian or the Rocky Mountains and her descriptions of the Districts make the readers think of different American places such as New York or Texas. Unlike Atwood, Collins gives her country an official name: Panem (Lat. “bread”). Obviously, this is a reference to the cynical political phrase “panem et circenses” (or “bread and games”) that defined the ways in which the Roman emperors kept the masses content. Here, however, just like in *MaddAddam*, only the rich can enjoy comfort and entertainment, while the poor one being condemned to starvation and terrible punishments.

What motivated these two authors to choose such a setting? In Suzanne Collins’s case, such an option does not really intrigue the reader. She is after all an American writer and she might have done that not necessarily out of an American impulse towards egocentricity (as some voice would say) but in order to offer her work a certain degree of authenticity. Additionally, she can provide an inside version of the problems Americans have to face nowadays:

issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth, the power of television and how it’s used to influence our lives, the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon, and then first and foremost (...) the issue of war. (Hudson 2)

Margaret Atwood’s decision, on the other hand, requires a more detailed explanation. Being a Canadian writer in search of her national identity and literary tradition, Atwood, just like other fellow authors, felt the need to explore her powerful neighbour, probably in an effort of ‘knowing yourself by knowing the others’. When she chose the United States as a setting for the fanatic Republic of Gilead depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), she motivated her gesture as follows: “The States are more extreme in everything [and] everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now” (qtd in Bloom,14). Atwood’s reasons for choosing again the United States as a setting, can be discovered in *A Letter to America* published in “The Globe and Mail” on March 28, 2003 – the same year *Oryx and Crake* came out. The author was deeply aware of the fact that the collapse of the United States could trigger a terrifying domino effect: “We know perfectly well that if you [America] go down the plug-hole, we’re going with you” (Atwood LA 3).

It is also important to underline the fact that the societies depicted by *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* are set in “a future” that is very close and could be seen, according to Le Guin, as “half prediction and half satire” (qtd in Atwood OW 14). We stress “a future” rather than “the future”, because just as Atwood claims: “the future is an unknown: from the moment now, an infinite number of roads lead away to <<the future>>, each heading in a different direction” (Atwood OW 14). Both authors claim that their choice for “a future” and not “the past” or another temporal dimension is motivated by their intention to explore numerous contemporary fears and show their catastrophic results. By doing so, the authors can sound a warning signal and hope that young readers “with the possibilities of the future waiting for [them], [might be] thinking about how to head these things” (Perlmutter 2).

The trilogies begin in medias res, the protagonists suffering because of the societies they are part of. In first novel of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy (alias Snowman) wakes up in a post-apocalyptic world, where the human race has been nearly erased by a lab-created pandemic and replaced by a genetically engineered species of humanoids, called Crakers. He is delusional and wanders among the ruins of the “world before the chaos” in search for food and booze. At the same time, in the *Year of the Flood*, Toby begins her day barricaded within a luxury spa where she has begun to grow a garden while her friend, Ren, trapped in the cubicle of a sex club facing an imminent asphyxiation. Finally, the last protagonist of the trilogy, Zeb, stays in hiding with some of the followers of the God’s Gardeners, a veg cult, led by his brother, Adam One. Together they try to ensure their survival. At this point, the characters find themselves right in the middle of the action. On one hand, they offer information about their lives before the apocalypse and try to come to peace with their recollections and on the other hand they to cope up with the new events that are taking place.

In *The Hunger Games*, the protagonist-narrator, Katniss wakes up on the day of the reaping when Panem is preparing for the annual Hunger Games. This is a terrifying reality show where twenty four boys and girls raffled from the Districts have to hunt and kill each other. Just like the characters from *MaddAddam*, Katniss is also in the middle of the action. She oscillates between her earlier years spent in District 12 and the terrible events she had to go through, such as her father’s death and starvation, and the present when she volunteers for the Hunger Games in order to take her sister’s place.

The societies from *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* present numerous similarities: economic discrepancy, social segregation, increased security measures, abusive policies, aggressive media, violence, terror. However, we do not find here the same nightmarish atmosphere from Orwell’s *1984*, for instance. These societies are not 100% good or bad. At first glance, the Compounds and the Capitol may seem perfect places, real e/utopias while the Pleeblands and the Districts look terrifying, like a dystopia. Very soon, however, they prove to be complex and come with disadvantages as well as advantages just like those in real life.

The trilogies also follow up to a certain point the traditional narrative structure of the utopian texts and the protagonists travel around their countries presenting them to the readers. In *MaddAddam*, the Compounds and the Pleeblands are presented in great detail through retrospection and various perspectives. As usually happens in utopian works, characters have the chance to travel and compare places, offering important details and gradually constructing a clearer image of the things happening there. *Oryx and Crake*, is for instance, mostly dedicated to the exploration of the Compounds. This goal is reached following Snowman’s flashbacks of a time when he was called Jimmy or Trikey accompanied by the explanations of an omniscient narrator. Growing up as a Compound brat, the protagonist reveals these places from a relatively advantageous position, taking everything for granted. In the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, the description of the Compounds continues to be developed by Ren, a girl born there but raised in the Pleeblands among the members of the veg cult, named God’s

Gardeners. Forced to go back to her previous life she finds the Compounds totally different than she expected them to be. Toby, also known as Eve Six, another protagonist of these novels, depicts the rich people and their habits while running the beauty salon, AnooYoo. Finally, the most intriguing discoveries involving the Compounds are made by Zeb in the last novel of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*. Working undercover, he digs out the weaknesses of their security systems, the dirty jobs of their highly important members and “robinhoods” precious information. Atwood’s multiple perspective presentation of the Compounds offers the reader a complex image of these places; one which goes beyond their polished surface and exposes their inner cracks. Moreover, this narrative strategy proves that there is no single truth and that only by juxtaposing various opinions, the reader can get an elaborate and clearer understanding of the United States but also of the contemporary society as a whole.

In Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, the equivalents of the Compounds and the Pleeblands– the Capitol and the Districts– are presented only from the protagonist-narrator’s perspective, Katniss, and consequently, all the details provided seem to be limited and subjective. As a tribute and later as a victor, Katniss, a teenage girl from District Twelve, is offered a tour of the country. On this occasion, she can take in a few aspects regarding the Capitol and all the other Districts, meet people and find out new information. However, she spends a lot of time comparing the things she encounters with those back home and this makes her too emotionally involved, critical and perhaps unreliable.

In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol is the only major city in Panem and the power centre of its tyrannical government. From here, President Coriolanus Snow, a man who “goes beyond the obvious banality of an assumed human wickedness”, rules the nation’s twelve Districts with an iron fist (Arendt 125). Just like the Compounds, this is a confined place. However, instead of the high fortified walls with barbed wire, the Capitol is surrounded by a natural barrier, represented by the Rocky Mountains. This location makes it almost impenetrable and allows it to send planes and bombardiers targeting the Districts in case of war.

Going inside and outside the Capitol is also forbidden except for “officially sanctioned duties” (Collins *HG* 39). Based on special permits, officials from the centre, tributes or victors can travel by fancy high-speed trains that average 250 miles per hour and take their “breath away” (Collins *HG* 39). Security is maintained by the Peacekeepers (a sort of CorpSeCorps) who are well-trained soldiers mostly recruited from District 2 but also from the Capitol. Their presence seems not that intrusive here as in the Districts but inhabitants are constantly monitored through hidden cameras or microphones. Inside, the Capitol shares the splendour of the Compounds and astonishes its visitors with its grandeur. Katniss feels overwhelmed by the unexpected “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” and “the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal” (Collins *HG* 57). It is, however, important to underline that Katniss is astonished by the things she sees here

as well as intrigued or outraged by the things she sees here especially because she keeps comparing them with her precarious conditions back home.

Capitol citizens, just like the Compounders, do enjoy luxury and an extravagant life but on a closer look their life style is not that lavish as Katniss imagines. Likewise, people here can enjoy all that they have as long as they obey their dictator. Getting to know the Capitol better, Katniss alternates between hate, excitement, fear but also pity and remorse. Just like Jimmy from Atwood's *MaddAddam*, Katniss enters the Capitol having numerous stereotypes regarding its inhabitants. For her, these people have bizarre looks and an affected accent. They are ignorant, snobbish, heartless and dangerous. Soon, after she gets to know them better she gets to admire people like Cinna, pity her Prep-team and most importantly discovers them in a new light realizing that "the culture of classism" functions in both directions; the rich being also looked down upon by the poor (Lewis xxxix).

The Capitol shelters two places of great importance which require a special attention: The President's mansion, also known as the Presidential Palace, and the arena of the annual Hunger Games. Both of them appear along the three novels and can be seen as symbols of power. The first one, found in the City Circle, is by tradition, the home residence of the ruler of Panem. The mansion is impressive due to its size, luxury and devices meant to discourage intruders. Its role is not only to impress visitors with its "forty-foot ceiling has been transformed into the night sky," floating musicians and lavishing banquets (Collins *CF* 74), but also to raise President Snow to the status of a god. Consequently, we can speculate upon this and claim that his place can very well resemble the temple of Jupiter on Capitoline hill or even that of Zeus's home on the legendary Mount Olympus. The second location, on the other hand, is represented by the arena where the annual Hunger Games take place. Similar to the Roman amphitheatres which used to host gladiator fights, this construction reveals a combination of sophisticated technology, media strategies and a terrifying design. The Gamemakers transform it every year, building inside of it everything from a scorched desert, a frozen wasteland, a flooded area, to an open meadow or a tropical forest. Filled with traps, this is a place where children from the Districts have to hunt and kill each other during a televised competition meant to entertain the Capitol residents and punish the Districts.

The Presidential Palace and the Arena remind the reader again of the Latin dictum "panem et circenses" and reflect the power that the Capitol exercises over the citizens. It is interesting to note, however, that while they seem to offer a bountiful feast and an exciting form of entertainment for the privileged Capitol people, they in fact shelter a form of persecution for those living in the Districts who suffer from starvation and see their children being killed.

The Districts represent the *Pleeblands* of *The Hunger Games*. Numbered from one to twelve (or thirteenth before the Dark Days, a revolution which led to the readjustment of the country) these places are strictly divided and constantly monitored and terrorized by the Capitol.

Living in District 12, Katniss can provide a detailed and clear image of the place and its inner hierarchy: the poor miners live in dusty Seam, the merchants live in a better looking area and the winners of the Hunger Games move in a privileged part of the district, called the Victors' Village.

All Districts seem to be organized following the same pattern but as Katniss later discovers things are not really as she expects them to be. As a victor, she is offered a tour of the other Districts and the chance to compare them. Just like in *MaddAddam*, the Districts from *The Hunger Games* differ in organization and life style some of them being more privileged than others. Likewise, some of them are considered to be much more rebellious and thus submitted to more stringent security measures, while others appear to be loyal and much more laxly watched. However, none of the Districts can match the Capitol and only together can they oppose a certain resistance as had happened back in the Dark Days. Thus, interaction between these places is strictly forbidden. Unlike the Pleeblands which seemed to be “boundless” and “wide-open” (Atwood, *OC* 194), the Districts are surrounded by twenty-foot high electric fences. No one can leave them unless they are chosen as victors or they are working as officials representing the Capitol. Likewise, information is censored and the security forces, that is the Peacekeepers, constantly monitor and terrorize people.

Apart from the twelve Districts which surround the Capitol and are part of Panem, there is also a thirteenth one, which after the rebellion of the Dark Days was considered to be destroyed. However, this place, which mastered nuclear power and was the only one which could measure up to the Capitol, accepted to sign a treaty and to play dead while gaining its independence. In the last novel of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, Katniss is kidnaped by a hovercraft and brought to District 13, where she is asked to play the leading role in a new rebellion against the Capitol.

As its surface was bombarded by the Capitol, during the Dark Days, District 13 has become an underground, self-reliant state. Designed to resist nuclear attacks, District 13 looks like a huge bunker with grey corridors and specially assigned cubicles for each family. While living in this district, Katniss claims that: “Something feels very wrong down here. It’s more than the reinforced elevator, or the claustrophobia of being so far underground, or the caustic smell of antiseptic” (Collins, *MJ* 43). Life in District 13 is not that great as some of the refugees arriving there would have expected it to be. Though people have a clean shelter and are fed three times a day the control they are submitted to is more rigorous than that of the Capitol. In this sense, Katniss, who even begins to hate this place, confesses: “We know how to be hungry, but not how to be told how to handle what provisions we have. In some ways, District 13 is even more controlling than the Capitol” (Collins, *MJ* 43).

The protagonist of *The Hunger Games* finds out, just like those from *MaddAddam*, that each of the places she visits has its positive but also its negative sides. Institutions and power mechanisms can dominate their lives but it is still their choice if they want to continue or change their present situation.

The ending of both Atwood’s and Collins’s trilogies is also significant for our analysis. After a lab-created pandemic and a terrifying war which almost wipe out the population, the survivors struggle to reconstruct their world but the ending is neither a happy nor a sad one. In the first trilogy, the characters celebrate the birth of four new children but also mourn the loss of some of their dear friends, Zeb and Toby, and experience the threat of a new danger. More importantly, they write down their life stories and record the events they go through in an attempt to teach future generations about the “chaos” they have been through. Similarly, in the second one, a new President comes to power and Panem enjoys a peaceful time, people trying to rectify things. Katniss and her friends try to recover from the trauma and begin a new life, building houses, getting married and having children. Moreover, just like the characters from *MaddAddam*, they begin working on a book which contains the history of Panem as well as their personal memories. This way they can caution the new generations not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The final situation of the protagonists has definitely improved and yet, just like in real life no one knows for sure what is going to happen next. Things get worse but not hopeless. In short, both trilogies end up with a message or moral— change becoming the key word here.

Taking all into account, we conclude that *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* cannot be seen as typical utopian works. They are not eutopias or dystopias, white and black but shades of grey. The societies depicted by them are not intended to be perfect as happened with Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* or Jonathan Swift’s Houyhnhnms’ land in *Gulliver’s Travels* and do not preserve the same nightmarish atmosphere as in George Orwell’s *1984* either. This makes them special and therefore suitable for a new category, namely ‘critical utopia’ or as Atwood says, ‘ustopia’.

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