Survival is My Game:

The impossibility of play in Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games

In Suzanne Collins’ young adult novel *The Hunger Games*, the “game” that is played is far from the carefree play that we normally associate with the word “game.” The participants are engaged in a fight for their lives. This is reflected in their everyday lives where relaxation, fun, and leisure are practically impossible for most people. In this analysis, I will examine the children and young adults in the novel, exploring the effects of work and leisure on their lives. Through its depiction of the society and of the Games, the novel paints a bleak picture of the possibility for leisure in our society. In my analysis, I also examine how work and play is different for young people in the poor districts versus the well-off districts. Each group is cut off from leisure in a different way, suggesting that both lower and middle class people have different impediments with regard to leisure.

The novel takes place in Panem—the United States at some unspecified point in the future. Panem is composed of the Capital and 12 Districts. Approximately 75 years prior to the start of the novel, the districts rebelled against the Capital. Due to their lack of resources and the geographic impregnability of the Capital, the districts were defeated. As a punishment for the uprising and a reminder of their continued vulnerability, the government established the annual Hunger Games.

The rules of the Games are simple: 24 young people between the ages of 12 and 17 (2 from each of districts) are placed in the arena to engage in a televised fight to the death; the last one left alive wins. The winner receives fame as well as monetary rewards. Collins writes, “To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others” (Collins 19). This quotation shows the cruel irony of the Games.

Certain districts fare better than others in the games. Katniss, the protagonist, describes, “[k]ids from wealthier districts, where winning is a huge honor, who’ve been trained their whole lives for this. Boys who are two to three times my size. Girls who know twenty different ways to kill you with a knife” (Collins 36). In the poorer districts, they have no time for training because they must work for a living. Katniss describes how she and her friend Gale must labor to support their families, discussing “Gales’ two little brothers and a sister. Prim. And you may as well throw in our mothers, too, because how would they live without us? Who would fill those mouths that are always asking for more?” (Collins 9). In this way, all of the children in the districts are denied the play of childhood: the poor by having to work for their livelihood, the better-off by spending their childhood training so that they can attain the glory and riches of being a victor.

The issue of labor is extremely relevant to a discussion of *The Hunger Games* because it relates to survival. We see this in the novel when Katniss describes the time after her father’s death: “The district had given us a small amount of money as compensation for [my father’s] death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she didn’t…the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death” (Collins 26-7). In this quotation, we can see that Katniss’ mother’s unwillingness to work is literally killing them.

This idea is reflected in the real-word labor market. People are struggling to survive due to a lack of available work. Involuntary part-time employment is concentrated among relatively disadvantaged groups. This suggests a strong association between involuntary part-time employment and economic vulnerability. In 2012, one in four involuntary part-time workers lived in poverty, whereas just one in twenty full-time workers lived in poverty (Glauber 1). This establishes a clear connection between a lack of work and a struggle to meet one’s basic needs.

One might argue that working to survive is primarily an adult concern, and therefore not applicable to Katniss’ situation in *The Hunger Games*. However, the adolescent characters in the novel spend vast amounts of time working. In addition, labor is highly relevant to the lives of real adolescents. People ages 16-34 made up 38.6% of the population in the year 2000; 75.5% of people in this age range participated in the work force (Kalleburg 45). This suggests that work is a major part of life for young people, especially in lower classes because adolescents of lower classes are more likely to report working long hours than those of higher classes (Bachman 2127).

Therefore, discussions of poverty and labor are highly relevant to a discussion of the adolescents in *The Hunger Games*. Because labor is the only way to survive, Katniss, at the young age of 11, has to take on the responsibility of labor to keep her family going. It is not just Katniss who shoulders this responsibility; in the poorer districts, everyone works. Young people are expected to attend school until age 17, at which point they enter the official workforce. However, most young people engage in some type of part-time labor outside of school to help support their families. Even Peeta, whose family is hardly the worst-off in District 12, assists his parents in baking bread when he’s not in school. For these teens, life is a constant source of labor.

In the real world, the increase in labor in recent years is startling. From 1970-2000, work intensity has increased: 21% of men reported working over 50 hours in 1970 whereas 26.5% reported this in 2000; 5.2% of women worked over 50 hours in 1970, and 11.3% in 2000 (Kalleburg 153). In addition, increasing economic pressure is creating a perception of a “time squeeze” (Gershuny 288). People feel like they are working a lot more and have very little free time. Even “part-time or nonemployed people appear to have greater levels of activity intensity” (Gershuny 310), suggesting that across the board, busyness is increasing.

Because of high levels of work and busyness, for people in the real world and in *The Hunger Games*, there is little time for leisure. For the purposes of this paper, leisure will be defined as being “‘the time that remains after maintaining one’s body in a healthy and socially acceptable state, contracting time to the market, and meeting domestic and family responsibilities’…[it is] all those things that people do when they are not obliged to work or take care of others and themselves’” (Beck 125).

All of these types of non-leisure activities are factors in Katniss’ life, making leisure all but impossible for her. She appears to be engaged in leisure activity when she goes hunting with her best friend, Gale. She clearly enjoys hunting, so it seems to make sense to categorize this as a leisure activity. However, as Katniss says, “Gale and I were thrown together by a mutual need to survive” (Collins112). In other words, this activity is about survival, not leisure. In this way, “leisure itself ceases to be leisurely” (Gershuny 291).

This idea carries over into the “Games” themselves. For much of the competition, Katniss is on her own, doing whatever she needs to do in order to survive. However, later in the novel, she teams up with Peeta, the other tribute from her district. Prior to entering the arena, the pair are painted as “star-crossed lovers,” thus becoming favorites with the fans. Once they are thrown together in the arena, they need to keep up this charade so that they will continue to get support. As Katniss states, “”being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12 [is]…an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors” (Collins 247). This leads them to orchestrate intimate moments, such as snuggling while hiding out inside a cozy cave. Although these moments appear leisurely and enjoyable, for Katniss, they are a form of work.

Studies show that in the real world only 15% of the time that people spend in their homes is spent on leisure (Beck 121). People tend to see leisure as a “bonus activity”; therefore, such activities are the lowest on their list of priorities (Claxton 28). In these studies, when people discussed their homes, they spoke “frequently about chores and home maintenance issues and less often about their leisure moments” (Beck 137). In fact, people often engage in leisure activities while doing non-leisure activities, such as folding laundry while watching TV (Beck 126). Even when doing leisure activities as a family, people tend to see the planning of such activities as more of a chore than a pleasure (Claxton 30). This clearly reflects Katniss’ experiences in the novel; even when she is doing enjoyable things, such as hunting with Gale or sharing intimacy with Peeta, she views it as work rather than leisure.

Lack of leisure time is detrimental in numerous ways. First of all, people have an emotional need for leisure time (Claxton 28). Inability to engage in fulfilling leisure activities can lead to depression and accompanying health issues. These health problems are exacerbated by the fact that lack of monetary and cultural resources forces lower class people to spend their free time at home, engaging in passive activities, such as watching TV (Glorieux 177). This leads them to be more sedentary, and thus less healthy.

In addition, poverty negatively impacts adolescents’ social lives due to lack of resources. By being unable to participate in social and athletic activities, these lower class teens suffer. Studies suggest that “structured activities such as sports clubs and school bands are often argued to foster democratic skills, to keep adolescents out of trouble, and to facilitate ‘positive’ peer contacts” (Aaboen 296-7). In other words, being unable to participate in healthful physical activities further limits adolescents’ abilities to make social contacts and gain the skills that would come along with such interactions.

This reflects the detriments that the tributes from poorer districts face in The Hunger Games. First of all, their poverty forces them to work to survive, leaving them no time to train in skills that could benefit them in the arena. Like real-world teens, they are unable to gain the capital that healthful social and physical activities foster. In addition, the lack of healthful activities and malnutrition that results from their poverty leaves them in a poor physical state. Upon entering the arena, they are scrawny and weak, putting them at a major disadvantage when faced with the physically superior “Career” tributes.

Therefore, it is clear that poverty, both in the novel and in the real world, is a serious detriment to leisure, which in turn, has its own negative consequences. However, for the Career tributes in the novel, and their real-world middle-class counterparts, leisure is equally difficult. In recent years, there has been “an increasingly positive view of "busyness" that results from its association with the increasingly busy lifestyle of the most privileged groups in developed societies” (Gershuny 289).

Because busyness is equated with success, “[p]eople with higher wage rates will … choose longer hours of work” (Gershuny 291). In fact, studies show that an increase in wage is associated with an increase in time spent working for a wage (Bloeman 63). As Glorieux states, “[i]nstead of allocating our material and cultural resources in a way that moderates time pressure, living standards were raised by using those resources to consume and accomplish more, ultimately aggravating time pressure. The higher these standards, the more we have to work in order to earn an income to keep up with them. As a result, our leisure time decreases, and those working the most do have the most money to spend, but also have the least time for consumption” (Glorieux 165). In other words, the higher the income, the more one must spend in order to keep up with social expectations, resulting in less time being available to actually use the commodities that have been purchased.

In addition, those with more money are expected to engage in leisure activities that are neither relaxing nor cheap, such as learning an instrument or sailing a boat (Glorieux 166). In fact, 44.7% of members of this “harried leisure class” say that during their leisure time, they do not get to do what they want to do (Glorieux 174). In this way, leisure ceases to be leisure for the middle class as well.

We see this in the novel by the way in which the Career tributes are esteemed and rewarded for the dedication that they show in training for the games. Instead of spending their young lives on fun and leisure, all of their time is consumed in preparing for a future that promises to provide money and glory. We see this in the real world in the way in which parents push their children to engage in countless activities, thrusting them toward success. As Gershuny states, “increasingly parents of the superordinate class reproduce their own position in their children in vivo by investing in their children's human capital, rather than postmortem through receipt of fixed capital” (Gershuny 295). In other words, they attempt to invest their children with skills and capital that will allow them to achieve success as adults.

One could suggest that parents’ attempts to improve their children’s chances at success are partially self-serving. If the children are successful in life, they will be less likely to stay dependent on the parents and more likely to be able to take care of them in later years. In this way, pushing young people to engage in beneficial activities is an investment. The same can be said of the Career tributes of the novel. When a tribute wins, the victory doesn’t just benefit them; their parents clearly benefit from the added income. In addition, the entire community is rewarded with extra food after the victory. This suggests a high level of outside pressure to engage in this type of “self-improving” work.

Engaging in numerous activities such as school, sports, clubs, and paid employment is a regular part of life for middle-class adolescents hoping to buoy their chances for later success. Each of these activities can be seen as a type of work. However, this work comes at a cost. Studies show that adolescents who work long hours are at higher risk for problem behaviors; this effect is more severe for those who are more advantaged (Bachman 2125).

This idea is clearly reflected in the Career tributes of the novel. When observing the Career tributes in the arena, Katniss is often shocked by their viciousness. This is not to say that the other tributes lack a killing edge; however, they are motivated by survival, whereas the Careers seem to relish in their deadliness. This suggests that the work that they have put into training has been psychologically damaging to them.

This analysis of work in *The Hunger Games* suggests that for adolescents in the districts, leisure is all but impossible. Whether it’s working to survive or being pressured to work toward success in the arena, the lives of adolescents are filled with work, not play. There are clear parallels to the real world; members of the lower classes struggle to survive, making work the central focus of their lives (even when work is hard to find). For members of the middle class, there is increasing pressure to work more and more to maintain a higher standard of living, staying ahead of the curve and insuring their place in the class hierarchy. The analysis of the lower and middle classes and how they parallel the citizens of the districts in The Hunger Games paints a bleak picture of the possibility for leisure in our society.