

Exile, Decadence and Dystopia: An Intertextual Analysis of the Book of Esther and *the Hunger Games*

Dr. Gerard O. McLarney

St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB. Canada (e-mail: gom@ualberta.ca).

Abstract: *This paper offers an intertextual analysis of the Biblical book of Esther and Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games. It argues that the works, though set in radically disparate contexts, provide readers with novel insight when juxtaposed. Particular attention is paid to: the opulence of ancient Persia and Panem and the absurd decadence evident in their capital cities; the morally ambiguous mentorships of Mordecai and Haymitch Abernathy and the role that they, as societal insiders, play in leading their protégées; and the experience of exile that the protagonists, Esther and Katniss both endure, in addition to their use of violence. The paper concludes with a contrast of the theological frameworks surrounding of the two books.*

Keywords: *Book of Esther; Haymitch Abernathy; Katniss Everdeen; Mordecai; The Hunger Games.*

1. Introduction

At first blush, the Biblical book of Esther and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, two works set in radically disparate contexts, stand as an unlikely and awkward pair. Enconced within the Biblical canon, Esther possesses an extensive reception history [1]. Her unlikely ascension to royal status and decision to save her Jewish kindred from destruction in Persia, hallmark features of the work, have captured varied portions of popular imagination, stretching from ancient Persia to the 21st century [2]. Suzanne Collins's recent series, *The Hunger Games* [3], by contrast, tells of the trials of Katniss Everdeen. Set in a future dystopian North America, Katniss emerges from the margins of Panem to become instrumental in the upheaval of a tyrannical regime. Though written primarily for young adult readers, the work has also captured the imagination of a broad audience, including those in academic circles [4],[5]. Scholarly attention to the parallels with the book of Esther has yet to emerge, and perhaps with good reason. As noted, the works ostensibly possess little in common, save perhaps for the depiction of female protagonists who risk their lives for the betterment of their societies. Though laudable and noteworthy, this feature alone, does not seem to warrant pursuance of sustained juxtaposition—yet when compared, the two works offer an inner-illumination that provides unusual insight and an enriched reading.

It should be noted that a literary dependence between the works is not assumed, nor is an allegorical reading of *The Hunger Games* suggested. The works belong to vastly different traditions, one Biblical and the other contemporary popular culture. To the degree that they can be explored as independent literary units however, unique insight can be garnered by their juxtaposition.

2. The Setting

A comparison of setting is illustrative of this point. Darius the Great, who reigned for three decades as emperor, prior to Esther, provides a vivid description of Susa, the imperial city in which the book is set. An inscription from a surviving foundational stone, for example, boasts that its cedar beams were taken from Lebanon, timber from Gandara, gold from Sardis and Bactria, precious stones from Sogdia, silver from Egypt, ivory from Ethiopia, India, and Arachosia. Along with these riches, says Darius, so came human resources. From

Ionia and Sardis came the stonecutters and woodworkers; from Egypt the goldsmiths, carpenters, and wall-decorators, while Darius's brick makers were Babylonian [6].

Like Darius's Perisa, Panem, is a place where resources from the outlying regions are funnelled to the heart of an empire. As Katniss explains, District 11 provides agricultural resources, District 4 fishing, District 3 factories, District 12 coal, and so on. Both societies are structured so that the peripheries serve the urban capitols without any noted reciprocation or intrinsic benefits for the provincial regions. The respective cities dominate life across the landscape for thousands of kilometers, unhindered by any other political power.

The luxury exhibited within these centers, moreover, is not just awe inspiring, but jarring. When entering the Capitol for the first time, Katniss impulsively runs to the window of the train. The city's magnificence is undeniable, its well-fed citizens bizarrely dressed, but the city exhibits an artificiality with "*the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes*" [7]. The overreach in design that Katniss identifies, signals imbalance; the Capitol gleams but it leaves an artificial and wanting taste, just like the factory made "flat round disks of hard candy" that the city calls to mind [8]. In other words, despite the ability to harvest and manipulate resources, the styles and architecture of the Capitol are misplaced. Though the colors may capture one's eye, the attraction simultaneously reveals a design that is askew and so repulses the senses.

A similar phenomenon transpires in President Snow's mansion. Grandiose forty-foot ceilings, musicians floating on clouds, tables laden with succulent foods, all greet banquet guests—but given that Katniss has just emerged from the impoverished District 12 where starvation is common, it is not surprising that she describes the dishes in detail while indulging in the feast. Yet, she and her fellow tribute Peeta, are not satiated by the meal but repulsed by the discovery that Capitol citizens purposely vomit to enable prolonged indulgence. For Katniss, the purpose of food is sustenance, while here it is presented as a means of sensual gratification. This perversion, coupled with the excessive display of wealth in Snow's residence is beyond the pale for provincials like Katniss and Peeta. Soon the disenchanted District 12 tributes are discussing revolt against the Capitol—a highly risky and treasonous act given their presence in the President's mansion.

Within Esther, displays of extreme wealth are also present. Direct criticism is not made, but readers aware of an opulent and highly stratified society like Panem failing to harness its resources to create beauty, are better positioned to detect the criticism of excess, tacit in the book of Esther.

While exaggeration is a deliberate literary feature within the book, the opening lines speak of a massive and continual celebratory feast for the elites of society. Royal guests are "treated to six months of festivities" within the royal quarters of Susa (Esther 1:4). Marble pillars draped in fine-linens surround the king's guests, who drink lavishly, "without restraint", from golden goblets (Esther 1:8). The floors are tiled with mosaics of precious stones and "couches of gold and silver" seat the revelers (Esther 1:6).

The description of such sights is breath-taking. A six-month long stream of unabated feasting and supping upon couches of gold, however, seems preposterous to the outside observer. The continual dissipation, moreover, leads Xerxes to impulsive decision making, the proclamation of irrational decrees and the regrettable disposition of Queen Vashti.

The outlandish wealth and power of these two cities are not just arresting, but also absurd. Just like the pink that is too deep or the green too deep in the Capitol, so too the opulence of Susa is surreal. Considered in tandem, they force readers to reconsider what constitutes true beauty; what is reflective of a magnificent society if funneling luxury into one place and raucous festivities fail? If Susa and the Capitol are not as magnificent as they were designed to be, what is missing? These texts, when contrasted, prompt readers to contemplate an answer.

3. The Mentors

While the juxtaposition of setting accentuates societal imbalance, the respective mentors of the two protagonists, Mordecai and Haymitch Abernathy, when considered together, prompt a closer evaluation of their

moral decision making.

To their moral credit, both stand as intermediaries for their protégées. As insiders-outsiders, both know the world from which our protagonists have come, and have long been immersed within the upper echelons of the prevailing society. They also intervene at crucial junctures to assist or guide the protagonists. Haymitch, for instance, not only arranges invaluable parachute gifts during the games, but, crucially, coaches Katniss on how to behave and perform post-games in addition to maintaining a close eye on her in District 13. Mordecai arranges for Esther to enter the competition for the crown, and assists her from a distance during her palace life, particularly in guiding her to help save their people from persecution.

Yet, the way these two are most reflective of each other, arguably, are the questionable and morally ambiguous decisions they make, given the fiduciary duty owed to their protégées.

Mordecai is introduced as a man of contradictions. The Biblical text announces he is “a Jew in Susa’s acropolis . . . the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem” to Babylon among the captives exiled by Nebuchadnezzar (Esther 2:5-6). The Hebrew text places his ethnic and religious identity, “a Jew,” in the emphatic position. Jewish identity, however, is tied closely to the land of Israel. It would not be lost to the original readers of Esther, that Mordecai is living over 1,200 kilometers from Jerusalem. The text references the Babylonian exile, that great catastrophe of the previous century, but this is only a partial and perhaps insufficient explanation, given that Cyrus the Great had permitted Jews to return to their homeland decades prior to this story. In short, Mordecai, it is intimated, now freely chooses Susa over the land of Judah.

Other contradictions are evident. The very name, Mordecai, raises questions of identity. There is some debate over the meaning of Mordecai’s name but it clearly relates to the Babylonian deity marduk. Some render it “man of Marduk” or “worshipper of Marduk,” [9],[10]. Either way, the original readers of Esther would understand it as a name befitting one whose home is Babylon.

The ambiguity revolving around Mordecai thickens when we consider him in light of the eponymous hero of the story. The fact that Mordecai adopts Esther (“took [her] as his daughter” in Hebrew) demonstrates a concern to protect, guide, and nourish the next generation of Jews living in a foreign land. Providing care for the disenfranchised, and being deeply concerned with the fate of his niece and for the preservation of his people, also follows the basic ethical injunctions of the Torah to care for the orphan, the widow, or the foreigner. It follows that an ancient reader might reasonably expect Mordecai to seek safe passage for Esther to return to Judah as a next step. But that is not what happens. Instead, within a few verses of his introduction, Mordecai seals Esther’s fate in Susa, effectively cutting off any hope of her ever leaving Persia. He proposes that Esther vie for the position of queen within Xerxes’s harem.

The text at this point gives room for pause. Is not sending Esther into this competition a complete abdication of responsibility by Mordecai, given his fiduciary duty to his niece? Moreover, the Mosaic law also prohibits intermarrying with foreigners—the best possible outcome of the competition. To fail is to become an anonymous face, secluded within the harem, sans crown. More cynically, this plan could have been interpreted as a maneuver to curry favor with the royal court at the expense of the liberty of a dependent.

The Biblical text does not try to resolve this tension nor smooth over these subtle details. We are not given privileged insight into the inner thoughts of characters, but we are told what any casual observer in Susa’s acropolis might notice. Mordecai does not abandon his adoptive daughter, but rather makes a daily pilgrimage to the harem “to learn how Esther was and how she fared” (Esther 2:11).

With questions of the mentor’s duties and responsibilities in mind, we can re-consider the care Haymitch provides for the District 12 tributes. Like Mordecai, Haymitch defies easy characterization. The drunken haze in which he lives, masks not only pain from his past, but also his grit, quick wittedness, keen insight, and intensity. His initial nonchalant reluctance to take his mentor task seriously can be viewed, perhaps generously, as a means to provoke his tributes into a state of preparedness. More likely, it is a crude defense mechanism to avoid

attachment. The outcome for District 12 tributes has remained gruesome death for two and a half decades.

More problematic is that Haymitch appears to favor Katniss. Peeta picks up on this imbalance early on, but his exasperation comes to the fore after the Games given that he did not receive any gifts while Katniss did on several occasions. This discrepancy invites readers to ponder, again, if Haymitch rejects those who lack the cunning and conviction to outsmart others in the bid to survive.

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of his mentorship involves the decision to withhold crucial information from Katniss. This gives the reader the impression that she is being manipulated rather than trusted, and given no choice about her future. Haymitch, for instance, is directly involved in the plot to break tributes out of the Quarter Quell, a plan he shares with his fellow conspirators. No information however, is offered to Katniss—and, by extension, to Peeta. For all the insights Haymitch has into Katniss's character, one would assume he could drop a subtle clue or provide some forewarning. Plutarch, while Gamesmaster, gives Katniss more information about the plot in the cryptic message about his watch about to strike midnight. Haymitch, by contrast, chooses to keep Katniss in the dark, just as he derided her hypothesis about District 13 and left her unaware of the scope of the rebellion.

The vicious and brutal rage that erupts within Katniss once the “subterfuges and deceptions” of Haymitch are brought to light is disturbing, though not entirely surprising [11]. The defense that Haymitch required her ignorance for her own protection is possible, but the savage wounds dealt across his visage emphatically declare that Katniss sees this explanation as sorely lacking explanatory power. Further information and coaching, moreover, could have paved a path to a genuine leadership role for Katniss in the counter-insurgency. Instead, she arrives in District 13 ill-prepared by her mentor to navigate the Machiavellian governance of Coin.

4. Esther and Katniss

The contrast between Mordecai and Haymitch underscores the need to scrutinize their decision-making as mentors particularly since it can be easily obscured beneath the umbrage of their overall success. Points of contrast and commonality between the protégées themselves also brings their respective characters into sharper relief.

4.1. The Exilic Experience

Both, for instance, experience life in exile. This facet of life is most conspicuous in the Biblical narrative as the text clearly notes Esther, though born in Susa, is a member of the Jewish diaspora, hailing from a community forcibly dislodged from their homeland. Though little is said of Katniss's ancestry, her life is also one of forcible confinement—a fate which her parents and previous generations have endured. Esther and Katniss are not only born into this generational exile, but also experience a “second exile,” as it were.

Esther, already living in exile, is taken into the king's palace and placed under the tutelage of Hegai, the eunuch who “keeps charge” of the king's women (Esther 2:8). The verb for “keep charge” itself harkens back to the Garden of Eden where Adam kept charge of tilling the land (Genesis 2:15) and was tasked with this responsibility after his exile. Esther lives in a manner emblematic of the Biblical experience and, in the flower of her youth, enters a profoundly new and challenging mode of life without the chance of return.

Though the narrative of Esther is framed within the context of exile, the notion of exile provides a helpful lens through which we can understand Katniss's experience of reality—particularly the intensive and unrelenting experience of loss.

Katniss, likewise, once selected to go to the Games, cannot return to her community. Not only is she obliged to reside in the Victor's Village upon return rather than the Seam but she cannot resume her old routines. Tracked by Snow, compelled to appear on the Victor's circuit, and pressured to feign a relationship, Katniss faces a complete lack of freedom. Her primary experience of exile, however, is psychological. The horrors of the Games and experiences of war haunt her sleep and impede her day-to-day functioning. This struggle is

perhaps the greatest experience of exile possible, for it entails separation from the goodness of life, both daily and nightly.

4.2. Violence and Self-Defense

Another point of symmetry between Esther and Katniss is that they do not shy away from violence, particularly when it seems to be a logical, and defensible act. Esther, for instance, calls not only for the execution of Haman, but also requests that Jewish inhabitants across Persia be able to pre-emptively strike those plotting their deaths. By the standards of ancient Persia, the act does not stand out as particularly violent. That the taking of plunder is not involved, a fact underscored by the biblical writer (Esther 9:10, 15-16), clarifies that the act is to neutralize one's enemies, not profit from attacking them. The execution of Haman's 10 sons under Esther's direction does, however, raise concerns that Esther seeks retribution and not just peace. One wonders, at first reading, if she harnesses her power for personal revenge on his family. Their deaths, however, can be seen in logical continuation with overall events; if any latent forces remain in the empire to launch another pronghorn, surely it is they.

Katniss, similarly does not back away from violence when it is deemed necessary. Though the Games are designed to precipitate killing, Katniss is reluctant to end the life of Cato and regrets the deaths caused during the uprisings. Like Esther, she expresses no reservation in the execution of her former adversary, President Snow, offering to carry out the sentence herself. The act is not difficult to justify given the circumstances, but turning the arrow on the unsuspecting President Coin raises a plethora of ethical questions. Is this a prescient pre-emptive execution justified because of what Coin might do or is this revenge for her sister Prim's death? That the tribunal declares Katniss mentally unfit and therefore not culpable does not resolve the matter entirely. As in the case of Esther, the prevailing circumstances and the context of Coin's intentions and past actions, however, lend themselves to viewing the act as justified self-defense.

5. A Theological Hermeneutic

The theological framework of these works serves as another point of juxtaposition. The Hunger Games contains no clear mention of the divine or of spirituality; Panem's salutary phrase, "May the odds ever be in your favor," for instance, is redolent of the Western Christian benediction, "May the Lord be with you"—but reference to the divine has been stripped away and replaced with the impersonal wish for luck and chance.

The lot being drawn for Prim, and Katniss stepping to her assistance, conceivably, can be read as providential along with the selection of the self-effacing Peeta, the one District 12 boy who happens to be secretly in love with Katniss. Other extremely unlikely occurrences can be noted such as: Katniss tossing cookies gifted from Peeta's family out of the train, only to see them land on dandelions, the same flower associated with the bread Peeta fatefully tossed in Katniss's direction; the chance meeting with the District 8 refugees, Bonnie and Twil, in the forest; and the innumerable accurate arrows shot by Katniss. These are examples of events that appear to be more than just the product of random chance, but the text does not give grounds for a theological interpretation of the events. At best, Collins's world of Panem is resolutely agnostic.

The divine is conspicuously absent from the book of Esther as well. It is the one biblical book where God is not explicitly mentioned by name. Esther and Mordecai are not portrayed as devout Jews and neither do they appear as saints. Though undeniably heroic they do not strictly adhere to the Mosaic Law. Yet, there is mention of religious ritual, particularly praying and fasting. The most obvious manner in which Providence can be understood as operative in this book, is in its context within the Biblical canon. Other Biblical characters, such as Jacob and Rebekah, enable readers to consider how God can work in morally ambiguous situations and with flawed people. Put another way, Esther demonstrates that heaven does not require earth to be in a perfect state before redemption. Esther serves as an illustration of the divine ability to redeem humanity from our worst predicaments, including a dystopian reality.

6. Conclusion

Our juxtaposition between the Book of Esther and The Hunger Games underscores how an analysis of the two books can be mutually enlightening. It does not claim literary dependence nor does it seek to artificially flatten the two books into generic categories. Rather, it argues that, when viewed as independent literary units, parallel features such as the decadent and exorbitant societies that serve as the setting, the questionable mentorship and decision-making of Mordecai and Haymitch, in addition to the experience of exile and violence by Esther and Katniss, prompt readers to consider the respective narratives more deeply. The above analysis is necessarily cursory and limited. Other points of contrast, such as the extensive beauty treatments imposed on the protagonists, their ability to successfully and skillfully operate under intense pressure, and the irony that both antagonists, Haman and Coin, are executed by their own devices, are examples of how points of contrast can be further examined.

7. References

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