

Jamie Psinakis
Dr. Olsen
T/RS 228
May 17th 2020

The Hunger Games:
A Parable in Pop Culture

Learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, can be summarized at the University of Scranton as such: "Jesuit education does not make you better than everybody else, it makes you better for everybody else". Embodying all that a Scranton education is, this statement highlights how unique this school is amongst other universities. A Jesuit education is one that prioritizes bettering the community, equally as much as it does learning and academia. It is a complete education that focuses on caring for the whole person, otherwise known as *cura personalis*, preparing students to create a better reality for future generations.

As a nursing major, I am a part of Panuska College of Professional Studies (PCPS). The slogan for students in the PCPS is, 'Embracing the Call to Care'. This title is extremely fitting because the students in this college are involved in helping professions, with majors such as counselling, education, nursing and many more. All of these majors and future occupations encompass what it means to embrace the Jesuit value of *magis*, or doing more for others. These values of *cura*

personalis and magis are parabolic in nature. As Paul Ricoeur once defined it, "Parables, paradoxes, hyperboles, and extreme commandments all disorient only to reorient us. But what is reoriented in us? and in what direction? I would say that what is reoriented by these extreme sayings is less our will than imagination. Our will is our capacity to follow without hesitation that once-chosen way, to obey without resistance the once-known law. Our imagination is the power to open us to new possibilities, to discover another way of seeing, or acceding to a new rule in receiving the instruction of the exception" (Ricoeur). Tying all of this together, the film *The Hunger Games*, written by Suzanne Collins, is a parabolic piece that instructs the viewers on the themes of sacrifice, love, survival, and rebellion.

For background, this movie takes place in a dystopian future, in which the government of Panem is corrupt, and downright inhumane towards its 12 Districts. The main protagonist, Katniss, the rest of District 12, and the other unfortunate districts suffered years of brutal oppression under this leadership; the majority of them living in poverty and famine. All the while, those in the Capitol and better-off districts lived lavishly and without worry. This authoritarian-totalitarian government ultimately led to the start of civil war known as the First Rebellion. The failure of it, brought about a

sadistic annual event, known as the Hunger Games, which served as a continual reminder of the failed rebellion. Each year, two representatives from each district are selected by lottery to participate in The Hunger Games. Portrayed as entertainment, the televised games are broadcasted throughout Panem. The 24 participants are forced to eliminate their competitors, while the citizens of Panem are required to watch. Public executions and whippings, severe restrictions on civil rights, and mass surveillance all become common in Panem.

Starting with the scene of the Reaping, Katniss illustrates true sacrifice, a testament to her bravery and unconditional love for her sister. Beginning the scene, the camera zooms in on the fishbowl, filled with the names of possible candidates for the upcoming Hunger Games. The intense focus on the bowl emphasizes the magnitude of this event and the true worth of the people of Panem. Ultimately, their worth merely amounts to a name on a piece of paper. If their paper is chosen, it is essentially a death sentence. The camera then pans out to the crowd, who is patiently awaiting their fate. The looks on each one of the faces in the crowd is almost identical. Slapped across each face is a melancholic glare, almost disinterested. No one looks even slightly afraid, seemingly numb to the events going on around them. Back to the bowl, Effie's hand reaches in to pick a name, her fingers gracefully moving in circles as she

searches for the paper she wants to choose. Effie opens up the piece of paper she picks and reads the words, "Primrose Everdeen". The silence that follows speaks volumes. Back to Prim, her face is completely drained of color and she begins to walk toward the stage in utter disbelief. Before she can make it there, Katniss, her voice breaking up, chokes out the statement, "I volunteer as tribute". The two sisters embrace and Katniss tells Prim she needs to go find their mom. Tears stream down Prim's face as Gale drags her away from Katniss, and her screams echo throughout the event. Katniss takes her place on stage, her face revealing the realization that she is likely going to die in these games. In this scene, Katniss personifies *magis* and makes the ultimate sacrifice for her little sister. Instead of allowing Prim to go to the games and likely get killed, without hesitation, she sacrifices her life. Even though Katniss is older, a better hunter, and more likely to survive the games than Prim, she still took a tremendous risk, as no one from District 12 had won the games in decades.

The scene concludes with Peeta Mellark being chosen as the male candidate and the two shake hands. When they lock eyes, Katniss has a flashback of him throwing her a piece of bread, which seems minuscule to the viewer at first. Later, we learn that this flashback is a pivotal moment in the pair's relationship. It is revealed that in that moment, Katniss was

suffering from starvation, unbeknownst to Peeta. She was lying up against a tree in the pouring rain, and as he walked out of his father's bakery he saw her lying there and threw some bread to her. Even though his father beat him for doing this, he partook in this act of kindness in spite of that. Katniss states that this bread, literally, gave her the motivation to continue living. It was a symbol of hope. Peeta was a symbol of hope. She now understood that she could survive without her dad. She could survive with her absentee mother. She could be the mother-figure her sister needed. That piece of bread changed her life. Throughout the series, Peeta continues to be her hope. He is the light that gives her the motivation to survive. He is her sanctuary.

Another prime example of the theme of love and the Jesuit value of *cura personalis* is Katniss' relationship with Rue, a girl from District 11. It is interesting that Collins chose the name Rue, as it means sorrow, which can be interpreted as foreshadowing of the Rue's fate. Katniss and Rue become acquainted during the games when Katniss notices Rue following her around. Rue is drawn to Katniss because of the Mockingjay pin she wears on her heart. Simultaneously, Katniss is drawn to Rue because she reminds her of her younger sister, Prim. An alliance forms between the two and Rue helps Katniss to treat her injuries. They form a bond and devise a plan to attack some

of the other competitors. This plan ends up going awry, and this is when Katniss's compassion and ultimately, love is displayed. The scene begins with Marvel running towards Katniss and Rue. He throws his spear, just a second after Katniss draws back her arrow. The camera follows Katniss as she turns to Rue, who is speared in the stomach. Rue falls into her arms and the camera zooms in on Rue's face looking up at Katniss. Her eyes pool with tears as Katniss tries to comfort her. The camera intentionally blurs out of focus as Katniss sings to Rue while she passes. The blurring of the camera signifies to the viewer that Rue is now gone. Instead of leaving her body out in the open, like everyone else would in these barbaric games, Katniss honors Rue. She covers her body in beautiful flowers and kisses her on the forehead. The lighting of this scene is significant. The entire time that Katniss is covering Rue in flowers it is cloudy and gray, emphasizing the tone of loneliness and sorrow that Katniss is feeling. Rue was Katniss's only sense of security. For the first time since the games began, she did not feel completely isolated. Just as quickly as she got Rue, she was ripped away from her. As Katniss completes the memorial, rays of sun peak through the clouds, shining down on Rue's body. This sunlight is illustrating that Rue is now at peace because of the kindness and love that Katniss showed her. The scene concludes with a birds-eye view of Katniss who kisses her fingers and extends

them outward. This is a message of condolence and solace for Rue's family and all of District 11. However, it cannot be ignored that this is also a complete act of defiance against the Capitol. Katniss showed empathy towards a fellow competitor, which is something that President Snow sincerely frowns upon.

Following Rue's death, Katniss is now more motivated than ever to survive. Grief and rage that the Capitol would allow for an innocent child to be murdered so viciously, fuel her to continue on. A prime example of Katniss' will to survive is seen in the final chaotic scene in which the last competitor besides her and Peeta comes to his demise. The Capitol sends in hybrid animals that they have engineered into the arena to attack the contestants. The scene opens with "free camera" or "shaky camera" following Katniss and Peeta as they run for their lives from these predators. This technique allows the viewer to feel the anxiety and suspense that the characters are experiencing. The hybrids get closer and the pair climbs to the top of the Cornucopia. To their surprise, Cato is already there. The three get into a heated battle, which ends with Cato holding Peeta in a chokehold. Katniss points her arrow at him, and the camera pans to Cato who is urging her to shoot. "Do it and we both go down" he spits at her. The camera zooms in on Peeta who is pointing to Cato's hand, silently encouraging Katniss to shoot at it. We then see the arrow fly across the air and strike Cato

in the hand, forcing him to release Peeta. Peeta pushes him off the side of the Cornucopia, where he falls to his demise. Despite everything that she has been through, Katniss still came out on top. She was not going to let Cato take Peeta down with him. All of the sadness, anger, and fear never clouded her judgement. She repeatedly continued to make the calls she needed to, to stay alive. Her perseverance in spite of trauma is admirable.

Not only is Katniss Everdeen a survivor, but she is also a revolutionary. Throughout the trilogy, Everdeen's actions ultimately lead to a rebellion in which the people of Panem get their freedom back. In the first film specifically, the final scene of her and Peeta at the conclusion of the games is just the beginning of this revolution. Despite the Capitol making the rule that there can be two victors from the same district, they decide to change this at the last minute. One final twist of the knife. The scene opens with Katniss and Peeta after just hearing this news, their faces ghostly white. The camera pans from Katniss' horrified gaze to Peeta's. He looks at her, and with an assured tone, tells her to kill him, because one of them deserves to go home. However, Katniss does not accept this fate. She no longer accepts a world in which the Capitol always wins. Although the Capitol thought they were again victorious, Katniss outsmarts all of them and their conniving ways. Instead of

killing one another, Katniss reaches into her pocket and grabs the poisonous berries. The camera zooms in on them and we see Peeta's hand quickly reaching for hers and hear him shouting, "No!". Quickly panning up to the pair, Katniss meets Peeta's gaze and tells him to trust her. The two seemingly communicate the plan through their eyes, not having to verbalize a word. Back down to their hands, Katniss pours half of the berries into Peeta's palm, saving the rest for herself. They look at each other one last time before lifting the berries to their mouths. Just as Katniss had planned, before the berries can even reach their lips, the Capitol shouts over the intercom to stop. Katniss proved that they are not just pawns in the Capitol's game. Katniss and Peeta are crowned victors of the 74th annual hunger games, begrudgingly so. This action of rebellion is what sparked the second revolution. It proved that the Capitol could lose. It proved that the Capitol was not in complete control. In this moment, Katniss gave the people of Panem something that they had not had in so long. Hope. For the remainder of the trilogy, Everdeen serves as a symbol of the revolution, known as the Mockingjay.

All in all, the Jesuit values of *magis* and *cura personalis* are parabolic in nature. They represent what it truly means to care for the whole person and to do for others. In line with these values, are the themes of sacrifice, love, survival, and

rebellion which are at the forefront of the film *The Hunger Games*. Katniss Everdeen's sacrifice for her sister, love for Rue, survival of the games, and rebellion against the Capitol are all characteristic of a hero. It is only fitting that she goes on to lead a winning revolution.

The essay fulfills the requirements set for the Final Project for Parables in Pop Culture (T/RS 228) at The University of Scranton, under the direction of Dr. Cyrus P. Olsen III, for spring semester 2020, under the conditions of COVID-19 lockdown.