

2014

## Young adult literature "Catching fire:" Classroom implications for secondary schools

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## Young adult literature "Catching fire:" Classroom implications for secondary schools

### Abstract

Historically, Young Adult (Y A) Literature has been overlooked in school curricula and as a literary genre. Yet in recent years, YA authors have produced creative and thought-provoking narratives incorporating social commentary and teachable themes fitting for secondary school classrooms across subject areas. One of YA literature's most salient features is its accessibility to young readers. Thus, YA texts such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* help engage students in the reading process and bridge them to more challenging texts, including traditional works in the English canon.

To demonstrate students' ability to engage with a YA story, I created a reader-response survey on *The Hunger Games*, addressing the novel's strong female protagonist, the love triangle, social commentary, and violence in the work. This thesis traces the development of the YA Literature genre from the 1960s through the present, discusses students' high level of engagement with *The Hunger Games* through the Reader-Response survey results, examines the multiple benefits of reading YA Literature, and justifies its implementation in secondary school classrooms, as a means of promoting disciplinary literacy as well as a meaningful tool for engaging students in reading in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms.

### Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

### Department

English Language and Literature

### First Advisor

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YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE "CATCHING FIRE:"  
CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

By:

Emily Colletti

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Graduation

with Honors in Language, Literature, and Writing,

Department of English Language and Literature

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date

May 14, 2014

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### Abstract

Historically, Young Adult (YA) Literature has been overlooked in school curricula and as a literary genre. Yet in recent years, YA authors have produced creative and thought-provoking narratives incorporating social commentary and teachable themes fitting for secondary school classrooms across subject areas. One of YA literature's most salient features is its accessibility to young readers. Thus, YA texts such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* help engage students in the reading process and bridge them to more challenging texts, including traditional works in the English canon.

To demonstrate students' ability to engage with a YA story, I created a reader-response survey on *The Hunger Games*, addressing the novel's strong female protagonist, the love triangle, social commentary, and violence in the work. This thesis traces the development of the YA Literature genre from the 1960s through the present, discusses students' high level of engagement with *The Hunger Games* through the Reader-Response survey results, examines the multiple benefits of reading YA Literature, and justifies its implementation in secondary school classrooms, as a means of promoting disciplinary literacy as well as a meaningful tool for engaging students in reading in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms.

## Introduction

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy has captured the interest of young readers across the nation. For those unfamiliar with the series, *The Hunger Games* (2008) opens with 16-year-old protagonist Katniss Everdeen and her friend Gale Hawthorne musing about starting a new life in the woods, away from their dreary hometown known as District 12. The reason for their musings becomes abundantly clear to readers when Primrose Everdeen, Katniss' younger sister, has her name drawn as a tribute for the upcoming Hunger Games, "... a gladiatorial contest from which only one will emerge alive" (Miller np). Katniss volunteers in her sister's place, and joins the male tribute from her district, Peeta Mellark, to train with young people from other districts and eventually face one another in mortal combat. The next two installments in the series, *Catching Fire*, published in 2009, and *Mockingjay*, published in 2010, follow Katniss on her perilous quest to stay alive in the dystopian world of Panem.

Despite its dark premise, *The Hunger Games* landed a spot on the *USA Today* bestseller list for 132 weeks, while *Catching Fire* was there for 131 weeks, as of March 2012 (Miller np). Yet the series stands apart from others that have achieved phenomenon status in recent years due to its teachable themes and sophisticated social commentary. Indeed, through the dystopian plotline, Suzanne Collins expertly weaves together issues of government control, violence, a societal obsession with reality television, and an unequal distribution of wealth. Due to its overall popularity among young readers and its teachable themes, I selected *The Hunger Games* as the focus of my Reader-Response survey that I designed for secondary school students. Through students' completion of the survey, I intended to demonstrate students' ability to actively engage in reading and

discussing a Young Adult (YA) text. My thesis relies on *The Hunger Games* survey data, as well as secondary research, to argue for the implementation of YA novels in secondary school classrooms. The following four sections -- "The History of Young Adult Literature," "Reader-Response Survey," "The Benefits of Reading Young Adult Literature," and "Teaching Young Adult Literature"-- work together to achieve this purpose.

## **The History of Young Adult Literature**

The genre of Young Adult (YA) Literature is one whose boundaries have shifted dramatically in the past sixty years and whose literary merit has increased exponentially in that time frame as well. While today YA novels are read and enjoyed by both adolescent and adult readers, this was not always the case in past decades. Indeed, in 1956, Author Frank G. Jennings explained, “the stuff of adolescent literature, for the most part, is mealy-mouthed, gutless, and pointless” (Cart 26). Even teachers fifteen years ago were reluctant to teach it: “Reading young adult literature in the advanced placement classroom is certainly not widespread...some teachers see it as a waste of time, labeling it ‘subliterature.’” (Monseau 40). With such poor reception by the literary community, it is little wonder that the genre faced near-extinction in the early 1990s: Connic C. Epstein, former editor-in-chief at Morrow Junior Books, explains, “some editors, marketing directors, and subsidiary rights directors, discouraged by this downturn, have [had] been wondering whether the young adult novel was ready for burial, and certainly most would agree that the genre is [was] in turmoil” (qtd. in Cart 49). In order to understand how a genre went from being described as “mealy-mouthed” and “ready for burial” to a genre which has come to captivate readers of all ages, one must first examine its beginnings.

Researchers Allen Pace Nilson and Kenneth L. Donelson claim in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* that the period known as young adulthood was first defined post-Civil War. However, “...it was not until 1966 that the term ‘Young Adult’ was finally used in connection with the ALA’s Best Books List” (Cart 17). Before this time, novels for Young Adult readers were termed “junior novels.” This conceptual change was a

huge step forward, from a condescending term to one that would accurately come to encompass the genre's 12-to-18 year-old readership. However, YA novels in the 1960s had little in common with YA novels today aside from the name. Many were formula-driven problem novels with flat, inaccessible characters. The publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) was an exception to this trend, a book that focused on youth gang violence and a lack of adult role models. Hinton was a teenager herself at the time of her novel's publication, and she condemned the unrealistic world that problem novels so often painted: "Teenagers today want to read about teenagers today" (Cart 42). While there were still some markedly unrealistic qualities to *The Outsiders*, such as the gang members' laughably unthreatening names—"Ponyboy" and "Soda Pop," for instance—Hinton's novel was a step towards more meaningful literary themes and is still taught in many English classrooms today.

Authors of YA novels in the 1970s, following the lead of risk-takers like Hinton, began writing truly realistic stories rather than moralistic or unoriginal problem novels. Michael Cart explains young people's need for the former:

Not a formula-driven fiction that begins and ends with the problem... a new kind of problem novel that is as real as headlines, yes; but enriched by the best means literature can offer—an expansive, fully realized setting; a memorably artful narrative voice; complex and fully realized characters; and unsparing honesty and candor in use of language... a young adult fiction... that takes creative (and market) risks to present hard-edged issues of relevance so that it may offer its readers revelation. (168)

Books such as Rosa Guy's *The Friends* were a manifestation of this "new kind of problem novel," believably addressing "the complex interrelationship of class, racism, and economic privation" (Cart 82). This "golden age" for realism helped bring YA literature into the literary spotlight, producing cross-over YA novels that were enjoyed by both young people and adult readers. And while novels of realism continued to become more relevant to the lives of young people, problem novels became more irrelevant than ever: "Despite its occasional lapses, the novel of realism was gradually evolving into a richer and more rewarding kind of fiction (a process that is ongoing); the problem novel, on the other hand, was rapidly devolving into something, well, ridiculous" (Cart 71).

And yet after the progress made in the 1970s towards more realistic novels, the 1980s was primarily a decade of regression for YA Literature. Paperback romance novels came to dominate the '80s, and were just as formulaic as the problem novels of the '60s and '70s. They were largely popular among teenage readers, who may have wanted an escape from "graphic television shows and movies and books" and a return to "the mystery and beauty of love, if only on a superficial level" (Cart 100). The superficiality of these books was certainly their defining characteristic, and this superficiality did little to help young women (or men) become self-aware, critical thinkers. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) revealed how romance novels of the '80s "teach girls that their primary value is their attractiveness to boys; devalue relationships and encourage competition between girls; discount the possibility of nonromantic friendships between boys and girls; depict middle-class, white, small-town families as the norm; and portray adults in stereotypical sex roles" (Cart 101). Young Adult Literature was in dire need of a transformation.

However, the '80s were not completely a step backward in the path towards meaningful YA literature—multicultural literature also interested publishing houses and would come to take firmer root during the decade. Piñata Books became “the first imprint devoted to providing materials for children that authentically and realistically portrays themes, characters, and customs unique to US Hispanic culture”(Cart 131). After the second great wave of immigrants into the US, multicultural literature provided much-needed guidance to Americans who were not quite sure how to respond to so many societal and cultural changes. It also provided support for the immigrants themselves—after all, the theme of the outsider is one that resonates with both young adult readers as they navigate through puberty and high school, as well as with international and multicultural readers who are not quite sure which culture they fully belong to.

The early 1990's, rather than furthering the publication of well-developed, multicultural literature, returned to formulaic novels—this time, in the form of Young Adult horror novels. With an increase in violent crimes in the early 1990's, Cart explains one reason for the popularity of the horror genre: “Jaded, numbed and dehumanized, viewers and readers seem to need ever more visceral doses of violence to jump-start their numbed emotions and sensibilities” (144). Thus, “...the paperback horror novel became to publishing in the nineties what romance paperbacks had been to the eighties” (Cart 145). To make matters worse, a lack of federal funding caused the school library market to shrink, and so schools were mainly buying nonfiction books to support curricular needs. YA literature, it would seem, was truly in turmoil.

Yet, by the mid-1990s, the genre was changing. Between 1990 and 2000, “...there was ‘a renaissance of youth culture in this country.’ This was...a largely market-driven

phenomenon, rooted in the extraordinary growth of this segment of the population, which would grow by 4.5 million between 1990 and 2000 (a 17 percent increase)” (Cart 62).

With this growth came significant changes in book marketing. Publishing industries were interested in producing short paperbacks with teen readers in mind. Well-known publishing houses began creating teen imprints, including Harper Collin’s imprint, HarperTeen, and Penguin’s imprint, Razorbill.

Then in the late 1990s, the British company Bloomsbury would publish the first book in a series that would come to be the greatest phenomenon for YA literature—the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was 3 times longer than the average YA novel, and fantasy novels were not popular at the time. However, a marketing specialist at Bloomsbury heard about the book and promoted it until it was published. Another Bloomsbury employee referred it to members of Scholastic, who bought the US rights for the work (Anelli 53). Readers everywhere immediately fell in love with the magical story of a neglected boy invited to join an elite wizarding school, leading Harry and his wizard and witch companions to quickly become household names. As researcher Jack Zipes infers, “[a]nyone working in the field of children’s literature cannot avoid Harry Potter” (Zipes 171). And, with the midnight book releases, blockbuster film and video game adaptations, and fansites for the series that followed the success of the first novel, a phenomenon was born. As Zipes explains, a phenomenon occurs when “[t]he ordinary becomes extraordinary, and we are so taken by the phenomenon that we admire, worship, and idolize it without grasping fully why we regard it with so much reverence and awe except to say that many others regard it as a phenomenon and therefore, it must be a phenomenon” (173).

The fan base for this phenomenon included YA and adult readers, as well as child readers. Cart explains how "...the multigenerational appeal of the Potter books spurred a rush to publish crossover titles and began attracting record numbers of established adult authors to the newly profitable field of books for young adults" (Cart 98). This crossover audience, primarily composed of eighteen-to twenty-five-year-olds, called into question the very definition of YA. With an increasing number of young people spending more time in school before marriage, the process of coming of age is changing. As Cart observes, "...over the course of the past five or so years, coming of age itself has become a significantly more attenuated process, and as a result a new category of human development has begun to appear that is being called, variously, kidult, adulescents, twixters, and boomerangers" (119). Pocket Books' MTV Books (1995) and Simon & Schuster's Spotlight Entertainment (2004) are two imprints that were created specifically with the newly emerging crossover audience in mind.

Along with attracting a wider readership than previous children's and YA novels, "[t]he international success of the [*Harry Potter*] series helped turn young adult literature into an increasingly global phenomenon and sparked a new interest in fantasy as a genre not only for children but also—and perhaps more important—for young adults" (Cart 98). Fantasy novels had been out of fashion for decades, but like horror stories, helped readers momentarily escape reality: "Instead of craving realistic stories about people like themselves...teens are crazy about characters (and scenarios) that have little in common with their everyday lives. Today's adolescents are flocking to fantasy..." (Cart 102).

J.K. Rowling's boy wizard forever changed the nature of YA publishing. For, just as in the case of *Harry Potter*, Scholastic employees first generated excitement about *The*

*Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins within the publishing house, before further promoting it through word-of-mouth. While ideally all publishers would share interest in a promising new manuscript, David Levithan, the executive director of Scholastic, and Kate Egan, a freelancer, knew this was not always the case in large publishing firms, where there are hundreds of manuscripts to leaf through.

Levithan and Egan were immediately enthralled by *The Hunger Games* and wanted to make sure the manuscript was placed into the right hands as soon as possible. They knew that they needed to place the book in the hands of key librarians, booksellers, and educators before the story even went to publication. The book's marketing team therefore decided in January of 2008 to send out photocopies of the manuscript rather than bound proofs. As blogger Laura Miller infers, "...a choice like this is part of an informal semaphore system between publishers and the all-important first readers of any new children's book. A Xeroxed, plastic-comb-bound manuscript conveys both urgency and the conviction that here's a title that doesn't need attractive packaging to make an impression" (Miller np). Scholastic sales representatives distributed the manuscript to "Big Mouths," which is "...children's publishing lingo for booksellers who have exceptional influence with co-workers and peers. These people run regional associations, organize book fairs and set up school events. Teachers and librarians come to them for hot tips on new kids' titles" (Miller np).

In response to Levithan and Egan's efforts, the advance reader's copies of the book were highly sought-after by booksellers and librarians at book conferences and conventions. Indeed, "[t]he book was well on its way to bestseller status even before the cover art — a major conundrum for Scholastic — had been finalized" (Miller np). When

it was finally released, *The Hunger Games* landed on the Best Seller list within its first week. Today, there are more than 24 million copies of all 3 books of the series in print (Miller np). No one really expected *Harry Potter* to be so well-received by young people and become the literary phenomenon that it is today, but Levithan and Egan were designing *The Hunger Games* to become a phenomenon from the start. In fact, Egan had worked on Suzanne Collins' previous series, *The Underland Chronicles*, which had done well on the Best Seller list. In 2007, Scholastic therefore bought *The Hunger Games* after only reading a 4-page proposal from Collins, outlining the 3 books in the projected trilogy. As Miller points out, "in the post-*Harry Potter* and *Twilight* world, break-out children's series like *The Hunger Games* automatically attract the interest of big-budget Hollywood producers" (np). And this post-*Harry Potter* and *Twilight* world, where every promising YA series is examined for phenomenon potential, is the one we live in today.

And, while other YA series have achieved phenomenon-status in recent years, including Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, *The Hunger Games* stands apart because of its teachable themes: "Parents, teachers and librarians seize on the social and political commentary in the novel's depiction of an authoritarian government, an exploited underclass and reality-TV voyeurism pushed to grotesque extremes" (Miller np). Along with being a politically-charged novel, *The Hunger Games* is expertly crafted to captivate readers: "*The Hunger Games* is a novel that takes to heart Billy Wilder's famous dictum for screenwriters: 'Grab 'em by the throat and never let 'em go'" (Miller np). Indeed, Suzanne Collins' background in episodic television served her well in creating suspense in her novel. As Journalist Karen Springen exclaims, "She knew how to do cliffhangers

to get you to come back after the commercial break. Each chapter is a cliffhanger, and each book is a cliffhanger” (Miller np).

For this project, I wanted to examine a YA novel that has achieved phenomenon status, and yet also has the literary merit necessary for meaningful secondary school discussions. *The Hunger Games* met both of these criteria, and so I created a Reader-Response survey to study young people’s engagement level with the text. The next three sections of this thesis outline my findings from the Reader-Response survey, the benefits of reading YA literature, and ways to effectively implement YA literature into a secondary school curriculum.

## **Reader-Response Survey**

### ***Methodology***

It seems counter-intuitive to discuss the validity of teaching Young Adult Literature in high school classrooms without presenting an opportunity for high schools students to voice their opinions on the matter. I therefore created a reader-response survey on Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* and distributed it to students in local high schools, including Harrison High School in Farmington, Michigan, Allen Park High School in Allen Park, Michigan, and Hartland High School in Hartland, Michigan. Students who had read part or all of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, or who had at a minimum seen the film versions (only the first two were released at the time of this project) and understood the storyline, participated in the survey. I targeted students of varying grade levels and academic placement level, including mainstream, accelerated, and Advanced Placement English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, grades 10 through 12. Since there were two mainstream tenth grade classes surveyed, in every graph in the Appendix, Allen Park High School's class is referred to as "10<sup>th</sup> Grade A," while Hartland High School's class is referred to as "10<sup>th</sup> Grade B."

The survey, containing 7 reader response-type questions, and the accompanying parent permission slip, were approved by the Human Subjects Committee in the winter of 2013 (please see Figure 1 in the Appendix for the survey and Figure 6 for the parent permission slip). Most students surveyed were under 18 and thus had to return a signed parent permission slip, allowing participation in the survey process. Many students returned the form, indicating an investment in *The Hunger Games* discussion. All three classroom teachers that I met with had read the series themselves and were enthusiastic about its implementation in an academic curriculum.

After completing the surveys, some of the classes had time for students to discuss their overall feelings about the novel. Some chose to voice their opinions about Katniss, focusing on the survey question on the protagonist's emotional distance and calculating nature. Others compared the novel to similar dystopian stories they had recently read, including the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth. Still others talked about the dystopian elements of the novel in connection with society today, and how District 12 mirrors the conditions of certain low socio-economic areas of the United States. Finally, students talked enthusiastically about how the concept of the Hunger Games competition and the arena connect to reality television series, such as *Naked and Afraid*, where contestants have to survive in the woods together with few supplies. Students were making multiple real-world connections to the novel, were sharing their opinions, and were engaged in the discussion. As Louel C. Gibbons, Jennifer S. Dail, and B. Joyce Stallworth point out, "student engagement with a work of literature insures introspective writing, lively discussions, and perhaps most importantly—the students will keep reading, long after the required selection has been finished" (53). That is what I hope to achieve in my future ELA classroom—to teach novels that truly allow students to engage in the reading process.

### ***Results***

The first question on the survey asked how many books students had read in the trilogy. At Allen Park High School, some of the tenth grade students had participated in a One School, One Book program during their freshmen year, where they were required to read the first *Hunger Games* novel as part of a school-wide reading effort. Not surprisingly, the majority of these students went on to read the next two books, *Catching*

*Fire and Mockingjay*. Seventy percent of Accelerated tenth graders at Allen Park High School, and 78 percent of mainstream tenth graders at Allen Park High School read the whole trilogy. Similar results were evident at Harrison High School, where nearly 63 percent of students who started the trilogy, finished it (Table 4).

Katniss Everdeen, the trilogy's protagonist, was the focus of the next survey prompt. Unlike typical female characters, Katniss is physically strong, and can sometimes be emotionally cold and calculating. When asked if they liked Katniss as she is, or if they would prefer a more emotional and warm female protagonist, the overwhelming majority of surveyed students would not change her at all. In fact, 100 percent of eleventh and twelfth grade students at Allen Park High School and 100 percent of students at Harrison High School liked Katniss as she is (Table 3). Katniss' appeal to female and male readers alike is what makes her stand apart from other females, both in the fictional arena and in our society. One AP English student from Harrison High School remarked, "She strongly cares for her family and for Peeta, but she is still good at focusing on survival and being hardcore" (Figure 2). Another argued, "A warm and sweet little girl would be unrealistic and probably wouldn't survive" (Figure 2). Many students believed that Katniss' survivor mentality was fitting for her circumstances.

Another prompt on the survey addressed the romantic aspect of the story, something that became a heated topic of discussion after the release of the first *Hunger Games* movie in 2012. *Twilight* fans have drawn comparisons between the love triangle in *The Hunger Games* involving Katniss, Peeta, and Gale, and the love triangle in *Twilight* involving Bella, Edward, and Jacob. When asked if the romantic aspect of the story takes away from the plot or enriches it, students' responses were mixed. One female

twelfth grade AP student at Harrison High School wrote, "I wished the author had kept Katniss as an independent woman fighting for her and her friends' lives and fighting against society rather than a love story" (Figure 3). Female responses are shown in red on the graph, and male responses are in blue (Table 1). While overall more females than males appreciated the love triangle, there were also more females surveyed. At Allen Park High School, there were actually 3 times more eleventh and twelfth grade males who thought the love triangle enriched the plot than males who thought it took away from the plot. At Hartland High School, the 3 males surveyed from the class all wrote that the love triangle enriched the plot. One male tenth-grader at Allen Park High School wrote, "It enriches the plot knowing that she also has to deal with stuff normal teenagers go through. It helps some readers connect" (Figure 3). Romance, it would seem, does not necessarily cause male readers to lose interest. According to YA Author Patricia McCormick, "Young adults are willing to accompany an author just about anywhere -- to a dystopian future or the ancient past -- but they will not tolerate anything extraneous or self-indulgent" (np). A good story is a good story, for male and female readers alike.

The next prompt focused on the author's social commentary in the novel, specifically on how characters in District 12 are nearly starving while citizens of the Capitol gorge themselves daily. Even more disturbing, the Capitol members in the story are entertained by watching young people kill one another. Through the survey, students discussed these troubling themes in relation to our own society, pulling on examples from ancient Rome, the nature of the entertainment industry today, and the direction in which our society is headed. One AP twelfth grade student from Harrison High School wrote, "I think the author is trying to show how the future might end up

being” (Figure 4). Students were not instructed to make connections to the past, present, and future, but did so naturally, indicating their ability to make meaningful, real-world connections.

A final prompt addressed the novel’s violence in context to its Young Adult categorization. In the arena, young people are speared to death, are slaughtered by wild animals, are stung to death by genetically-mutated wasps, and have their necks snapped. Some critics of the work believe this is too much violence for a young reader to be exposed to. However, in every grade level and school, surveyed students felt that the violence was needed to accomplish the author’s purpose. One student at Harrison High School justified its presence, explaining, “Without the violence, maybe the reader’s reaction to the story and social commentary would not be as strong.” Another student at Allen Park High School inferred, “It was included to convey the horrors of what can happen when one group of people gets too much power” (Figure 5). Among the few students who did think the novel was too emotionally disturbing for young adult readers, some of those students did not have a clear understanding of the term “young adult.” One AP 12<sup>th</sup> grader at Harrison High School felt that the novel was inappropriate for her 9-year-old brother, when currently, the definition of “YA” refers to a 12-to-18 year-old readership. A female tenth grader at Hartland High School wrote, “Many things become inappropriate if given to an age group too young. I think 13, 14, and 15 year-olds can handle it.” YA does in fact encompass the ages she named. The series was not written with children in mind, and certainly does contain violent imagery and themes inappropriate for readers under 12 years old. Another student at Hartland High School

felt that the story was inappropriate for its intended readership, writing, “I don’t believe a book like this should be read in school” (Figure 5).

### ***Analysis of Results***

Students’ responses to the survey questions indicate first and foremost that they are reading. If teachers hope to lead engaged classroom discussions, then they must first make relatable texts available to students. Former classroom teacher Randy Bomer suggests stocking a classroom library with YA novels for students to read during their free time (46). Additionally, teachers can incorporate reading workshops into their units, allowing students independent reading time, “...where students keep a journal and respond to the literature in terms of what they think or how they feel about what they are reading” (Tynor and Green 10). If students become accustomed to reading frequently, both in and out of school, they are more likely to continue the habit. In a study conducted in Tennessee high schools, researchers found that “students who read daily ‘are usually very open to any type of reading.’ On the other hand, ‘students who have been reluctant to read or have struggled in reading have a negative attitude about reading in general,’ making comments such as ‘Man, reading is stupid’ or ‘Reading is for nerds’ (Gibbons, Dale, and Stallworth 58). Clearly, the key to continued reading habits is to prompt students to begin reading in the first place.

Results to Question 4 on the survey indicate that students are invested in *The Hunger Games* because they care about Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist. Despite her cold and calculating nature, the overwhelming majority of surveyed students would not change her as a character. They appreciated her ability to survive in a chaotic, apocalyptic world. And, as one anonymous blogger wisely argues, readers do not necessarily need to

like the protagonist to respect her. She writes, “We [Women] are raised to be good and friendly and to put others’ feelings before our own. We are conditioned to believe that we have to be well-liked at any cost. I think there’s something...really awesome about this heroine because it doesn’t matter if I like her. Instead, I unquestionably respect her” (“I Don’t Really Like Katniss Everdeen”). Finding novels with characters that students can respect and care about leads to more engaged readers in the classroom.

From the prompt on social commentary, it is evident that high school readers are capable of sophisticated textual analysis. One female tenth grader from Allen Park High School wrote, “The Capitol represents today’s upper class, who just watches the lower class struggle. It makes me sick. You have this wealth and power, so put it to good use” (Figure 4). Her response indicates her ability to make real-world connections to Katniss Everdeen’s violent and unjust dystopian society. And while these dystopian elements of the novel are grim at best, they are certainly still important for young readers to be exposed to. As researcher Michael Cart explains, “...dystopian fiction can...serve a larger purpose, inviting idealistic teens to examine the logical consequences of illogical human behavior and to consider how their own actions—or failures to act—might affect the future of the planet and humanity” (103). By critically examining our own society, young people can begin to shape it, and hopefully prevent a future that resembles the one portrayed in The Hunger Games arena. One anonymous blogger exclaims, “We don’t want to be her. We don’t want to hold a 12-year-old in our arms while that child dies... We don’t want to have to care for Peeta, always worrying that he’ll die, that we’ll die, that the final moment of crisis has arrived.... We don’t want to be pawns in anyone’s Games” (“A Question of Perspective”). We can all agree that we don’t want to be a part of

Katniss Everdeen's world, and we can also agree that by becoming aware of societal problems now, her world is more likely to remain fictional.

Through the last prompt, on violence in the novel, students justified the horrors of the arena, explaining how they were necessary for Suzanne Collins to achieve her purpose in the story. While parents and other community members may have objections to graphic scenes in novels--especially novels read in school--Cart argues that violence serves a meaningful purpose in YA stories. He reasons, "...the great gift literature can give its readers...is the experience of empathy and sympathy. Books can take their readers into the interior lives of characters in ways that television and video can't. They not only can show what is happening to characters but also can powerfully convey how what is happening feels" (132). Books such as *The Hunger Games* lead us into the hearts and minds of complex characters, and we are better people for it.

Young people thoughtfully crafted responses to prompts related to Katniss Everdeen's struggle to stay alive in a dystopian world. Through the surveys, they justified her cold and calculating nature, speculated on the social commentary being addressed, and shared their opinions on the novel's love triangle. But most importantly, through the completion of the surveys and the discussions that followed, they were actively engaged in the reading process.

### ***Collegiate-Level and International Samplings***

College students from Dr. Ramona Caponegro's Young Adult Literature course at Eastern Michigan University, Czech college students from an English Education Methods course at the University of Hradec Kralove, and Czech eighth grade students from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class at a Czech secondary school, were

additionally surveyed. While these groups of students do not currently attend—or in the case of the Czech students, have never attended-- US secondary schools, I was interested in discovering how older, more mature students respond to YA Literature, as well as gaining an international perspective of the genre, from the Czech students' responses to an American story. It seemed especially appropriate to include a small sampling of collegiate-level students in the pool of surveyed students since the definition of "Young Adult" is constantly expanding, as discussed in the "History of YA Literature" section of this thesis. As I am seeking certification in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), it also seemed appropriate to survey non-native English speakers to understand how language learners respond to the American YA genre.

Of the 6 Czech eighth grade students surveyed, between the ages of 13 and 14, all 6 students saw the movie adaptation of the first novel, but had not yet read *The Hunger Games*. However, many of the students expressed interest in reading the series outside of school. Similar results were apparent in the Czech English Education Methods course, where 1 of the 7 surveyed students read *The Hunger Games*, while the other students had only seen the movie adaptations. Students from the class were between the ages of 21 and 24, seeking a Master's degree in education. The male student who read the novel made connections to an American classic when addressing the prompt on the purpose of the author's social commentary: "I just think it's a parallel to oppressive systems in general. Something like in [George Orwell's famous novel] 1984, loss of freedom, the right to speak." Another student responded to the same prompt through a focus on her own country's history, following the Second World War: "I think that it [the social commentary] is addressed to the whole world. Just to be careful about totalitarian

states—they can come again if we are not careful.” Students’ cultural schema clearly influenced their understanding of the novel.

At Eastern Michigan University, 25 students were surveyed, whose ages ranged from 19 to 25. Of the 25 students, 80 percent believed that *The Hunger Games* is not too violent for YA readers. One female student’s response paralleled Michael Cart’s justification for violent YA Literature, previously mentioned in the “Analysis of Results” section of this thesis. She explained, “[t]here is a lot of violence in the real world that is senseless. In the fictional world, violence can actually be discussed in terms of how characters are motivated.” It was unclear through the surveys if any of the college students identified as YA readers themselves, but regardless of their personal identification, they believed YA readers should be exposed to literary violence. Their responses paralleled ideas expressed in the high school responses, indicating that readers of a variety of ages feel violence in YA Literature serves an educational purpose.

The pool of Czech secondary and college students surveyed, as well as the pool of surveyed American college students, was relatively small in comparison to the total number of students surveyed from American high schools. However, while it was most beneficial to compile responses from American high school students to discuss the implementation of YA stories in American high schools, gaining the perspective of international and college-age students provided context for the larger discussion of how YA Literature is understood as a genre, across cultures and grade levels.

### **The Benefits of Reading Young Adult Literature**

Through *The Hunger Games* reader-response surveys, high school students demonstrated their ability to critically analyze a Young Adult (YA) text. Yet despite students' enthusiasm about YA Literature, many teachers and librarians still have reservations about implementing works from the genre into a school curriculum. This could be because, according to researcher Michael Cart, "young adults themselves are considered the B-team of society—the bargain basement of age groups: discounted, misunderstood, ignored, and patronized" (247). The literature that represents young people, by extension, is then often seen as lacking sophistication and literary merit. However, what educators should be focusing on in their curricula are the works that instill students with a passion for textual analysis and literary discussion, regardless of the works' genre labels. After all, "...some of the most enduring young adult novels—*The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Chocolate War*, *The Moves Make the Man*, and *Weezie Bat* among them—were actually written as adult novels" (Cart 246). By re-examining the YA genre, and what it has grown to encompass in recent years, teachers and librarians can begin to re-assess the educational value of YA stories in secondary school classrooms.

As former classroom teacher Randy Bomer points out, a range of quality is represented within every literary genre (46). While some YA authors still produce novels with formulaic plots and inaccessible characters, other authors take creative risks, extending narrative boundaries. YA Author Patricia McCormick believes that these authorial risks have led to more meaningful literary creations: "Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a Holocaust novel narrated by death. Walter Dean Meyer's *Monster* is a murder mystery in screenplay format. Karen Hesse's *Out of Dust* is a historical novel written in

prose poems. Lauren Myracle's *Ityl* is written entirely in electronic messages" (np). This narrative fluidity engages readers, catering to their diverse interests, as does the diverse subject matter. McCormick observes how YA authors' creative risk-taking "...with narrative structure, voice and social commentary..." is something that readers "...just don't see as often in the more rarefied world of adult fiction" (np). One high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher even challenges his students to examine plot and character development in complex video games: "[t]his new medium is not only connected to our students' lives and their interests but also represents our society's efforts to push the boundaries of story-telling in meaningful ways" (Ostenson 71). As the very definition of "literature" continues to expand in an increasingly technological world, classroom teachers should consider the potential of creatively-written YA texts and other mediums of literature to captivate young readers and should encourage readers to reflect on how literary form can enrich the plot.

Teaching creatively-written YA texts will additionally benefit students by helping them reach state standards. Teachers must strive to align their curricula to Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and one of the ELA standards for ninth and tenth graders works well with YA Literature: "Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5). Students studying *The Hunger Games* could consider how the short, fast-paced chapters describing the arena build suspense in the novel. The genre's creativity in structure expands beyond fictional pieces as well: "Over the years, YAL has grown expansively to include genres such as poetry, biographies, memoirs, informational

texts... to name a few" (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth 3). This inclusion of informational texts additionally aligns to CCSS, which place greater value on informational texts than literary ones. The CCSS creators justify this decision, explaining, "Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content" ("Key Design Consideration"). By implementing both informational and literary YA texts into a curriculum, teachers can ensure students' college-readiness while exposing them to innovative literary works.

One notable way in which adolescent readers benefit from reading literary YA works in school is the therapeutic function of these stories, helping teens to make sense of their world. Author Norma Klein argues for the need of therapeutic stories during adolescence: "If we admit that being a teenager at any time in history is by some definition, terrible, then let us have books that acknowledge this. Young people will be grateful for these books" (Cart 275). YA stories touch on an array of problems and conflicts that secondary school students may encounter at some point during their school years, including family conflicts, identity issues, bullying, and various mental health issues. While *The Hunger Games* takes place in a dystopian society, the extreme sense of loss Katniss feels after the death of her father, her distant relationship with her mother, and her anxiety may resonate with readers who come from broken homes. YA author Chris Crutcher also advocates for this genre, stating, "I have never met a depressed person, or an anxious person, or a fearful person who was not encouraged by the knowledge that others feel the same way they do" (Cart 137). By assigning YA stories such as *The Hunger Games* in ELA classes, teachers can help connect students with tools to make sense of their coming-of-age experiences.

Students can additionally connect to YA stories because a variety of races, ethnicities, and cultures are represented in these texts. This is especially important for young people who live in a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, with "...325 distinct languages spoken in homes across the United States" ("What Languages"). With an increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) and bilingual students entering U.S. schools every year from these diverse backgrounds, YA authors have been writing meaningful and culturally-rich texts to represent this group of young people. As researchers Louel C. Gibbons, Jennifer S. Dail, and B. Joyce Stallworth infer:

Young adult literature appeals to adolescent readers for multiple reasons. It is written about characters with whom they can identify based on issues such as age, conflicts, and world perceptions...YAL also includes a growing body of work that represents different ethnic and cultural groups, reflective of our ever-growing diverse society. (4)

These stories will benefit Native English speakers (NES) in the classroom as well by helping them to become more culturally-conscious readers and thinkers. Thus, while it is important for students to connect to texts on a personal level, they can also learn a great deal from protagonists with life experiences that extend beyond their own. The International Board on Books for Young People affirms that books can "build bridges of understanding and peace between people" (Aldana np). As classrooms continue to represent students from diverse backgrounds, it is crucial for young learners to develop sensitivity and open-mindedness to cultural diversity, examining contrasting belief systems and values in literature. Through *The Hunger Games*, student readers can consider the cultural values of each district, as well as the misconceptions that arise from

a lack of understanding between districts. Additionally, Multicultural YA stories, such as Markus Zusak's award-winning *The Book Thief*, celebrate distinct cultures while still exposing adolescent readers to shared human experiences.

YA Literature, while helping young people to make sense of their own lives and to better understand the lives of young people from diverse backgrounds, simultaneously encourages positive reading habits. As Marsha Sprague, author of *Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls with Young Adult Literature* explains, teachers should "...give adolescents books that help teens make sense of their lives, with the idea that if they see reading as meaningful, they will want to read more" (Cart). In 2007, 65 percent of high school seniors and 71 percent of eighth graders were reading below grade level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth 57). Teachers can therefore assign YA Literature to help students engage in the reading process, since they tend to relate well to these books. Students who enjoy reality television shows can infer how the concept of *The Hunger Games* competition is a dystopian version of our society's reality shows. YA novels are also helpful for struggling readers because of their pacing. Stories in the genre "...will hold students' attention in a rapidly increasing technological society where their world literally flashes before their eyes through television, video games, and computer images" (Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth 56). For students who are intimidated by dense, complex texts, shorter and more accessible YA novels can help them feel more comfortable with the reading process.

YA literature can benefit parents as well by helping them to discuss important topics with their teens. As librarian and blogger Cindy Dobrez explains, "It's often easier

to talk about difficult issues through the actions of a book character than in real life” (Benedetti np). Parents can read YA texts that their children are assigned to read in school to discuss characters’ coming-of-age issues that their own children are likely experiencing. Additionally, parents are likely to truly enjoy reading these stories and discussing them with their teen readers. As David Levithan, the editorial director at Scholastic who worked on *The Hunger Games* infers, “...our emotions don’t really change as we grow older. Issues of identity and belonging and finding your way in the world are new when you’re a teen, but they never actually go away” (Miller np). Young people and adults alike enjoy reading *The Hunger Games*. Therefore, the inclusion of YA stories such as *The Hunger Games* in school curricula can help bridge the gap between teen readers and their parents.

YA novels also address violence in a meaningful way, allowing adolescents to become more empathetic readers and, ideally, citizens. Violence, unfortunately, has a large presence in students’ lives. In fact, the average child will watch 100,000 acts of simulated violence before graduating from elementary school (Cart 144). Along with watching violent acts on television and in video games, students encounter violence in school environments. While some teens merely witness these acts, others are frequently directly involved in bullying incidents, either as bullies or victims. Sadly, an alarming 30 percent of all students between sixth and tenth grade have been involved in bullying in some capacity (Cart 144). The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (NYVPRC) observes prominent behaviors that bullies exhibit: ““Bullies have a strong need to dominate others and usually have little empathy for their targets”” (Cart 133). Thus, one effective way to eliminate school bullying incidents would be to instill students

with empathy for their classmates. Violent YA novels, while exposing students to yet more violence, serve a meaningful purpose by allowing readers inside characters' minds and exposing readers to the thoughts and feelings of others. As Cart wisely infers, "We can learn what's good and what's bad, what's generous and unselfish, what's cruel and mean from fiction" (104). *The Hunger Games* is, without a doubt, a highly graphic and violent novel. Young people compete to the death in an arena every year, to atone for their ancestors' rebellion against the Capitol. Yet Katniss, a contender in the Games, is sickened by the unending violence of the arena. Through Katniss' first-person narration, readers follow her struggle to survive the Games as well as her coping with the moral consequences of killing other young people. YA books, even violent ones, have the capacity to positively impact teen readers.

A final educational function of YA Literature is to introduce students to literary concepts, by exposing readers to these concepts through texts at an appropriate reading level. It seems counterintuitive to teach literary devices, thematic vocabulary words, and unique grammatical constructs as concepts independent of literature, when there is in fact a large amount of overlap. Moreover, it seems counterintuitive to teach the aforementioned concepts using texts far beyond a student's current reading level. Such an approach would simultaneously discourage students from engaging with the text and from mastering the literary concepts. However, integrating writing concepts into a YA novel helps students understand writing concepts as meaningful and relevant to their development as readers and writers. Students studying *The Hunger Games* might focus on Collins' deliberate use of the present tense throughout Katniss' narration, and how the verb tense enforces the immediacy of the arena. Bomer points out the usefulness of this

strategy: “[t]aking out a text with which the students are already familiar, the teacher can...quickly zero in on the relevant part of the text, without sacrificing students’ connection to the context, meaning, and background” (238). By reading rich YA texts containing unique narrative structures and literary devices, students can practice analytical skills while also learning language concepts.

YA Literature has made remarkable strides as a literary genre in recent years, producing novels with “...beautifully realized, multidimensional characters that... will endure, just as the human spirit” (Cart 79). However, many classroom teachers and librarians still have reservations about teaching these works, unsure of their literary merit. To be sure, this is a valid concern, when many YA texts written in past decades were formulaic. Cart believes that “...books won’t change anything if they’re a formulaic, problem-driven fiction inhabited by cardboard characters ...young adult books must constitute a grittily realistic literature inhabited by complex characters whose lives...invite us not only to empathize but to think” (277). The latter type of work that Cart mentions is quickly becoming the standard for YA Literature, providing teachers and students with ample educational uses for YA Literature in the secondary school classroom.

### Teaching Young Adult Literature

While many educators still have reservations about teaching Young Adult (YA) novels, others have already begun to find meaningful ways of implementing Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series into classroom curricula across the nation, recognizing young peoples' passion for this series and the YA genre as a whole. Additionally, *The Hunger Games* is not solely being taught in the traditional English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Indeed, librarians and other content-area teachers recognize that concepts in the books can be applied to a variety of educational activities and learning objectives.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, "...the number-one method of improving reading skills is by practicing reading..." (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth 5). This information is especially relevant to educators, given recent reports on secondary students' reading proficiency: "Large-scale data from tests such as the NAEP, the SAT, and state-mandated assessments suggest that secondary students are struggling to make gains in reading as the curriculum becomes more complex after elementary school..." (Saunders 45). As a result of this research, some secondary schools have made an organized effort to promote reading outside the classroom. One such school in Michigan, Allen Park High School, used *The Hunger Games* to introduce their "One Book, One School Program" during the 2009-10 school year. The program was designed "to promote reading, encourage interdisciplinary discussion and create a sense of community through this common, shared experience" ("Annual Education Report"). Along with guided reading questions to consider, each grade level was assigned a different essay prompt to complete after independently reading *The Hunger Games* for

one and a half weeks. The essay prompts were differentiated by developmental level and aligned to state standards. To answer the essential question for one of the freshmen prompts-- "How do my relationships change me as a person?"--students were required to explain why a certain supporting character was pivotal to Katniss' success in *The Hunger Games* arena. This question aligned with the ELA state focus on interrelationships for ninth graders ("Michigan" 3). On the other hand, to answer the essential question for eleventh graders-- "What Qualities Define a Leader?"--students were instructed to pick a character from *The Hunger Games* who exemplified leadership qualities, as defined by John Quincy Adams. They then gave a five-minute speech in support of their chosen character, an activity which aligned with the Civics state focus on leadership for eleventh graders ("Functional Independence"). ELA and social studies teachers at the school collaborated to effectively align concepts in *The Hunger Games* to state standards.

Even math and science teachers have been using the novel to teach core concepts. Literacy professor Jane M. Saunders believes that disciplinary literacy approaches will make math and science concepts more accessible to struggling readers: "Recent research suggests if we hope to engage with students about the complex work required for each of the disciplines, we need to nestle that content 'in relevant context and its connection to larger constructs within...the world'" (Saunders 47). To accomplish this, math teachers in Texas have made the concept of probability more exciting for students by having them calculate the odds of characters' names being drawn during the Reaping Ceremony. In science classes in Texas, teachers are focusing on the *Hunger Games* arena and are introducing students to biodiversity by having them classify plants described in the story (Saunders 46). Through these interdisciplinary approaches, content teachers are making

learning relevant and are encouraging students to examine a much-loved text from new perspectives.

Book-inspired assemblies are another avenue through which interdisciplinary learning can take place. When *The Hunger Games* author, Suzanne Collins, visited one school, various classes applied content from the novel to their assembly preparations, demonstrating their ability to collaborate across content areas:

Students marched before the author costumed as the district tributes, the language arts class made posters with quotes from the novel (to illustrate such rhetorical devices as irony) and the art class re-created one of the settings in the Arena. Even the business class participated by budgeting, raising money for and finally commissioning a pendant of Katniss' emblem, a bird called a mockingjay, to present to Collins at the event.  
(Miller np)

While Collins cannot visit every school, school-wide collaborative efforts to celebrate a YA novel certainly engage students in reading across content areas.

A final interdisciplinary learning approach to *The Hunger Games* involves an integration of art and ELA. To study sensory details, students can examine pictures of the colorful and lavish delicacies served in the Capitol before examining the simple soups and hearty breads served in District 12 (*Fictional Food*). After making these visual comparisons, students can transfer this knowledge into writing by composing vivid sensory detail descriptions of each of the meals represented in the pictures. According to the New York State Department and the Office of Bilingual Education and Foreign

Language Studies, an integrated arts approach to studying *The Hunger Games* greatly benefits learners:

The No Child Left Behind education law has led schools to increase the amount of time spent on reading and math instruction, resulting in a decrease in the amount of time spent on other subject areas, including the arts...the arts increase a child's capacity to learn in other academic areas, particularly in reading, writing and verbal communication. (5)

Additionally, visuals serve as meaningful supplementary materials for English Language Learners (ELLs) in the ELA classroom: "...the visual arts can be successfully integrated with reading, writing and oral communication to increase literacy development and foster higher order thinking skills for English Language Learners" (The New York State Department 2). Therefore, a focus on the pictorial representation of *The Hunger Games* concepts aids both Native English Speakers (NES) and ELLs in the classroom.

Another way to teach *The Hunger Games* is through the lens of critical theory. The trilogy depicts, in many ways, Katniss Everdeen's coming of age. And, while critical theory is typically taught at the collegiate level, one proponent of critical theory argues that high school ELA classrooms are also a fitting place to apply theories to literature: "...novels that follow the tradition of the Bildungsroman lend themselves naturally to being read from a psychoanalytic perspective. The Bildungsroman has its main focus on the psychological and emotional development of the protagonist" (Soter 27). Many accessible Bildungsroman, or coming of age, stories, *The Hunger Games* among them, fall into the genre of YA Literature. By introducing students to critical theory through

YA texts, students will make a smoother transition to studying critical theory through classic texts on the collegiate level.

Along with introducing students to critical theory, *The Hunger Games* can be taught in order to bridge students to classic texts in a unit with similar themes. As Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth reason, "...classics are not always relevant to our students' lives. Such a pairing of contemporary literature and YAL with canonical texts at least bridges the distance between students' lives and the textual world" (56). Through the reader-response surveys that I conducted, students demonstrated their ability to make real-world connections to the social commentary discussed in *The Hunger Games* and expressed their respect for the protagonist. Thus, teachers can use *The Hunger Games* as a means of introducing students to a thematic unit on violence in the media or social class inequality before transitioning to a classic text with these themes. And, since "...the motivation to read affects reading proficiency" (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth 5), students will already be engaged in the unit by starting with a novel that they are passionate about discussing.

Sophisticated YA texts such as *The Hunger Games* have the potential to be incorporated into a variety of educational settings. When numerous young people are passionate about a book, educators are more likely to incorporate interdisciplinary learning approaches into the curriculum, fostering a sense of community in secondary schools. These interdisciplinary methods promote literacy across subject areas and a drive for students to continue reading outside of school. Even when *The Hunger Games* is taught strictly in an ELA classroom setting, the novel can introduce students to thoughtful discussions incorporating critical theory while also bridging readers to classic texts with

similar thematic ideas. When students already exhibit enthusiasm and passion for incorporating *The Hunger Games* into an educational environment, the possibilities to transform reading activities into meaningful learning opportunities are truly endless.

## Appendix

Figure 1 below shows the data collection instrument used for this procedure.

Age:	Grade:	Gender:
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1. Which book(s) have you read in the series? (If you have only seen the movie adaptations, then please indicate which ones)
  - a) Only *The Hunger Games*
  - b) *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*
  - c) *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*
  - d) None
2. Have you also read the *Harry Potter* series and/or the *Twilight* series?
3. Why did you read *The Hunger Games*?
 

a) A friend referred it to you.	c) You saw the movie, and then wanted to read the book.
b) You were assigned to read it in school.	d) Your parent(s) suggested that you read it.
e) Other (please explain):	
4. Katniss is a survivor. She provides for her family to prevent them from starving, and she keeps herself and Peeta alive in the arena. However, she can also be emotionally distant from others and calculating. Would you rather have a more emotional and warm female protagonist, or do you like Katniss the way she is? Why?
5. Many *Twilight* fans have drawn comparisons between the love triangle in *The Hunger Games* involving Katniss, Peeta, and Gale and the love triangle in *Twilight* involving Bella, Edward, and Jacob. Do you feel that this romantic aspect of the story enriches the plot or takes away from it, and why or why not?
6. Many people in District 12 are nearly starving while citizens of the Capitol gorge themselves daily. The Capitol members are also entertained by watching young people kill one another. Describe what you think the author's purpose is; that is, what larger theme or themes (e.g., social commentary) are being addressed? How do you feel about the author's social commentary?
7. In the arena, young people are speared to death, are slaughtered by wild animals, are stung to death by genetically-mutated wasps, and have their necks snapped. Do you find this violence to be too emotionally disturbing for a young adult novel? Why do you think the author included it?

Figure 2 shows a sampling of student responses to Question 4 on the survey.

**Allen Park High School, Grade 10**

*"She was different from other stereotypical protagonists; she was somewhat of an anti-hero"*

*"She's strong, tough, and she's not like other female characters, which makes her more interesting and relatable" –male student*

*"It makes it more exciting knowing how unpredictable she can be"*

*"I believe the reason why she is a survivor is because she knows when to be emotional and when there is more important things to worry about"*

*"She seems powerful and wise"*

*"She is unlike most characters in novels I read today and it makes it more interesting to see how she will react in certain situations"*

*"I would prefer a more emotional protagonist because I would be able to have more relatable feelings with her"*

**Allen Park High School, Accelerated Grade 10**

*"So many women in the media are loving and weak, but to have a strong, determined woman as the lead role is a refreshing experience"*

**Hartland High School, Grade 10**

*"I think she's tough when she needs to be and kind when she needs to be."*

*"Personally, I can't stand Katniss. She acts in such an unattached manner that I could barely even finish the first book without strangling her."*

**Allen Park High School, Grades 11 and 12**

*"I like Katniss the way she is. I think she portrays a heroine, survivor, and fighter very well."*

*"She strongly cares for her family and for Peeta, but she is still good at focusing on survival and being hardcore."*

*"She doesn't give up when things are tough"*

*"A warm and sweet little girl would be unrealistic and honestly probably wouldn't survive"*

**Harrison High School, AP English 12**

*"If she were more emotional, the book would have lost some of its edge"*

Figure 3 shows a sampling of student responses to Question 5 on the survey.

**Allen Park High School, Grade 10**

*"Gale and Peeta are always a distraction"—female student*

*"It enriches the plot knowing that she also has to deal with stuff normal teenagers go through. It helps some readers connect."—male student*

*"One of the reasons Katniss fights to stay alive is because she wants Peeta to survive"—female student*

**Allen Park High School, Accelerated Grade 10**

*"Teens enjoy a little romance"—female student*

*"The love story with Peeta is what kept them alive in the first Hunger Games, but the love triangle I really could have done without. It's bringing Katniss' personality back to that of a typical woman in media"—female student*

**Hartland High School, Grade 10**

*"I didn't really get into the whole "love triangle," "Team Peeta," or "Team Gale" thing. I accepted the relationships as part of the plot and moved on.—male student*

*"It annoys me that the media care more about "Team Peeta" than dystopian society."*

**Allen Park High School, Grades 11 and 12**

*"I think it adds because it's just another layer to an already-complex story"*

*"Not only is she battling her opponents in the arena, but her feelings also"*

*"It provides an emotional battle for Katniss to go through—something she can't be distant from"*

*"The book focused more on the relationship aspect than the dystopian survival-type plot that was originally in the book"—male student*

**Harrison High School, AP English 12**

*"It shows a different side of them (Katniss and Peeta) besides survival"*

*"You have two characters that you're sort of rooting for and love, so you feel torn to choose."*

*"So much of The Hunger Games is about surviving and having to make difficult decisions; adding a love triangle diminishes the significance of the other, more important, choices Katniss has to make"*

*"I wished the author had kept Katniss as an independent woman fighting for her and her friends' lives and fighting against society rather than a love story"*

Figure 4 shows a sampling of student responses to Question 6 on the survey.

**Allen Park High School, Accelerated Grade 10**

*"The author is criticizing our society. We find enjoyment in shows such as Wipeout. The larger theme is that wealth is distributed unequally. Poor people fight to survive, such as in District 12, while the rich stand by and watch."*

*"The Capitol represents today's upper class, who just watches the lower class struggle. It makes me sick. You have this wealth and power, so put it to good use."*

**Hartland High School, Grade 10**

*"She is attempting to touch on unequal distribution of wealth and lack of compassion in society."*

*"She was trying to show how power can corrupt human morals"*

**Allen Park High School, Grades 11 and 12**

*"It's like the saying, 'the rich get richer as the poor get poorer.'"*

*"I think the author can get people to realize how our society is actually similar to the Hunger Games in many ways, and can possibly try to get us to change it."*

*"The author's purpose is to foreshadow what will happen in our society, but in a more extreme way."*

**Harrison High School, AP English 12**

*"It feels like ancient Rome, with the fighting in the Coliseum."*

*"I think the author is trying to show how the future may end up being"*

*"It is a very appropriate way to bring today's problems to attention"*

*"The rich and famous make entertainment out of the poor. They make movies about it instead of helping"*

*"It is an exaggerated version of today's reality T.V."*

*"It suggests that society is becoming more inhumane and detached to the strife of others"*

Figure 5 shows a sampling of student responses to Question 7 on the survey.

**Allen Park High School, Grade 10**

*"Most shows, video games, and books that young adults are exposed to are far worse. I think the author included it to depict how hard it is to fight for your life if you have nothing. It gives a more powerful message than just being a piece in the Capitol's games."*

**Allen Park High School, Accelerated Grade 10**

*"In order to convey a compelling plot, the author needed this level of brutality"*

*"It was included to convey the horrors of what can happen when one group of people gets too much power"*

*"Not any more violent than video games are today."*

**Allen Park High School, Grades 10 and 11**

*"I think the Rue scene was a lot for me to handle. I think the author included it to show how horrifying society really is."*

*"I find it emotionally disturbing that someone wrote it down and I enjoyed it."*

**Hartland High School, Grade 10**

*"I think that it depends on the person reading the novel. While I find some occurrences in the book emotionally disturbing, other people may not."*

*"Young adults know that there is violence in the world."*

*"Many things become inappropriate if given to an age group too young. I think 13, 14, and 15 year-olds can handle it."*

*"I don't believe a book like this should be read in school."*

*"The author included it to prove that children are desensitized."*

**Harrison High School, AP English 12**

*"I think the exaggerated violence helps the author convey her point"*

*"Without the violence, maybe the reader's reaction to the story and social commentary would not be as strong"*

*"Compared to other imagery in the media, and in the world, this violence is much less disturbing."*

Figure 6—Parent Permission Slip

Dear parents and guardians,

My name is Emily Colletti, and I am studying English Secondary Education and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at Eastern Michigan University. As part of my senior thesis, I am conducting a Reader Response survey in order to determine which aspects of *The Hunger Games* series are most appealing to different readers.

These results will help me to determine how Young Adult literature can serve as a useful tool for getting students engaged in reading in a high school classroom setting. Students' participation in this study may enhance critical thinking skills and encourage student discussions about young adult literature in the classroom.

Students can voluntarily elect to participate, or not, in this study, and they may withdraw without consequence at any time. In other words, students are not required to participate in this survey and will not be penalized in any way should they choose not to participate. My survey asks for the age, gender, and grade level of participants. However, if your son or daughter fills out the survey, he or she is not required to provide this information. Also, I plan to use pseudonyms when I represent students. Therefore, for example, if my research is published by Eastern Michigan University in any form, I will use pseudonyms when quoting participant responses and will not include any identifying features of participants. These consent forms with identifying information will be kept separate from survey results in a secure location.

Students who receive parental consent and wish to participate in the study will be handed the eight-question survey by their instructor in their language arts classroom to complete on their own time after school. I will explain the survey contents in each language arts classroom and can personally answer any student questions. The duration of participation depends on how long a student wishes to dedicate to answering the questions, but is expected to last approximately 15-20 minutes. When I return the following week, I will collect completed surveys from the instructor. Until this time, completed surveys will be stored in a secure envelope in the classroom. The survey asks participants to specify their familiarity with *The Hunger Games* book series, and also asks questions about the female protagonist, the love triangle, the author's social commentary, and the violent nature of *The Hunger Games* series. There are no anticipated risks for participating in the study. Nevertheless, participants will be asked questions about starvation and violence and may experience some emotional discomfort when responding to these items. This discomfort is not expected to last longer than it takes to complete the survey. If, however, a participant experiences emotional reactions, he or she can speak with a social worker at the high school's office. If you have any questions about this survey, please feel free to contact me at (734) 560-8535 or ecollet1@emich.edu. You can also contact my project adviser at Eastern Michigan University, Dr. Douglas Baker, at (734)487-2296 or douglas.baker@emich.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ms. Colletti

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the Director of the Graduate School (734.487.0042, human.subjects@emich.edu).

I give permission for my son or daughter to participate in the aforementioned research survey.

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

This study has the approval of:

Teacher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 7—Human Subjects Review Committee Approval of Study Form

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY  
*Education First*

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April 9, 2013

Emily Colletti  
Department of English Language and Literature

Dear Emily:

The College of Arts and Sciences Human Subjects Review Committee (CAS HSRC) of Eastern Michigan University has reviewed and approved your proposal (#1158) titled, "Catching Fire: Classroom Implications" and your minor modification to this proposal (#1158M). The CAS HSRC has determined that the rights and welfare of the individual subjects involved in this research are carefully guarded. Additionally, the methods used to obtain informed consent are appropriate, and the individuals participating in your study are not at risk.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the HSRC of any change in the protocol that might alter your research in any manner that differs from that upon which this approval is based. Approval of this project applies for one year from the date of this letter. If your data collection continues beyond the one year period, you must apply for a renewal. Please specify in your consent form that approval is from 4/9/2013 to 4/8/2014.

On behalf of the Human Subjects Committee, I wish you success in conducting your research.

Sincerely,

Alissa Huth-Roddy, Ph.D.  
CAS Human Subjects Review Committee Chair

Note: If project continues beyond the length of one year, please submit a continuation request form by 4/8/2014.

cc: Douglas Baker, Ph.D.

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University Human Subjects Review Committee - Eastern Michigan University - 290 Goss Hall  
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197  
Phone: 734.487.0912 Fax: 734.487.0930  
E-mail: human.subjects@umich.edu  
www.ansd.emu.edu

Table 1

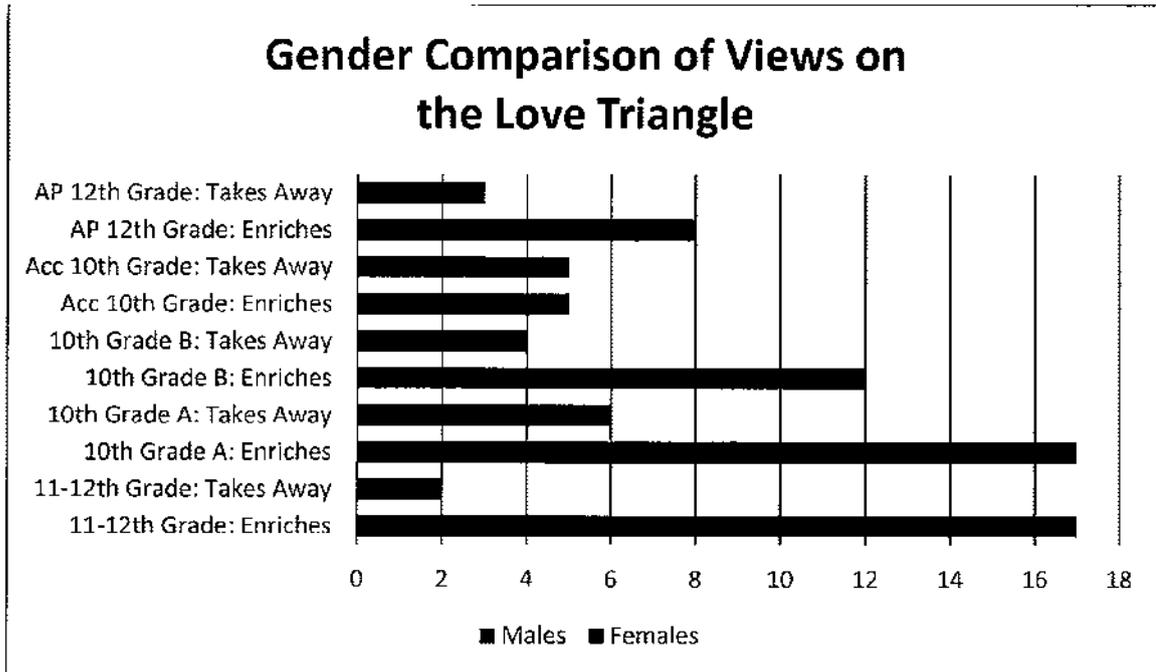


Table 2

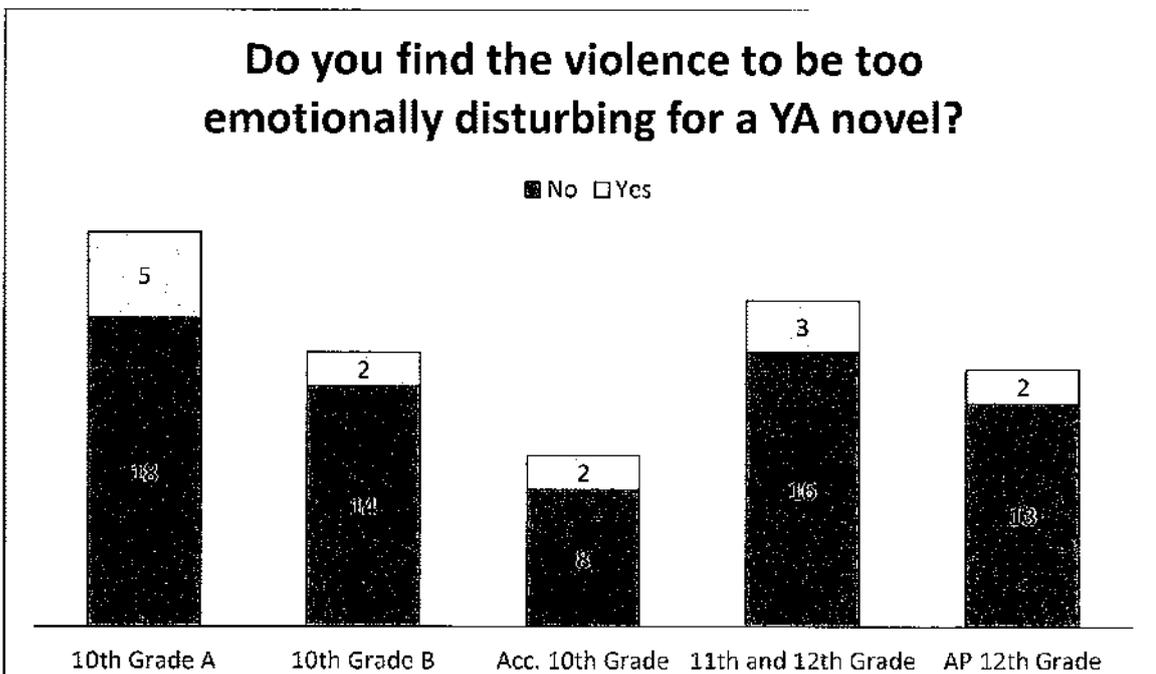


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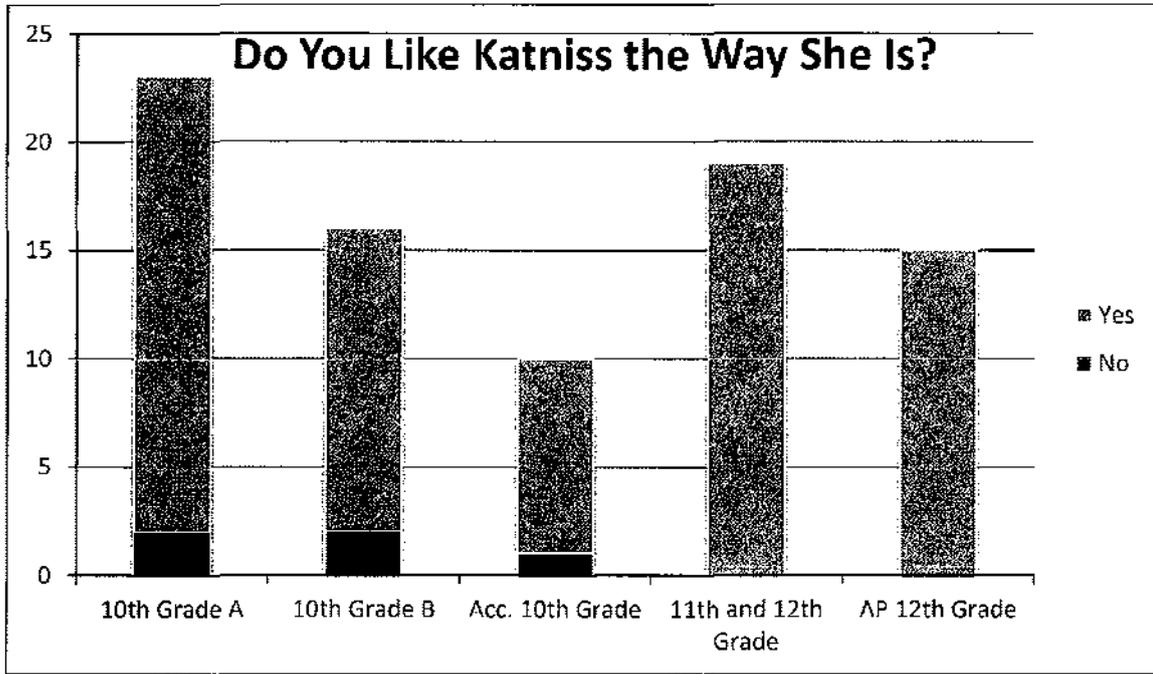


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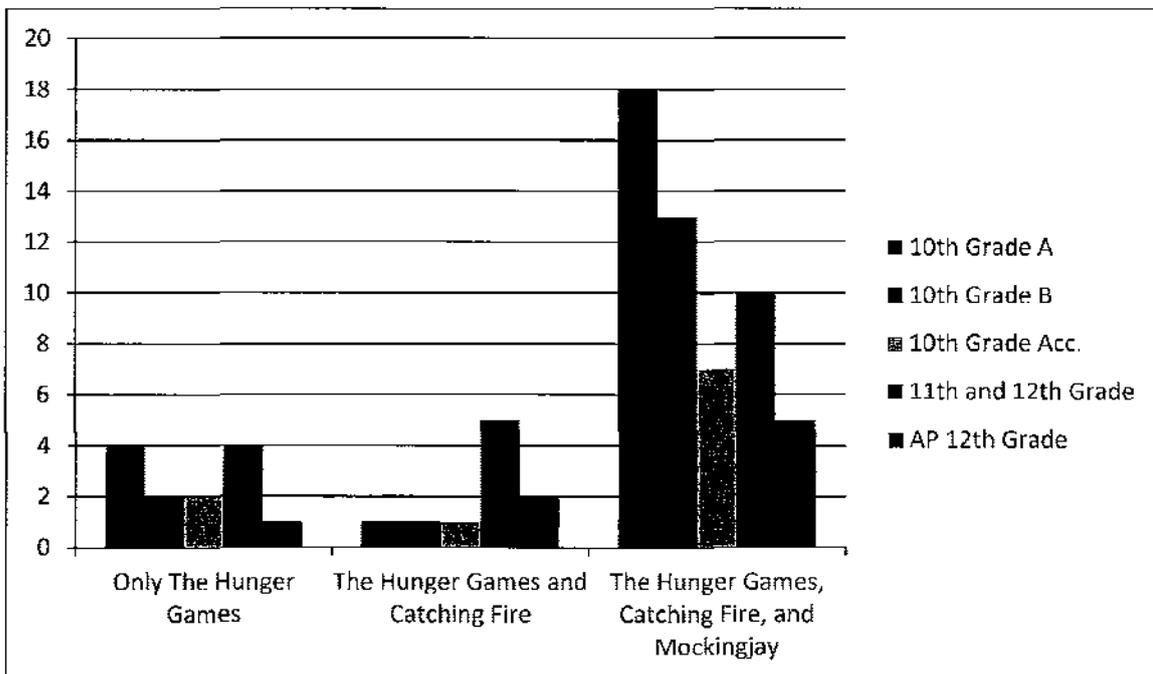
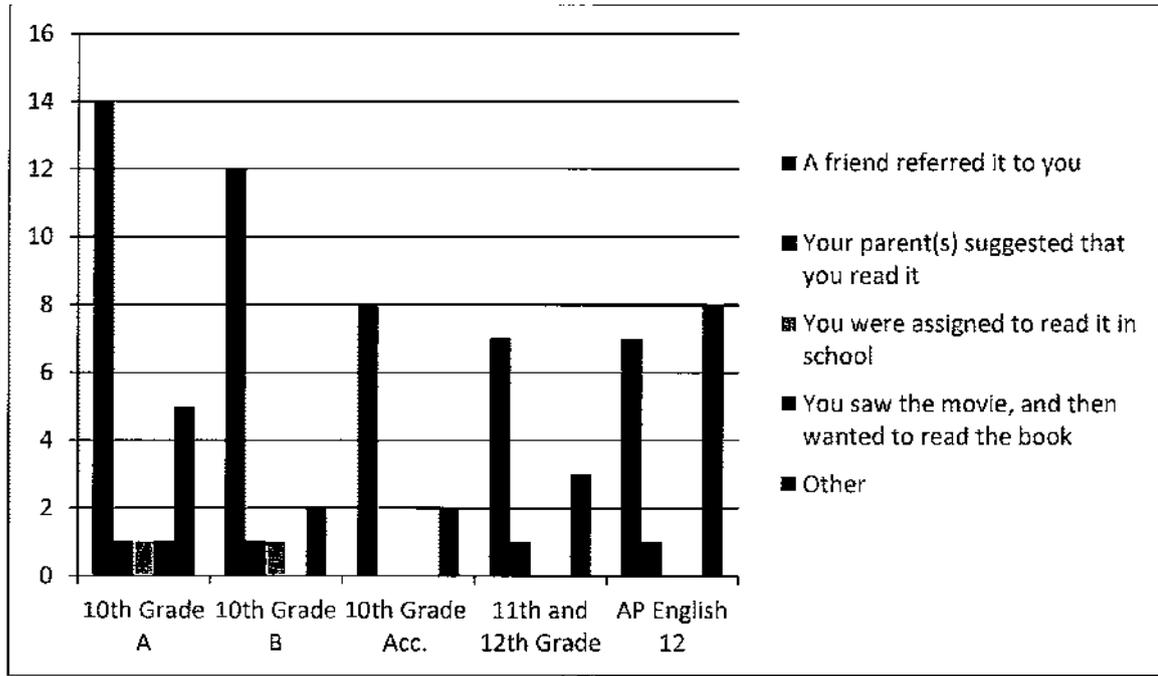


Table 5



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