

ENGL 192DF Paper 1

TA: Saide Singh

Section 1pm Tuesday

Avery Stanley

Truth vs. Perception: Strategic Performance in *The Hunger Games*

In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), perception is just as valuable, if not more important, than the truth. In the same manner that the tributes must physically participate in the games, they must also perform as a means of survival. The act of performance manifests itself in different ways—Cato as a violent killer, the girl from District 5 as a cunning fox, Katniss and Peeta as star-crossed lovers—which ultimately reveals the same phenomena about the Capitol's constant surveillance. The act of being watched at all hours results in the tributes being in a continual state of performance, knowing their reception by the Capitol is the difference between life and death. Performance in *The Hunger Games* is not merely participation in the games, but the process of acting out a false reality to create an image within the eyes of the Capitol and its powerful audience.

The act of performing occurs far before the tributes ever enter the arena. When the tributes arrive at the Capitol, they are essentially reconstructed as individuals and put on display for all to see. Like their physical appearances, their personalities are morphed to fulfill specific archetypes. As Katniss grapples with being portrayed as likeable, yet strong, in her interview with Caesar Flickerman, she feels disadvantaged by Peeta's confession of love. Haymitch rationalizes Peeta's choice against Katniss's anger saying, "Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough... Now I can say you're a heartbreaker... Which do you think will get you more

sponsors (135)?” Haymitch’s statement reveals how the tributes intentionally craft personalities during their interviews to garner supporters. These performances create a false reality for the tributes; however, they design a believable narrative for Capitol sponsors who crave emotional investment in the games. In the eyes of the sponsor, fierceness, sexiness, cunning, and even forbidden love are valued above truth or authenticity, which further forces the tributes into a state of performing.

Though the tributes’ personalities are carefully crafted before the games begin, if the tributes want to gain and keep Capitol sponsorship, they must continue to perform amongst the chaos of the arena. Even in Katniss’s most vulnerable moments within the games, she is hyper-aware of the Capitol’s surveillance and her need to perform thoughtfully for potential sponsors. This is evident when Katniss realizes Peeta has joined the careers who are attempting to hunt her. Though she is processing emotions of confusion and betrayal in her mind, she makes the conscious decision to, “...pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on [her]. Then [she] cock[s] [her] head slightly to the side and give[s] a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means (164).” In this moment of performance, Katniss gives the audience the illusion that she and Peeta may still be star-crossed lovers with an elaborate plan. Her performance of a singular smile portrays an entire false reality in which Katniss is aware of Peeta’s motives, giving her power in the games.

Katniss’s final life-saving performance ultimately lies in her relationship with Peeta. Planted in the heads of viewers from Peeta’s interview, Katniss relies on the presumption that the pair are a couple to survive. After the rule change, Katniss is aware that her best chance of survival is allying with injured Peeta, and she thinks within her internal monologue, “If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers

desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance (261).” Katniss knows they are being watched closely by sponsors, resulting in her performance of affection towards Peeta. Though Katniss uses her “relationship” with Peeta to climatically win the games, the controversial nature of their success means that the performance is not over. Even after winning, Katniss is aware that she has to continue her performance of love in order to escape punishment from the Capitol for embarrassing them and breaking their rules.

Through the Capitol’s constant surveillance, Katniss is able to successfully perform a certain narrative for the sponsors. This narrative of star-crossed lovers represents how performance can outweigh participation within the games, and how perception is paramount to survival. It is also a reminder that, though the tributes are being surveilled constantly, what appears on the screen is not necessarily reality but a carefully crafted image engineered to accomplish a certain goal.

Works Cited

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press, 2008.