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From Rome to Panem: A Cycle of History

The Hunger Games is a work of modern day literature which has a huge cultural following. A major influence on the writer, Suzanne Collins, was ancient Rome. The reader can see the impact it had on her through the use of Latin. Another way the reader should relate *The Hunger Games* to ancient Roman society is through the names of the characters which come from both Roman history and plays about ancient Rome. A final way to relate these two are through the sociopolitical structure in each; this includes but is not limited to the class system, the arena/coliseum, and the idea of an oppressive capitol. Almost every aspect of *The Hunger Games* can be related to ancient Roman language, history, or culture.

The Romans spoke Latin as their primary language and as Roman influence spread the Latin, the Romans speech evolved into other languages such as French. Throughout *The Hunger Games* readers can see a pattern of Latin words or parts of phrases that demonstrate how Panem and the Capitol reflected the Roman Empire. The first word or part of a phrase the readers see is Panem; in Latin, Panem means bread, and bread is a recurring theme throughout the story. Panem is also part of a larger Latin phrase, *panem et circenses*, this translate into English as bread and circuses or bread and games. Bread and circuses was the Roman idea of how to keep its populations from revolting by providing them food and entertainment. Many powerful Roman senators and consuls thought the concept of bread and circuses was the only way to maintain the peace; this is

ironic because to maintain peace there had to be killing. The last way Panem could be translated is the French translation; in French, the word Panem literally translates to pain, something felt by a majority of the citizens in Panem. Another way this could be taken is that the government of Panem produces pain, the reader sees this when Katniss describes the Hunger Games ritual of “taking kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch” (Collins 19). Through the multiple translations of Panem, the reader could better comprehend the major effects Latin and words of Latin descent had on *The Hunger Games*.

Panem is not the only word that has Latin roots. The word tribute also has a Latin background. In *The Hunger Games* the tributes are all the competitors from the districts. The reason Collins choose tribute was that this word is the Latin descendant of the word *tributa*. In ancient Rome a *tributa* was a tax paid to the government for protection. This protection tax is very similar to the Capitol’s system of keeping the districts at bay. In both systems the governments use the *tributa* to keep “reminding [the people] how totally [they] are at their mercy” through violent and monetary means (Collins 19). The reader could make the connection that the word tribute was chosen because of its relation to not only ancient Rome but also because of its Latin meaning of the word related so closely to what the tributes’ lives actually were like.

When Suzanne Collins was writing this book, she put a good bit of thought into the names of the characters. The reason behind this logic is a majority of the important character’s names come from famous Roman people. The reader can see the first major example in Caesar Flickerman, the TV show host; Caesar might have been the most popular man in Panem, much like Julius Caesar was in Rome. Flickman is a loved by not only the people in the Capitol but also the people in the districts because of his oratory skills. Even Katniss thinks Flickerman is a

good guy with the way he “tries to set the nervous [tributes] at ease, laughs at lame jokes, and can turn a weak response into a memorable one by the way he reacts” (Collins 125). Seneca Crane, the Head Gamemaker of the 74th Hunger Games, was another one of Collins’s characters to be named after a Roman of the same name. Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a very important Roman politician who was rumored to be the person who started the Roman games. Even the main antagonist, Cato, was a part of the name referencing frenzy. Marcus Porticus Cato was a huge opponent of Julius Caesar which would make Cato perfectly set for the role of the bad guy. All these have an exact translation, so it is easy to see where Collins drew inspiration for their names.

Not every name in *The Hunger Games* has an exact person they could represent some have multiple people they could be. The best example of having multiple origins for a name is Cinna. Cinna has two origins his name could have stemmed from. Lucius Cornelius Cinna was a Roman politician and Julius Caesar’s father-in-law. Lucius as a politician opposed many things in the Roman government, so he would do his best to oppose them where he could, much like Cinna does. Cinna likes to “engage in subtle forms of defiance” and even though he works for the Capitol he resents their form of totalitarian government (“What’s in a Name in *The Hunger Games*” 3). Both of these men have their subtle rebellions in common which makes this an easy first connection to make. Cinna was a rebel at heart but an artist by trade. His artistic side is what connects him to Gaius Helvius Cinna. Gaius was a poet by trade. Since he was a poet the reader could make the connection Cinna was named after Gaius because of his artistic nature. Cinna could have been named after either of these men or Collins could have intentionally named him after both men.

An alternate theory is that Collins did not use the specific Roman names, but instead she used William Shakespeare's interpretation of how the characters acted in his plays. There are two main plays this could have been based on. The two plays are *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*. Titus is a character from *The Hunger Games* briefly mentioned; he was a tribute who resorted to cannibalism. Titus played a small role in the book on the other hand "the Shakespearean work that contains the most names in common with the *Hunger Games* series is *Julius Caesar*: Caesar...Cinna, [and] Cato" ("What's in a Name in The Hunger Games" 8). In *Julius Caesar* each person portrays a role very similar to their role in *The Hunger Games*. If Collins did not pull her ideas straight from ancient Rome, she still chose names based on Shakespearean works about Ancient Rome.

The Hunger Games shared more with ancient Rome than just a few names; they also shared the structure of government and the way the ruling class administered their power. Both governments are composed of a major capital with provinces being ruled by the central or main government but at the same time supporting it. The Capitol could not survive without the districts because it was "highly dependent upon the districts, from which it imports large amounts of agricultural and manufacturing products" ("Bread and Circuses: *The Hunger Games* and Ancient Rome" 5). Rome was not as reliant on their outer territories, but the territories did help the province of Rome. The reader can see how the structure of Panem could reflect on how the Roman government was set up.

Another way the reader could relate Rome to the harsh life in Panem is through the life of the gladiator or tribute. It is apparent to anyone who reads *The Hunger Games* that the tributes were partially, if not completely, based on gladiator. Not only are both competitors there against their will, they both have to fight to the death in order to receive rewards. These societies were

similar even in the fact that winning Roman gladiators could be compared to winning tributes. Both of the competitors had to deal with life and death situations, but when these situations were finally overcome, the winners would go on to live a life of luxury. A winning gladiator could eventually buy their freedom from the games, so if a gladiator won enough he could be a free man. This is closely related to the winner of *The Hunger Games*. The winning tribute only had to win one match but it is a brutal match. Once someone has won he or she will experience the joy of all the perks of a rich individual, and this is apparent with Katniss. After she has won she is “dressed...in a white, gauzy dress and pink shoes” (Collins 359). This is something she would have never worn if she did not win the games. Through these many similarities and few differences the reader can see where Suzanne Collins drew her ideas on the lifestyle of the tributes in both glory and failure.

The tributes and gladiators were similar in how they were treated by the government so it should come as no surprise that the Capitol and Rome treated the games nearly identically. To both the Romans and the people of the Capitol, the games were fun, violent, and a spectacle to watch, but to the districts and the gladiators, it was their friends and family out there dying for almost no reason. The Romans and the people of the Capitol saw nothing wrong with this is because it was not their children and friends in the competition. The higher class had no connection to the people in the games; because of this they felt no remorse when a child of only twelve was killed. The main difference in the coliseum and the Hunger Games is the reason they were put on. The people of Panem had to endure the games as punishment for an uprising that happened seventy-four years ago. On the other hand, the people of Rome put on games for any reason. The Romans would have games “as an entertainment and a celebration” for a variety of reasons although they were commonly used to glorify military victories of senators and generals

(Kyle 34). It was not uncommon for the games to happen for almost no reason. The games could occur simply because it had not rained in a long time, and the Romans wanted to please their gods with a human sacrifice. Although the games differed in the reason behind them, the treatment by the elite class in the government still makes them feel similar to the reader.

The final way Collins related the people of the outside districts to the Roman lower class is through the governments' treatment of their respective people. Romans had a large number of slaves in their society, and it fueled their economy. An example of how treatment was similar is neither were given sufficient food nor were they given luxuries that the upper crust of society experienced. Most Roman slaves were criminals or people from a conquered land. The Capitol treated the outside districts like criminals. The perfect example of treating the outside districts like criminals is that the districts were not given real names only numbers much like a jail cell number. The Capitol treated the outside districts just like the Romans treated the people they conquered to always remind the people of Panem that their rebellion failed. The real difference in these two people are the ideas that they have. The Romans did not know any other way to live, but on the other hand the districts knew how bad off they were having no food and always being watched by the government. District 12 was described as a place “[w]here you can starve to death in safety” (Collins 7). When the reader completely understands how bad off both these people were, they can see how Collins made the connection from Rome to Panem's people.

Suzanne Collins brings ancient Rome to life through her referencing and name-dropping skills. Collins use of referencing names through their Latin roots helps provide the reader with insight into a more vivid understanding of what life might have been like for the people of Panem. The way Collins named characters gives us some perspective on what her opinion of certain characters were supposed to be; for example, everyone was supposed to love Caesar

Flickerman. She also leaves a few things for the reader to decipher, such as, did she use names from the true ancient Romans or did she use a recycled *Julius Caesar* version? The largest difference between Roman games and the Hunger Games is the reason why they were put on; apart from this difference, both games have many similarities. Finally, the reader can see Collins probably got many of her ideas of oppressive government disguised through bread and circuses from the Roman style of ruling. Overall, Collins uses the referencing of ancient Rome through language, name references, and political structure as a way for the reader get background information and relate the problems in Panem to real life events.

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