

Wilderness as Katniss' Savior in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History:</i> Received 25 March 2021 Approved 18 April 2021 Published 23 April 2021</p>	<p>From many discussions on wilderness in literary works, only a few focus on the young adult dystopian, even more on Suzanne Collins's <i>The Hunger Games</i>. For this reason, this article aims to portray the wilderness in the book as the survival resource since the previous studies fail to point out such an issue. This recent study is conducted by descriptive qualitative methods. As the theoretical basis, the discussion employs Garrard's account of wilderness and Ross's myth of wilderness in American literature. As a result, the discussion depicts the wilderness as the natural woodland surrounding District 12 and the artificial battleground of the Games in Panem. The woods in Katniss's district enable her to provide for her family and develop such literacy in the wilderness. This literacy is advantageous in the Games arena, thus helps Katniss to be one of the winners. The findings might provide such an insight to the reader to live harmoniously with nature, even more with the wilderness.</p>
<p>Keywords: savior, survival resource, wilderness literacy</p>	

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INTRODUCTION

Wilderness, said Garrard, refers to nature "uncontaminated by civilization," which is placed "beyond boundaries of cultivation" (Garrard, 2004, p. 60). The word suggests "trial and danger" combining with "freedom, redemption, and purity." Any discussions on wilderness in literary works represent it as the place for escape (Barr, 2020), of refuge (Jhansi & Rao, 2020), of becoming (Vogel & Sena, 2020), of self-discovery and individuation (Noda, 2018), as an underworld (Wistey, 2020), and as an untamed landscape (Azizah & Sa'adah, 2017). All those earlier studies on wilderness have paid less attention to how the wilderness serves as a survival resource.

Furthermore, concerning the literary genres discussed, only Azizah and Sa'adah (2017) focus the discussion on the young adult dystopian novel.

It is such a wonder that not many studies regard wilderness in this said genre, even though Sharma (2014), in her thesis, argues that young adult dystopia might contain "didactic messages for the readers." By this argument, this recent study takes Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* since the researcher believes that the book offers an excellent insight to have a harmonious life with nature, in this case, wilderness. Meanwhile, Kullmer 's (2016) argument on *The Hunger Games* series as being the "[t]he most successful example of current [young adult dystopia]" also supports the researcher's selection of the book.

This article aims to show how wilderness portrayed in Collins's *The Hunger Games* becomes Katniss' savior from District 12's threat of starvation and her primary resource in winning the deadly game. Hundreds of studies have discussed

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the book, or the series, since its first publication in 2008. While the novel has been analyzed through various issues and approaches, only limited studies see the book from an ecocritical perspective. Among those limited studies are environmental justice (Burke, 2013) and eco-pedagogy (Bland & Strotmann, 2014).

Burke (2013) argues that the global food system “dominated by a small number of TNCs” leads to such an environmental injustice and shows how Capitol creates such a food system that ensures the citizens cannot provide for themselves, thus keep their dependence on the system. Meanwhile, Bland & Strotmann (2014) conducted an ecocritical reading towards the trilogy to promote eco-pedagogy for the secondary ESL/EFL students by discussing the classical literary tropes of the apocalypse, pastoral, and wilderness, also the relationship between the human and the non-human. However, both studies have not considered how wilderness might serve as the savior for the districts’ people.

Thus, this study attempts to answer how the wilderness in *The Hunger Games* helps Katniss survive from both the starvation in District 12 and the deadly arena of the seventy-fourth Hunger Games. The answer is expected to provide any insights on a harmonious life with wilderness. Also, this discussion, hopefully, can bring an additional perspective to the ecocritical reading of the novel. For these reasons, the researcher employs Garrard’s thoughts on wilderness and Ross’s myth of wilderness in American literature as the theoretical framework.

Wilderness is one of the ecocritical tropes that Garrard discusses in his book, *Ecocriticism*. It started to become a noticeable ecocritical discussion in the eighteenth century, but only in the form of “non-fictional nature writing” (Garrard, 2004, p. 59). However, in the earliest documents, Garrard adds, the wilderness is portrayed as many things. Among them are as a “threat,” “the place of exile,” “a hospitable place,” “to return home,” and as a place to escape from both “persecution” and “the temptations of the world” (p. 61).

In American literature, the wilderness has become an integral part that “looms large in the American imagination” (Ross, 2006, p. 5). Conforming to Marx (2000), Ross asserts that wilderness paradoxically represents abundance yet an enemy (2006). It offers freedom and quiet life while demands “mastery” of the threatening “forces of nature” (Marx, 2000, p. 43). By this paradox, Ross argues, surviving in the wilderness becomes the most frequent stories told in American culture (Ross, 2006).

METHODS

This article conforms to the descriptive qualitative method since it deals with non-numeric data for the results and discussion. The data were all the quotations in the novel that depict everything regarding the wilderness and how it helps Katniss survive. In analyzing the data, the researchers apply descriptive qualitative methods to elaborate the depiction of the wilderness in District 12 as the natural woods and the wilderness in the game arena as the artificial woodland. The discussion then continues to depict how the wilderness serves as Katniss’ resources to fight the starvation in her district and the Tributes, thus winning the Games.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wilderness in *The Hunger Games* *Woods in District 12*

Following Bland & Strotmann (2014), this study affirms that the first “wilderness setting” in *The Hunger Games* comes in the form of the “woodland wilderness” that stretches along the outskirts of District 12. The “flesh-eaters,” added with “venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real path to follow” (p. 6), make the woods a threatening concern for the district people. The threat makes the woods an uninhabited place. Thus, since the woods are uninhabited, conforming to Garrard (2004), the woods are uncontaminated by the district’s civilization.

Despite the uncivilized threat, the natural woods in District 12 offer, as Bland & Strotmann say, its “cornucopian qualities” for those who have

“the skill to understand it” (2014, p. 31). Katniss is one of a few people in District 12, especially those who live in the Seam, who understands the woods well. She has been familiar with the woods since she was eleven. It was her father who introduced her. He crafted her a bow and taught her how to hunt and find food. Since then, Katniss becomes quite skillful when she is in the woods.

When her father died “blown to bits in a mine explosion” (Collins, 2008, p. 6), Katniss’s only hope to feed her family is the woods. Of course, there is always the tesserae, but she could not sign up her name before she reached twelve. Therefore, she could only trust the woods to get food for her mother and sister and trade for money. The woods’ abundance helps Katniss survive the starvation that hovers over her family.

Katniss lives with her mother and Prim, her little sister, in a house “almost at the edge of the Seam.” The Seam is a part of District 12, where coal miners live in. From her home, Katniss needs to pass “a few gates to reach the scruffy field called the Meadow” before she can enter the woods through one of the “weak spots in the fence” (Collins, 2008, p. 5).

Unfortunately, in District 12, it is illegal to trespass into the woods. There “is a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops” that separates and encloses the district from the woods. The fence is said to protect the district’s people from “packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, [and] bears” that roam freely inside the woods (Collins, 2008, p. 5).

Since the woods are illegal to enter, poaching is also forbidden. Illegal hunting “carries the severest penalties” (Collins, 2008, p. 6) by being “whipped on a daily basis” (p. 201). The district people, thus, can only rely on the tesserae for their food supply. The tesserae become a system, Burke (2013) argues, that Capitol of Panem “has purposely created” to prevent the people “from providing for themselves,” thus, to control the food supply (p. 55).

However, to have a portion of the tessera, a person should register their name for the Hunger Game’s reaping candidates. Thus, the more a person takes a tessera for themselves and each

member of their family, the more their names are entered for the reaping. Katniss herself has her name “entered four times” when she was twelve. The first one was because she had to, the other three because she needed “grains and oils” for herself, Prim, and her mother. Thus, at the age of sixteen, Katniss’s name “will be in the reaping for twenty times” (Collins, 2008, p. 14).

Unfortunately, having tesserae is never enough to feed her family. Therefore, Katniss needs the woods’ resources to keep her family away from starvation. She cannot “stop hunting and gathering” (Collins, 2008, p. 51) because the woods provide what the tesserae cannot. A tessera only equals to “a meager year’s supply of grain and oil for one person” (p. 14), while on one fine day in the woods, Katniss can gather at least “a dozen of fish, a bag of greens, and ... a gallon of strawberries” (p. 11).

The woods never fail to offer the food that Katniss needs. In the late summer, Katniss can gather Katniss roots from a pond she uses for washing up. The roots are “as good as any potato” when being “boiled or baked.” Along with the fish she catches, Katniss can bring home such a feast for dinner that makes her family full “for the first time in months” (Collins, 2008, p. 52). In the fall, anyone brave enough can “sneak into the woods to harvest apples” (p. 7). On any other day, Katniss is able to steal “eggs from nests” and catch “fish in nets” (p. 51).

Moreover, besides hunting and gathering for food, Katniss can always trade whatever she gets from the woods for money or buy “soap and milk and thread” (Collins, 2008, p. 51). Sometimes, on her way home from the woods, Katniss stops at the Hop to trade some of today’s catch for “good bread,” salt, and “a couple of chunks of paraffin” (p. 12). The Hob is the black market in District 12, where Katniss makes “most of [her] money” (p. 7). When Katniss has finished with her business at the Hob, she continues her trade “to the back door of the wealthier clients in town” (p. 52). She sells the rabbit to the butcher and the squirrel to the baker. Katniss even manages to get a wild turkey for the Head Peacekeeper and strawberries for the mayor.

The woods have become Katniss's personal cornucopia. She can always rely on it when it comes to providing for her family. The woods' abundant resource helps Katniss and her family fight the starvation in her poor district. As a matter of fact, the woods also enable Katniss to develop her "wilderness survival skills" to help her deal with "the peril" of The Hunger Game's battleground later (Bland & Strotmann, 2014, p. 23, 31).

Artificial Woods of the Games

Meanwhile, the second area of wilderness is the "piney woods" that the Gamemakers artificially create as the main arena of the Hunger Games. Quoting Bland & Strotmann, the "landscapes of the arena" are purposely "made hazardous and deceitful." However, the Games' battleground is "less deadly" for the Tributes who have "wilderness literacy" (2014).

Haymitch, the mentor for District 12 Tributes, recognizes Katniss as one of the few Tributes who acquires such literacy. That is why Haymitch instructs her to go directly to the woods once the Games start. Being familiar with the woods in District 12 for years, Katniss most likely has more chance to survive inside the woodland battleground. Therefore, even though she has been a little distracted by the Cornucopia's abundant life supply for a moment, Katniss runs "full speed for the woods" when "the sound of the gong" releases all the Tributes (Collins, 2008, p. 147). Katniss knows that the odds might be more in her favor if she heads where she is familiar with, instead of fighting to the death to get what she needs from the Cornucopia.

Back in the training session, Katniss has hoped that the terrain she will be thrown into is between the trees. Katniss is aware that her survival in the Games is highly possible if the battle happens in the woods. She has been familiar with the woods for years, that she is confident the woods can afford her "some means of concealment and food and shelter" (Collins, 2008, p. 138).

Stewart (2013), in his unofficial wilderness survival guides based on *The Hunger Games* series, states that shelter and food, along with water, are

the basic needs for someone to survive. He establishes those core needs from the "Three Survival Rules of Three." Following these rules are essential for someone's survival in the wilderness.

The first survival rule says that under an extreme condition, someone can only survive for three hours without shelter (Stewart, 2013, p. 23, 25). This extreme situation is primarily due to hypothermia that Stewart says to be the deadliest among all. To avoid such threats, the best site for a shelter is in an elevated area, for example, up there between the trees.

The trees indeed become Katniss's favorite to hide and sleep her exhaustion away. When the "twilight is closing in" the first day of the Games, Katniss realizes that she should hurry to find "a place to camp" (Collins, 2008, p. 153, 154). Learning from the woods in District 12, she knows that having a shelter between the trees is the best option. Thus, when the night falls, Katniss carefully picks a willow tree that is "not terribly tall but set in a clump of other willows." This setting serves her good "concealment in those long, flowing tresses" (p. 154). This way, Katniss can have enough rest without being too worried about any predators or other Tributes finding her soon.

The trees can also help Katniss save her life. In District 12, Katniss prefers to hunt in between the trees. Every time she needs "to escape the wild dogs" (Collins, 2008, p. 51), Katniss always climbs the trees to hide. The thought also directly comes into Katniss's mind when the Careers find and pursue her. Katniss "pick[s] a high tree and begin[s] to climb" (p.179). She manages to escape from the Careers' deadly threat by climbing until eighty feet high. Even the Careers who "have been fed and trained throughout their lives" (p. 94) to volunteer for the Games cannot climb the tree the way Katniss does. One of them tries to go after her. Still, he ends up "flailing as he and a branch go down," thus, "hit[ting] the ground hard" (p.181). The yearly practice in the woods teaches Katniss where to put her "hands and feet" to climb and "scurry up" the tree like a squirrel, leaving all the five Careers "furious [Katniss has] made them look foolish" (p.181).

Meanwhile, water, says Stewart (2013), is the second of the three survival rules. Without water, a person can only survive within three days. Hence, before the Games starts, Haymitch has advised Katniss that once inside the woods, the first thing she needs to find is water (Collins, 2008, p. 138). Katniss obviously knows this rule too that finding water becomes her primary mission since the first day of the Games. Unfortunately, such a task is hard to accomplish, especially when Katniss cannot go to the lake on the other side of the woods since she knows that going there means an easy death with other Tributes are waiting.

Katniss knows by experience that she “can go a long time” in the woods if she has water (Collins, 2008, p. 150). However, Katniss fails to find any source of water even when she has already walked for hours. When she feels that she is dehydrating, Katniss forces her brain to recall what the wilderness has taught her on finding water.

The first thing Katniss remembers is that water “runs downhill,” thus she keeps walking down “into the valley.” She also tries to “locate a game trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation” to help her along (Collins, 2008, p. 164). Game, says Stewart, is a common term for a hunter to call the animal they are after. Hence, a game trail is “a path created by an animal” that might lead “either to or from a food or water source” (2013, p. 73). Meanwhile, “green patch of vegetation” is another sign that Katniss needs to find since she knows that plants only grow where there is water.

Katniss is on the brink of collapsing when she accidentally stumbles upon a pond. However, she cannot directly drink the water to calm her quenching thirst. She knows enough not to directly jump into the water and drink as much as she can since the water can be poisonous and cause her any dangers. Then, with a hazy mind, Katniss manages to purify the water she puts in her flask with “the right number of drops of iodine” (Collins, 2008, p. 169). Confirming Stewart, water in the wilderness might contain harmful micro-organism (2013, p. 79). Since it is the Games, nobody guarantees that the water is free from any big city pollutants courtesy of The Capitol.

The last of Stewart’s (2013) survival rules in the wilderness is food. By this rule, someone can only survive for three weeks if he/she cannot find any to eat. The ability to find food under extreme conditions, like in the wilderness, is not easy to learn.

Katniss knows how to get food from the woods. Katniss learned such a lesson from her late father. She might shoot squirrels with her bow, snare the rabbits, fish at the lake, or gather the greens and dig the roots (Collins, 2008, p. 10–11). It is no wonder that Katniss has a “healthier body” than most of the Tributes from all her “exertion” to get the “meat and plants from the woods” (p. 94).

Katniss also has good knowledge of edible plants. She learned about them from his father’s drawing in her mother’s book of an apothecary. She used to spend “the rest of the night poring over those pages.” (Collins, 2008, p. 50). Thus, Katniss knows that “[d]andelions, pokeweed, wild onions, [and] pines” (p.50) are good-to-go food once she is in the middle of the woods.

Katniss’ knowledge of plants enables her to “sweep the edible plants’ test without blinking an eye” (Collins, 2008, p. 96). The test is one of many parts of training sessions held in the Training Center. The place is the Tributes’ home before the actual Games begins. In the middle of the Games, Katniss’ ability to distinguish any edible plants from those that can kill in an instant (51) enables her to find “some water plants with edible roots” to survive in the battleground woods (p. 179). Along with Rue, one of the Tributes from District 11, Katniss gathers “the greens and roots and berries” and has a good meal with the food. Katniss knows enough not to have meat since the smell “will draw unwanted predators” (p.222), and it means danger for her.

To top it all, Katniss’s good experience with berries is the determining factor of her winning in the Games. When Peeta gives her some berries he has collected by the stream, Katniss is wise enough not to eat them immediately. She recognizes the berries are different from Rue’s or from what she learned in training. The berries Peeta brought her are what Katniss’ father called “nightlock,” which

kills whoever eats them, even before they reach the stomach (Collins, 2008, p. 314). Katniss smartly uses the berries to deceive Cladius Templesmith so that she won't need to kill Peeta and force Cladius to announce both Katniss and Peeta, the Tributes from District 12, as "the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games" (p. 339).

CONCLUSION

Discussing wilderness in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* results in portraying the place as the survival resource for Katniss to fight the hunger in District 12 and win the Games in Panem. The woods in Katniss's home provide her abundant resource to feed her family since the death of her father. Katniss can protect herself, her mother, and her sister from hunger due to an insufficient portion of the tessera. Meanwhile, Katniss's experience in spending her time in the woods enables her to develop such a wilderness literacy that helps her survive in the Games' battleground. Katniss knows how to find a safe shelter, water, and food that she can bring herself and Peeta to be the winners of the Games.

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