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The Collapse of the American Ideal in “*The Hunger Games*” and Crèvecoeur’s Letters

Director Gary Ross in *The Hunger Games* presents a world full of power, fear, and inequality dominating normal people. All the districts are under strict control, and the children are compelled to fight to remind people who have power. It is a dystopia- a fantasy of a world in which there is no freedom and humanity is gone. However, in the book, *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur has developed a utopia based on freedom, dignity, and honest work. A combination of vision and warning of Crèvecoeur and Ross shows that, once the ideal of American freedom and equality is controlled, unequal and immoral values are lost, and the vision becomes disastrous.

Background: Understanding the Texts

The Hunger Games is a movie directed by Gary Ross and set in Panem, a world of the future. There are twelve districts and the Capitol that constitute the society. Capitol is wealthy and strong, with the districts living in poverty and terror. Each district is obliged to send one boy and one girl to *The Hunger Games* every year. It is an event on television where children are forced to fight till, they are dead. The Games are also employed to intimidate the people and remind them that they are controlled by the Capitol (Currie and Kelly 321). Life in Panem is not fair. The poor are victims of poor housing, while the wealthy live comfortably. Human beings are not treated as human beings, but they are treated as entertaining people and as workers. The state employs fear to line up with everybody. It is what Panem becomes: a dystopia.

On the contrary, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur concentrates on the positive image of early America in his book, *Letters from an American Farmer*. In the third letter, Crèvecoeur discusses farmers who are the owners of their land and lead a free life (Crèvecoeur, Letter III 65). He writes about a nation in which there is a reward that follows diligence and where everybody belongs to a firm, harmless society. Letter IV expands the concept with the image of Nantucket, a community where people collaborate and do not live opulently. However, the tone is altered in Letter IX. Crèvecoeur goes to Charles Town and observes slavery and brutality (Traesar et al. 159). He relates how cruelly enslaved people are treated and how it destroys their morality. It demonstrates the fact that the American dream is not flawless. Below the surface, there are cracks.

The idealism is the starting point of the work by Crèvecoeur, gradually transitioning into realism. It demonstrates the beauty as well as imperfections of the American ethnicity of the first generation. Comparing the two to *The Hunger Games*, the two works provide a great contrast of the dream, based on freedom, and the nightmare, based on control.

Theme 1: Freedom vs. Oppression

Crèvecoeur thought that freedom was not merely a word. In his letters, particularly in Letter III, he talks about it being attached to the land. According to Crèvecoeur, a man who possesses his farm, toils with his hands, and makes his own decisions is free. He considers such farmers as powerful, upright, and free (Crèvecoeur, Letter III 69). They exist in a world where their hard work is rewarded and do not have to be controlled by the kings or powers, which are far away. The form of freedom is individual. It is founded on hard labor and discipline.

There is hardly freedom in *The Hunger Games*. The twelve districts live under the power of the Capitol, which reigns over every aspect of life. Citizens are unable to move, get a word in, and fight. Everything is watched. When anybody dares to rebel, he or she is punished or murdered. *The Hunger Games*, by definition, are a sadistic manner of reminding everyone that they are not in charge (Ormshammer 23). Forcing children to fight and die live on television, the Capitol sends the children a single message in a word: “you are not free”.

The contrast between the two is obvious. Crèvecoeur describes a venue where freedom is in everyday existence. Ross presents us with a world that has been stolen. Freedom is substituted with fear in Panem. Human beings submit to authority since they have no option. The contrast depicts the peril of the lack of sharing of power.

It is a theme that has a direct relationship with the current real fears in America. The common concerns raised by many are government control and surveillance, and loss of privacy. It is a digital age where more of the lives are monitored by corporations, by technology, and occasionally by government. In 2022, working on privacy and freedom, scholar Danielle Keats Citron elaborates on how surveillance can gradually erode the rights of people and make their voices mute (Citron 55). It is not too far, as it is demonstrated in *The Hunger Games*. Though Panem is fictional, the panic of being deprived of the right to choose the way people live their lives is very real.

The two writers Crèvecoeur and Ross provide the two parts of the same coin. One provides an example of how freedom is supposed to be while the other reveals what society becomes when that freedom is lost.

Labor, Class, and Inequality

Labor is a thing to be proud of in the world of Crèvecoeur. He discusses peasants who till the soil using their hands. They cultivate crops, construct houses, and bring up children. To him, this type of work brings dignity. It also builds equality. Everyone has a role. Everyone contributes. No one is above another. Actual success comes with hard work in this vision of early America. The wins are distributed among themselves, and people respect one another since they are all working.

Labor, in *The Hunger Games*, is not an asset that can be proud of; it is a liability. The individuals of the districts are not self-employed. They work for the Capitol. The inhabitants of District 12, such as coal miners, endanger their lives in their underground mines, yet barely survive (Suleiman 66). Their work supplies a system that makes them poor. In the meantime, the Capitol is wealthy and colorful and comfortable. The upper ones live luxuriously, fashionably, and full of food, and the workers live hungry and in pain. The further down the districts are, the better the Capitol lives. The line of distinction between classes is tearing and inhumane.

It portrays a distinct contrast. Crèvecoeur presents a dream of work as something that provides unity. Ross (34) gives an example of a nightmare in which work is in control. The definition of Panem has reversed the concept of working hard and making it. The bad earn the most but receive nothing. The wealthy neighborhoods are not producers; they are usurpers.

The theme is also addressed to the modern world. The chasm between the affluent and the laborers continues to increase in most places. There are individuals with two or three jobs who can hardly make ends meet. In “*Poverty by America*”, scholar Matthew Desmond describes how the U.S economy is constructed in a manner that ensures poor people remain poor, as others grow richer as a result of their labor (Desmond 250). It is not too much different from what viewers see in *The Hunger Games*.

Crèvecoeur believed labor could raise individuals. Ross does not forget to think that it can keep them down in the wrong hands.

Dehumanization and Spectacle

In Letter IX of *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur talks of his visit to Charles Town. The tone is dark and heavy. He observes slavery at close and explains how brutally people who are under slavery are treated. They are not perceived as human beings, but as property (Grieve-Carlson 29). Their pain is ignored. Others oversee their lives. Crèvecoeur is taken aback by what he is witnessing. This fact destroys his previous image of a free and equal America. In the context of his words, the degree of injustice of treating people in an inhuman manner becomes evident.

The dehumanization of that sort is apparent in another mode in the movie *The Hunger Games*. Children are selected and are made to kill each other every year on a television show. Not only is this punishment, but it is entertainment. The Capital is eagerly looking on. They gamble, shout on their sides, and relish spectacle (Ross 12). The existence of the tributes is transformed into entertainment. Their dreads, suffering, and deaths are made spectacles like a game. The audience does not grieve. Instead, they applaud.

Both Crèvecoeur and Ross demonstrate what can be the result of human life losing its value. In both instances, individuals are the means of power. In Charles Town, the system exploits the use of enslaved people to do labor (Williams and May 2033). The Panem society controls and distracts with tributes. In any case, people will become objectified.

It is a theme that is still relevant nowadays. Painful stuff is, at times, packaged as entertainment in our world. Reality shows make money out of the challenges of individuals.

Violence in the media is common. After some time, audience become accustomed to watching people suffer. Crèvecoeur attempted to make slavery disturbing to the readers. Ross wishes to disturb the viewers with the Games. Both make readers remember that when society has lost the sense of valuing people, something human is lost.

The Collapse of the American Ideal

Crèvecoeur portrays America as a paradise in his early letters. He talks about those farmers who have led a life of freedom, toiled with sincerity, and even made their land and people their home. To him, this is the uniqueness of America, a nation where one can work hard and become successful, and one where people can live comfortably. The childhood photograph is pure and promising. It is a dream that defines the national identity.

However, in Letter IX, the tone of Crèvecoeur is different. The dream that he had become accustomed to is crushed when he tells the ugliness of the slavery in Charles Town (Crèvecoeur, Letter IX 79). The bloody scenes of cruelty and injustice show the fissures in the background of his ideal America. His liberation is not one that everybody enjoys. In his letters, he indicates that when the freedom of one group of people is based on the misery of another group of people, it means that the dream is lost. His transition into despair and uncovering the reality of the thing: the American ideal is true only when it is shared by everyone.

In *The Hunger Games*, that dream is long over. The only thing that is left is Panem, where equality and justice are not present, greed and domination of the Capital substitute community and empathy. The citizenry in the districts exists to serve the strong. Serious labor is no longer a source of satisfaction; it is a punishment (Feng et al. 10). The values that Crèvecoeur once held in such high regard are freedom, labor, and moral strength, and nowadays, it is a

perverted image of their original form. It is a cautious message of what a world of power and wealth eats up all of it as the world Ross constructs.

Both Crèvecoeur and Ross are reminding us of how the American ideal is a weak one. It may flourish or fail based on the attitude of society towards its citizens. According to Riggio, a majority of Americans currently consider the American dream alive (3). It is something that has become out of the reach of many. It is a concern echoed in the two works. They tell us that when justice is substituted for greed and unity for division, the dream which America was once defined is now becoming lost.

Counterpoint/Acknowledging Complexity

It should be noted that neither of the writings is flawless. There could be an opinion that *The Hunger Games* is a mere fiction. Some may argue that it is so extreme that it does not actually represent life. Afterall, children are not shown fighting to the death on live TV (Sovacool and Del Rio 1005). The world of Panem is a distant world. One can think that it is merely a tale that is designed to shock and entertain.

Others may identify the shortcomings of the letters of Crèvecoeur. His American is predominantly centred on white male farmers. He leaves no room for the voices of women, Native Americans, or even enslaved people- except in a short letter IX (Suskavcevic 31). His concept of liberty excludes a significant number of people. To them, the American dream was no longer in existence. That brings a narrowness to his opinion, despite what he may have considered honest on his side.

These are fair points. Both works have their gaps. One is a fictional warning. The other is a historical scoreboard featuring evident blind spots. Nonetheless, despite their constraints, the

two texts have something of value. They present the possibility of the level of ideals going up and down. They are a wakeup call reminding readers freedom, fairness, or human dignity are not guaranteed (Suskavcevic 6). Unless they are carefully preserved, they may be lost-mellowed away, or they may be swept away at once.

Moreover, though the backgrounds may be different, and the perspectives may be faulty, the message is the same. America cannot afford to rest on its laurels. It is the tales that challenge us, make us think, and take action before it is too late and the cracks turn into collapse.

Conclusion

The Hunger Games and *Letters from an American Farmer* present two very different values of society. One depicts a world that is constructed out of hope, freedom, and dignity. The other demonstrates a world where values are deprived. Using the differences, both pieces of work investigate the same central ideas, which are freedom, labor, inequality, and human life worthiness. Crèvecoeur speculates on what America would be like if there were a share of justice. Ross demonstrates what happens when power is misused. Although the two stories were written centuries apart, each answered the same question, i.e., what transpires when ideals are not guarded anymore? Such writings are significant as they ensure that the readers do not forget that freedom and equality are not a given thing. Such works of literature can serve to look back, challenge the present, and shape the future- before the American ideal turns into a memory.

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