From Poverty to Power: How Knowledge in The Secret Garden and The Hunger Games Prevents the Poor from Subverting the Social Hierarchy

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Abstract

Advancement in one’s social standing is a universal goal, but is especially sought after by members of lower social classes. Understanding the mechanism behind social class advancement is therefore highly valuable for improving the quality of life of the impoverished and rendering society more equitable. It is commonly believed that education is the cornerstone of social advancement; however, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* and Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* suggest that the educational system is established by the elite and accordingly it serves the purpose of reinforcing their influence over the underprivileged. These novels promote the idea that acquisition of knowledge through formal education indoctrinates the impoverished into serving the best interests of the rich and reducing their own welfare. This is demonstrated by the Sowerby family’s service to the Yorkshire elite in *The Secret Garden*. Furthermore in *The Hunger Games*, the residents of Panem’s districts submit to the control of the Capitol and use their skills to enhance the Hunger Games’ domineering political message. To escape acceptance of one’s inferiority and instead challenge the social hierarchy, one must step outside the confines of the established educational system. This revolt against the hierarchy is achieved by Martha’s ignorance of the duties of a lady’s maid in *The Secret Garden*, and similarly by Katniss’s impulsive decisions— which are discouraged by educational institutions— in *The Hunger Games*. Therefore, these books suggest that to serve their best interests the impoverished must avoid either formal educational or the conventional thinking that it encourages and instead acquire social advancement on their own merit.

Keywords: Social hierarchy; Social advancement; Knowledge; Education; Indoctrination
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The value placed upon knowledge in present-day North American society cannot be overstated. There is a mindset that the upper class is more educated and therefore more knowledgeable than the lower class. The Economic and Social Research Council claims that acquisition of knowledge is necessary for social advancement among the impoverished, and they state, “educatio[n] appears to be one of the main barriers which stop people moving out of poverty” (1). In keeping with this mindset, knowledge is regarded as a necessary tool to improve the quality of life and social standing of the impoverished. This notion seems to be reflected in both Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. In *The Secret Garden*, while none of the characters receive formal education, the socially superior Mary and Colin are able to acquire literacy on their own merit, whereas the penniless Sowerby family remains illiterate. By becoming knowledgeable about nature, Dickon Sowerby gains the respect of the elite, suggesting that education enables the lower class to weaken the existing social hierarchy. In *The Hunger Games*, the working class citizens in the districts manufacture labour-intensive goods, while the elite Capitol creates entertainment—a product of the mind. Furthermore, Katniss’s intelligence enables her to trick the Gamemakers into accepting two victors—a deviation from the Capitol’s agenda—and thus shake Panem’s power structure. Therefore, on the surface these books suggest that the poor can use knowledge as a tool to wield power and undermine the existing social hierarchy; however, a closer examination of *The Secret Garden* and *The Hunger Games* reveals a challenge to this meritocratic notion. The books demonstrate that the knowledge and intelligence acquired by the impoverished is both beneficial to the rich and detrimental to the poor. Attaining and using knowledge strengthens the notion that
in the social structure, the rich have the power and the privilege to exploit the poor. In the novels, impoverished characters are only successful in weakening the superiority of the rich and inferiority of the poor when they avoid conventional thinking either in ignorance or on impulse. Therefore, knowledge among the poor reinforces rather than undermines the social hierarchy by perpetuating the idea that the rich are inherently more important than the poor.

The skills gained by both the Sowerby family and Katniss serve the upper-class agenda of cementing the social hierarchy, rather than helping these characters to advance in society. In the Yorkshire setting of *The Secret Garden*, all characters internalize the idea that knowledge among the poor exists for the sake of the benefits it can confer to the rich. Regardless of the differences in morality between the upper and lower class, it is accepted as natural for the poor to help the rich gain power. This transfer of benefits from poor to rich is no different from the premise of capitalism. Karl Marx defines capitalism as exploitation of the poor by the rich (Wolff 106). In his critique, he says that although the proletariat should be entitled to the product of their labour, it is instead diverted to the upper class (107). As the mother of a “swarm of little [boys] and [girls]” (34), Mrs. Sowerby has significant experience in child rearing and Mrs. Medlock remarks about the Sowerby children: “there never was healthier or better ones” (136). This parenting knowledge is used to benefit Mary’s physical and emotional health. Mrs. Sowerby realizes the importance of fresh air and physical activity for Mary, and instructs Mr. Craven that she “had better get stronger before you [have] a governess” (133). The absence of a governess allows Mary to “run wild in the garden” (135). This “liberty and fresh air and romping about” is physically invigorating (135): Mary becomes “healthily hungry for the first time in her life” and her blood starts to “grow warm” (56). In Mrs. Sowerby’s interaction with Mr. Craven, although she educates him on how to raise Mary, Mr. Craven does not show appreciation nor offer
compensation for her assistance. Considering the wealth of Mr. Craven and the financial need of the Sowerbys, Mr. Craven has the capacity to considerably assist this impoverished family. The fact that he does not—especially once their family has helped his—emphasizes that Mrs. Sowerby’s knowledge exists exclusively for Mary’s benefit and that exploitation of the poor’s knowledge by the rich is natural. The tendency for the poor to use their knowledge to serve the best interests of the rich is even manifested in friendly childhood interactions: Dickon helps both Mary and Colin without receiving anything in return. Mary’s initial motivation to venture outside was “really this mention of Dickon […] though she was not aware of it” (37), and simply “to talk about Dickon” causes Mary and Colin to laugh “as if they had been two ordinary healthy, natural ten-year-old creatures” (167–168). Dickon’s knowledge about nature—he can “make a flower grow out of a brick wall” (94)—allows him to assist Mary in reviving the secret garden, and it ultimately brings Colin into the garden. The garden is essential in correcting Colin’s negative outlook on life. Before learning about the garden, he answers “no” when Mary asks “do you want to live?” (149) but once he enters he exclaims, “I shall live forever and ever and ever!” (243) Dickon further uses his intelligence about the natural world to provide therapy to Colin to help him gain physical strength. If Colin dies, his “father’s cousin [who] is quite poor […] will have all Misselthwaite [Missethwaite]” (148). Entering the garden and receiving physical therapy increases Colin’s health and chance of survival. Therefore Dickon’s transfer of knowledge about nature to Mary and Colin prevents a lower-class member of society from inheriting Mr. Craven’s wealth and ensures continuation of the domineering structure of Misselthwaite Manor. Since the poor are trained to see their abilities as tools to make the rich more important, similar to the interaction between Mrs. Sowerby and Mr. Craven, Dickon does not expect anything in return for his service to Mary and Colin. When Mary asks what she can
offer him, he does not ask for compensation but instead his response focuses on how he will benefit her: “Tha'll get fat an' tha'll get as hungry as a young fox an' tha'll learn how to talk to th' robin same as I do” (121). Therefore, by channelling their knowledge towards benefiting the elite, the Sowerby family reinforces the existing social structure.

The post-modern nation of Panem shares a similar power dynamic with Yorkshire: social class relationships are upheld because the elite manipulate the strengths and abilities of the lower class. Both the Capitol and the wealthier residents of the districts exploit the knowledge and intelligence of the poor in order to preserve the notion that they are at the top of the social hierarchy. In District Twelve, Katniss’s hunting and gathering help support her family; however, these skills also provide luxuries to the merchant class. Katniss notes, “I also sold at the back doors of the wealthier clients in town, trying to remember […] the Head Peacekeeper loved wild turkey. The mayor had a passion for strawberries” (52). Katniss makes an effort to meet the dietary preferences of the upper tier, and this barter emphasizes that the rich are deserving of fine foods. On a larger scale, the Capitol holds possession of all manufactured goods produced by the districts, and therefore the unique skills of the residents in each district—coal mining, fishing, technology production, among others—are harnessed for their benefit. Even though District Eleven has an agriculture industry, Rue goes hungry because “we’re not allowed to eat the crops” (202). An important difference between Panem and Yorkshire is that while the Sowerby family accepts the inherent importance of Mary and Colin, Katniss does not consider the Capitol citizens to be deserving of their fortune. She expresses “disgust with the Capitol” (63), equates the Capitol with “barbarianism” (74), and exclaims, “the whole rotten lot of them is despicable” (65). Despite her frustration with the Capitol, she complies with the hierarchy rather than overtly trying to subvert their control. Her compliance is driven by the fact that she depends on both the
merchant class of District Twelve and on the Capitol for survival. Attempting to challenge the power of the merchant class would hinder her from selling meat to wealthy clients in order to support herself and her family. Katniss also realizes that there is no “good [in] yelling about the Capitol […] It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair. It doesn’t fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game” (14). Katniss is not the only resident of Panem’s districts who responds negatively to the injustice of the power structure. When the Capitol publically demonstrates their power over the poor by asking District Twelve to applaud for Katniss as tribute, the crowd responds with “silence” and then “touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me […] It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love” (24). District Twelve recognizes the Capitol’s oppression and acknowledges the dignity of their own residents. Regardless of the motives behind the lower class using their knowledge to benefit the elite, in both Yorkshire and Panem the knowledge and intelligence of the poor reinforces the social hierarchy.

Knowledge among the proletariat does not simply benefit the upper class, but it also reduces the importance of the working class, thus exacerbating social inequality. Another key element to Marxist theory is the “Law of Increasing Poverty”, which states that as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer (Wolff 1999). In The Secret Garden, in addition to helping Mary and Colin, Mrs. Sowerby’s parenting knowledge decreases her family’s welfare. On one level, this diminished welfare makes it more difficult to move out of poverty but more importantly it reminds the Sowerbys of their inferior social position. Although the Sowerby family is “pulling eye-teeth” to pay for their rent (96), Mrs. Sowerby—who has no responsibility for Mary’s wellbeing—takes “tuppence out of [Martha’s wages] to buy that child a skippin’-rope” (80). Scarce resources that should be used for rent are instead allocated towards a wealthier member of
society. In this regressive system, the impoverished further reduce their socioeconomic status. In addition, Mrs. Sowerby’s children “scarce ever had their stomachs full in their lives” (35); however she opts to “take a pail o’ good new milk” to Mary and Colin and “bake ’em a crusty cottage loaf” as they work in the secret garden (285). It is ironic that Mary and Colin have ample food at Misselthwaite Manor but choose not to eat it so that Dr. Craven does not discover Colin’s improving health (279). The children are able to surprise Dr. Craven and Colin’s father at the expense of the Sowerby children “never [having] quite enough to eat” (59). Once again, the Sowerby family does not protest this unjust system. Instead, by sending skipping ropes and food to the upper class without responsibility to do so, Mrs. Sowerby conveys to her children that social inequality must be accepted. She indoctrinates her children to understand the importance of the rich from a young age, and this knowledge suppresses rebellion against the oppressive social system. In fact, since Mrs. Sowerby is a morally virtuous character, she sends the message that the moral code of conduct expects the poor to accept and promote the importance of the rich.

While Mrs. Sowerby voluntarily uses her knowledge to cement her inferiority to Mary and Colin, the skills and intelligence of the poor in *The Hunger Games* also cause them to diminish their social standing—but unwillingly. The survival skills of the tributes enable the Hunger Games to exist and they increase the Games’ grandeur: Katniss realizes that “the audience expects a show”, and this is only possible if the tributes use their game strategies to create a bloodbath (337). In the one year where the temperature was too frigid to fight, the “quiet, bloodless deaths” were “considered very anti-climactic in the Capitol” (39). The Hunger Games teach the residents of Panem to accept their position in the social hierarchy by sending the political message that the districts can be manipulated by, and are therefore less important than the Capitol. They remind the districts “how totally [they] are at [the] mercy [of the Capitol].
How little chance [they] would stand of surviving another rebellion” (18). By increasing the excitement and bloodiness of the Games, the tributes’ skills are used against them to re-establish the Capitol’s dominance over the districts. Knowledge among the poor thus impedes rather than facilitates subversion of social class hierarchies. Not surprisingly, the tributes’ survival skills derive from the industry-specific skills of each district. For example, a “boy from District Three, where they make […] explosives […] managed to reactivate [land mines]” in order to booby trap the supplies of the Career tributes (219). The Capitol selects industries for the districts that will provide tributes with sufficient knowledge to put up an entertaining fight. Survival skills and strategies are also taught directly in the Capitol-operated Training Centre. Therefore, in addition to the Capitol monopolizing the output of the districts (which reinforces the superiority of the elite), the skills required to produce these outputs are used against the districts to emphasize their inferiority. Giroux and Penna’s theory on education’s “hidden curriculum” helps explain why gaining knowledge hinders one’s ability to climb the social ladder (21). They explain that students gain additional knowledge from educational systems that is extraneous to official course offerings: there is a hidden curriculum in the school system (21). The curriculum is defined as a “covert pattern of socialization which prepares students to function in the existing workplace and in other social/political spheres” (21). This theory suggests that pursuing education will lead to better integration into the existing power structure rather than the capacity to overthrow it. In The Hunger Games, to develop one’s knowledge base is to acquire a set of attitudes and skills that align with how the Capitol wants the poor to behave. Using intelligence to reinforce the social hierarchy is also manifested in the critical thinking the tributes engage in to gain potential sponsors. Katniss refuses to “show weakness at [her] injury” because she realizes that “pity does not get you aid” (179). She also tries to manipulate the Capitol audience into believing she is
ruthless: “I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I’m a good bet” (164). In reality, the animalistic character she adopts to vie for sponsors trivializes her and the districts as a whole. In attempting to outsmart the Capitol, Katniss turns into a “puppet of the Capitol” and her actions testify that the rich can take control of the poor (118). In addition, by purposely playing for the Capitol audience she sends the message that the Capitol viewers are more important than those in District Twelve. Therefore, knowledge and wit of the lower class in both *The Secret Garden* and *The Hunger Games* decreases the ability of the poor to challenge the social power structure.

Seeing as the poor cannot use intelligence nor knowledge to subvert the social hierarchy, in both *The Secret Garden* and *The Hunger Games*, the hierarchy is challenged by characters who are uneducated or whose impulsivity allows them to act in ways that are contrary to their education and training, respectively. In India, “Mary had always slapped her Ayah in the face when she was angry” (27). Although she is only a young child, Mary acts dominantly since her Ayah is aware of and submerged in her role as obedient to her mistress. In comparison, Mary’s maid Martha in Misselthwaite Manor is “an untrained Yorkshire rustic” (34). Since she is uneducated about the duties of a lady’s maid, Martha has not internalized the conventional power dynamic between a mistress and her maid. She does not realize that she is expected to be “subservient and respectful” (32), and thus chooses to “talk to [her] masters as if they were [her] equals” (27). Martha stares at Mary “in amazement” when she cannot dress herself (27), appears “indignant” (36), and talks back “incredulously” (35). By defending her self-dignity, Martha resists the existing social order and attains a more powerful role than a traditional lady’s maid. Mary recognizes that Martha is different from her Ayah, and instead of slapping her, she stops to consider “what this girl would do if one slapped her in the face” (27). By receiving training on how to be subservient, Mary’s Ayah sets herself up to be physically abused by and remain
inferior to her mistress, but Martha avoids this fate by virtue of her lack of training. This
dynamic contradicts education sociologist Cristina Iannelli’s theory on social mobility. In her
paper on educational expansion, she claims that the poor can attain more powerful positions
through education: “the expansion of educational participation has enabled a large number of
working-class children to enter professional and managerial occupations and facilitated upward
mobility” (251). While education can allow certain individuals to attain a higher position within
an existing social structure—for example, even Martha could potentially move up the ladder to
housekeeper if she were properly trained—*The Secret Garden* explores the flip-side of that
dynamic, exposing the ways in which education thwarts the impulse to create real social change.
Were Martha to receive a promotion, this process would not challenge the basic master-servant
divide and its attendant injustices. Indeed, the principles behind Giroux and Penna’s “hidden
curriculum”—although based on the modern North American educational system—apply to
Yorkshire at the turn of the century (21). Both the Ayah and Martha’s training are offered by the
elite; hence completing training allows them to better serve the needs of their masters. Iannelli
goes on to say that mobility “is still largely dependent on social class of origin and so also is the
acquisition of different types of occupations” (260). Even though Martha’s subversion of the
social hierarchy by virtue of her lack of training and education is contrary to Iannelli’s argument,
her concept of restricted social mobility is seen in *The Secret Garden*. Martha resists the social
hierarchy by gaining the respect of her masters but she does not have much scope for moving up
the social ladder: she will always remain a servant. Despite this limitation, however, from her
position as a lowly housemaid Martha is able to undermine the existing social structure as a
result of her lack of training.
Subversion of the social hierarchy in *The Hunger Games* is also achieved by unconventional means. Increased knowledge among the districts is believed to threaten the power of the Capitol—Katniss tells Rue, “I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation because […] they don’t want people in different districts to know about one another” (203). In contrast, the book shows that forgoing both traditional knowledge and conscious reasoning helps the poor to rebel. Just as the Ayah is trained by her power-wielding masters, the Capitol administers the education system in Panem. As supported by Giroux and Penna’s theory on the “hidden curriculum” (21), the Capitol conditions the citizens of Panem to follow the existing social structure through schooling. One way in which this is achieved is by instilling a false definition of success. Citizens are led to believe that victors of the Hunger Games are successful, and Katniss plans her actions in the arena in order to win; however, winning is simply a necessary element of the Capitol’s exploitation of the districts, because, after all, “they have to have a victor” (344). Gaining knowledge and learning techniques that are designed to increase one’s chance of survival serves the interests of the Capitol. Using strategy is an example of a guideline that tributes believe will lead to survival and success. Since strategic planning is in the Capitol’s best interests, when Katniss makes impulsive decisions rather than using strategy she is successful in escaping the influence of, and therefore destabilizing the power of the Capitol. Acting on impulses is typically discouraged in society and therefore in education. Mischel et al. studied impulse control and delayed gratification in children by administering a “marshmallow test”: children could choose to consume one marshmallow immediately, or receive two if they waited until the experimenter returned to the room (933). The experimenters found that children who are “more likely to resist temptation” are more successful later in life. This finding seems to tout the benefits of strategizing over giving into one’s
impulses (934). Their measure of success, however, was “greater social responsibility” and “social competence” (934). Similarly in Panem, to define success as winning the Hunger Games is to define it as better cooperating with the goals of the elite—not with subverting the social class structure. Tributes are trained to control their impulses so they can focus on the goal of surviving the Games: a goal they are expected to pursue according to society’s definition of success. It is only by giving in to impulses that tributes can step outside the confines of society and overturn its power structure. Katniss strategizes not to form alliances in the arena, but “before [she] can stop” the words from coming out of her mouth, she impulsively asks Rue to team up with her (199). The friendship they develop is uncharacteristic of other alliances because it is not founded on a planned game strategy. Katniss grows to care deeply for Rue and their relationship humanizes the Games—quite counter to the Capitol’s agenda of presenting tributes as ruthless barbarians. When Rue dies, Katniss feels the urge to “do something, right here, right now” and decorates Rue’s body in flowers (236). This act of love “smacks of rebellion” (363) and “show[s] the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute that they can’t own” (237). It is reciprocated in District Eleven sending Katniss a loaf of bread (228) and Thresh later saving Katniss’s life (288). Furthermore, when Katniss makes the split-second decision to consume poisonous berries at the same time as Peeta, she is not aware of “how [her] actions [will] reflect on the Capitol” (358). This impulsive decision challenges the hierarchy within the context of the Games. Katniss’s impulsiveness does not enable her to rise to the position of the Capitol, but she shakes the existing system by demonstrating that the Capitol does not fully control the lives of the tributes in the arena. The limitation on Katniss’s ability to overturn the social structure is similar to Martha’s restricted social motility; however, the subversion of the social hierarchy that both Katniss and Martha do achieve is orchestrated
through an absence of knowledge. Therefore, overturning power structures by the poor is best achieved without education.

Both *The Secret Garden* and *The Hunger Games* feature impoverished characters who are either unable to escape their underprivileged position because of their knowledge, or who manage to defy their social standing by forgoing traditional education and knowledge. These outcomes challenge the conventional notion that social advancement is achieved through the pursuit of knowledge. The books send the message that education can serve to support the existing and unjust social system, and therefore that it is difficult to combat poverty with the oppressive educational system. A new framework—external to formal education—is warranted for addressing the continuing issue of poverty.


