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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Social Contract Theory in The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes

Teorie společenské smlouvy v Baladě o ptácích a hadech

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá *Baladou o ptácích a hadech* (2020) americké autorky Suzanne Collins v kontextu několika teorií společenské smlouvy. Tento počín je inspirován autorčinými citacemi z děl Thomase Hobbesa, Johna Locke a Jeana-Jacquesa Rousseau na začátku knihy. Tito tři osvícenští myslitelé jsou úzce s teorií společenské smlouvy spojeni. Teoretická část se pokouší představit samotný koncept společenské smlouvy. Především se soustředí na Hobbesa a Rousseau, jejich život, práci a jak tuto smlouvu vysvětlují. Další kapitoly se zabývají autorkou a žánry, které zvolila k předání svých názorů.

Praktická část se zabývá samotným dílem. Taktéž několikrát zmiňuje celou sérii *Hladové hry*, ve které nachází podporu a kontext některých argumentů. Soustředí se primárně na svět, postavy, jejich vztahy a příběh. V těchto aspektech se snaží najít propojení s teoriemi společenské smlouvy. Taktéž komentuje přesnost a validitu těchto odkazů a jak mohou působit na čtenáře.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Balada o ptácích a hadech, *Hladové hry*, Suzanne Collins, teorie společenské smlouvy, dystopická literatura, young adult literatura

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis aims to examine *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) by the American author Suzanne Collins through the lens of multiple social contract theories. This is inspired by the author's own mention of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, three major Enlightenment thinkers connected to the social contract theory, in the epigraph of the novel.

The theoretical part of the thesis attempts to explain the concept of a social contract. It mainly provides information about Hobbes and Rousseau, their lives, their work, and, most importantly, their takes on the social contract. There are also chapters dedicated to the author herself, as well as the genres she chooses to write in.

The practical part dives into the novel itself, also referring to *The Hunger Games* series at times to further support some arguments. The thesis analyzes the setting, characters and their relationships, and the story presented in *The Ballad*, to find if and how they are connected to social contract theory. There is also commentary on how relevant and accurate the references to the theory are and what the reader's takeaway might be.

KEYWORDS

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes, *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins, social contract theory, dystopian literature, young adult literature

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Introduction

This thesis deals with the novel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* by American author Suzanne Collins. The title serves as a prequel to the author's world-famous *Hunger Games* trilogy. Like many people my age, I grew up with this series, and therefore it holds a special place in my heart. It sparked my interest in literature and politics, which I will always be very grateful for.

In her work, Collins often focuses on political and sociological problems, even implying that her fiction may be in part an attempt to introduce them in a more digestible way to younger audiences. One of the aims of this thesis is therefore to determine whether these attempts are or are not successful, where they are good and where they might be lacking. In other words, I ask myself: "Is this a good introduction to the topics for someone who has never heard of them before?" I specifically want to focus on how the author handles the modern social contract theory.

In the epigraph of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, Collins quotes three thinkers of the Enlightenment era: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the authors of the most famous modern social contract theories. Her mention of Thomas Hobbes and his *Leviathan* seems particularly interesting, given the content of the novel. The characters, their actions, and the world around them often correspond with the ideas expressed in Hobbes' take on the social contract. This raises a couple of questions. To what extent does the novel refer to theory? What purpose do these references serve? What should the reader take away from it? These are the questions that our thesis is trying to answer, at least in part.

Throughout the thesis, I will refer not only to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* but also to the original *Hunger Games* trilogy. I am aware that another prequel has been released in March 2025, however I have not read *Sunrise on the Reaping* and a large part of this thesis had already been finished by the time this book was published. For that reason, I have decided to not include it in any capacity. If any of my claims are disputed by the new novel, I am not aware of it.

To evaluate just how effectively the novel utilizes social contracts, we first need to familiarize ourselves with the theory itself. That is precisely what the first part of the thesis deals with. I set out to introduce the concept of social contracts in general, not only the modern ones, but also their predecessor in ancient times. Hobbes and Rousseau are mentioned extensively. Other thinkers and their take on the social contract can be found here as well, mostly to provide context and further explain the subject matter. Another chapter deals with dystopian and young adult literature, as *The Hunger Games* series can be considered to have been written as such. There is also a section dedicated to Suzanne Collins and her work. Though I do not focus on her but instead on the subject matter of her work, I do find the context to be quite important.

In the practical part, the novel itself is analyzed, using the theoretical basis from the first part. It draws parallels between the social contract theories, Hobbes' particularly, as he is the most relevant to the text, and the topics discussed in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. By doing that, I try to find answers to the questions I have mentioned before.

1. Theoretical part

In the theoretical part, the thesis mainly focuses on explaining the concept of social contract theory. Entire subchapters are dedicated to Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as their theories are most relevant to the examined novel. Furthermore, this introductory part also takes a look at the dystopian genre, young adult genre, and the author of the series herself, Suzanne Collins.

1.1 Social contract theory

Social contract theory became a popular topic for philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the time, it was commonly believed that political legitimacy, political authority, and political obligations are all derived from the consent of those who create a government, sometimes also referred to as a society. In other words, the legitimacy and duty of whoever is in power depends on the consent and voluntary individual acts of others. This belief is what is known as the social contract. Different philosophers of that time, particularly of the voluntarist branch, came up with their own takes on how this works (Riley 543).

However, this period of history was not the first time something resembling a social contract theory took shape. Its origins can be traced all the way to ancient Greece. For instance, Aristotle claims Lycophron the Sophist held the opinion that law is only a “contract”, something that ensures mutual respecting of rights. In Plato’s *Republic*, Glaucon gives an account of the origin of civil society. According to him, people are naturally greedy and try to get as much as they can for themselves. To remedy this and escape the aggression tied to it, they come up with an agreement. This compact is what we call “justice,” or law. We can find glimpses of the social contract in Socrates as well (Ritchie 656 – 658).

These ideas later died down. For Christians in medieval times, civil society was regarded as a consequence of the fall of men and government was thought to have been brought into the world by sin. From thirteenth century onwards, Aristotle’s *Politics* had influenced Christian political philosophy. Because of that, the Sophistic theories mentioned above did not find much support. Interestingly though, even during this time, we can see the idea of a contract between government and people forming, particularly among the writers on the ecclesiastical

side and in the popular consciousness. Aristotle's work did not encourage this thinking, however the *Old Testament* did. Its passages may suggest that a ruler is responsible not only to God, but also to his subjects. This does, in a way, resemble a social contract (Ritchie 658 – 659).

Considering that, it cannot be claimed social contract theory was a novelty conceived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, it is rightly mostly associated with this period of modern moral and political theory. After all, it was Thomas Hobbes who first gave it full exposition and defense. Others followed, most famously John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the twentieth century, John Rawls revived interest in the topic with his Kantian version of social contract theory. It has also often been criticized, most recently by feminist and race-conscious philosophers who suggest it paints an incomplete picture of our moral and political lives (Friend).

The following section of the thesis delves into some of the different approaches to social contract theory.

1.1.1 Thomas Hobbes

As previously stated, Thomas Hobbes was the person who truly defined and brought attention to social contract theory in the seventeenth century. He was born in 1588 and studied Latin and Greek since early age. Later, he went on to study at Magdalen Hall, Oxford. During his journeys, he had become acquainted with many thinkers of that age, for example, Galileo and Descartes. He was also on intimate terms with Francis Bacon, though he makes almost no references to his work and did not appear to be influenced by his philosophy (de Montmorency 51).

Hobbes was interested in many different fields. He wrote about history, physics, and mathematics. He is, however, most known as a political philosopher. Some of his notable philosophical works include *Elements of Law*, *Elements of Philosophy*, which consists of *De Corpore*, *De Homine*, and *De Cive*, and, of course, *Leviathan*, which will be discussed in detail later in the thesis (Duncan). He was an intellectual revolutionist with no small ambitions. Hobbes undertook nothing less than a complete re-grounding of philosophy, one that could be compared in radicality to that of Descartes. His work concerning the philosophy

of state, the nature of law, and political authority is very original. His arguments concerning these topics still have relevance and are widely discussed even today. Hobbes is considered to be an Enlightenment thinker. In his work, he challenges books and supposed authorities, all whilst criticizing those who offer them uncritical reverence (Höffe 2).

In the 1640s, civil war broke out in England. Hobbes was a royalist, defending absolute sovereignty in his political philosophy. For this reason, he rightfully feared punishment in his homeland and instead spent the time between 1640 and 1651 in exile in Paris, France. While in Paris, he wrote *Leviathan*, a work that was influenced by the civil war. After his return to England, he continued publishing his work and engaged in debates for several years. He died at Hardwick Hall in the winter of 1679 (Duncan).

1.1.1.1 Leviathan

Describing and understanding *Leviathan* is a daunting task. It is an extensive work and perhaps the only masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language. Few works in the history of humanity have reached the same scope and achievement as *Leviathan* has (Oakeshott 3). Given the complexity of the text, this thesis only offers a brief overview of the work, referring to its most basic ideas, which should be sufficient for its purposes.

Hobbes started working on *Leviathan* while he was exiled in Paris, as stated before. It was first published in 1651. In 1668, he published its Latin version, which included some changes, as well as additions related to some controversial parts of the work (Duncan).

The name “Leviathan” might seem quite unusual for a work of political philosophy. It refers to a mythological and theological monster, which is described as a piercing-serpent in the Old Testament (The King James Version of the Bible, Isa. 27:1). Hobbes uses this name when he refers to a commonwealth, or state. According to him, the state is nothing but an artificial man. Sovereignty serves as an artificial soul of this body, which gives it life and motion. Magistrates and officers are the joints, reward and punishment are the nerves, wealth and riches are the strength and so on. The work is then dedicated to describing the nature of this artificial man (Hobbes and Pogson Smith 8 – 9).

Leviathan is divided into four parts – *Of Man*, *Of Commonwealth*, *Of a Christian Commonwealth*, and *Of the Kingdom of Darkness* (Hobbes and Pogson Smith 5 – 7). Only

the second part deals directly with political questions. Approximately one half of the book is dedicated to biblical interpretation and the relationship between the church and the state (Newey 39).

The opening chapters of the book focus on human sciences. He sets out to show us how human psychology and cognition make people careless when thinking about certain questions of science, politics, and morality. People are comfortable with opinions only, opting out of seeking knowledge. He analyzes these errors because he believes they make humans unfit for civil obedience. Hobbes offers suggestions on how to remedy them and bring people to right reason which will make them fitter for obedience and protection. Interestingly, reason is not painted as solely good in the work. He regards his findings in *Leviathan* as derived from natural reason, yet he also claims that people's insistence on reasoning to reach conclusions about the best form of government and religious truths is disastrous for public order. It is the goal of the work to tame this insurmountable power of reason (Newey 78 – 79).

In later chapters, Hobbes focuses on the state of nature, commonwealth, sovereignty, and state among other things (Newey 84, 114, 142, 172). As these topics are closely tied to his proposal of social contract, they will be discussed in detail in another part of this thesis.

Furthermore, the work also focuses on religion, particularly in the third part. This part is also the longest, suggesting the importance of church government to the work as a whole. In Hobbes' view, secular and religious matters should be governed by the same authority (Newey 39 – 40).

1.1.1.2 Hobbes' proposal

At the core of almost every social contract theory lies the state of nature. In this state, humans live without a government, political institutions and there is no executive force as well. It is a state of anarchy. For some thinkers, this is only a hypothetical scenario used to introduce certain concepts. Others consider it to be factual, a real stage of human development. It is not entirely clear which is true in *Leviathan* (Newey 84 – 85). The interpretations can vary (Newey 115 – 116).

Hobbes lists three causes of quarrel between people in the natural state: competition, difference, and glory. Competition makes them invade for gain, difference for safety, and glory for reputation. All three incentives make people use violence for different reasons. Either way, according to Hobbes, it is in the very nature of human beings to be at war with each other constantly if they have no common power over them (Hobbes and Pogson Smith 96). Natural law which dictates peaceful cooperation also exists in this scenario, however it is illogical for people to follow it, given the circumstances (Hampton, Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition 97).

For this reason, Hobbes claims that an absolute sovereign is needed to put an end to the state of war (Hampton, HatSCT 97). Once found, commonwealth, or state, is created (Hampton, HatSCT 97), together with the establishment of government (Hampton, HatSCT 98). One might argue this ultimate power which all other powers abide by might technically take the form of laws or multiple people at once, not necessarily a monarch. For Hobbes, however, this is impossible. He believes that the power of a sovereign cannot be shared, as human beings are incapable of cooperation (Hampton, HatSCT 99). All laws created by men are subjected to interpretation and people will always interpret them in ways that benefit their situation. This makes them unreliable and creates a need for one entity above all to interpret the laws for others (Hampton, HatSCT 100).

Hobbes is in favor of absolute monarchy, or, more broadly, autocracy. In pursuit of peace, the monarch establishes civil law, defining what is good, evil, lawful and unlawful. The sovereign has the power to determine the answer to all issues. In other words, he is untouchable, and his decisions are not allowed to be questioned, as long as he is able to provide peace (Hampton, HatSCT 100 – 101).

1.1.2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was historically a divisive figure, however an important one in many different fields. Though widely reviled in the past, he has returned to public favor in the last couple of decades, mostly because many of his texts turned out to have almost a prophetic power (Cranston 9).

He was born in 1712 in Geneva. From an early age, he was educated by his own father. The education mostly consisted of reading classic works on ancient republicanism, as well as teaching the values of republican patriotism in general. Eventually, circumstances put Rousseau in the care of a pastor for the rest of his childhood. When he left Geneva at sixteen, he spent some time working as a servant. Afterwards, he trained to become a Catholic priest, as well as pursuing a career in music for a while. In 1744, he moved to Paris and, among other things, wrote contributions for Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (Bertram, Jean-Jacques Rousseau).

In his work, he focused on many different topics, such as music, language, and psychology. However, he is mostly known for his contributions to political philosophy (Bertram, J-JR).

In 1749, he first developed an idea that is central to his entire philosophy – human beings are inherently good but are corrupted by society. The first work of his to discuss this was *Discourse of the Sciences and Arts*, also known as the *First Discourse*. It was published in 1751 and provided a basis for many of his other works, as well as becoming important for the upcoming Romanticism (Bertram, J-JR).

Some of his other notable works include *Discourse on Inequality*, sometimes also only referred to as the *Second Discourse*, *Julie*, *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, and *Confessions*. Both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* were condemned for going against the beliefs of the church (Bertram, J-JR).

Later, he was forced to flee his home, eventually ending up in England. While there, he was becoming increasingly more mentally unstable, often accusing others of plotting against him. Until the end of his life, he mostly wrote autobiographical works, such as *Confessions*. He died in 1778 (Bertram, J-JR).

1.1.2.1 The Social Contract

The Social Contract was one of Rousseau's most controversial works, particularly because of his takes on civil religion (Wokler 19). It was released in spring 1762 (Wokler 72) and got banned by the authorities in Paris almost immediately (Wokler 19). The following section serves only as a summary and introduction to the work, the details of Rousseau's contract will be explained in another part.

It is organized into four books. The first one is concerned with debunking what Rousseau considers to be false theories of the legitimate authority of the state. Then, he makes a case for his own contractarian theory. He also talks about individual freedom and how to combine it with political authority, a problem he says is crucial and should be solved by a theory of political right. The second book explores the nature of sovereign people, as well as general will and law and the problems that may arise during the initial creation of the state. In the third book, Rousseau outlines the relationship between the sovereign and the people and why he believes it will inevitably fall apart. The fourth book continues to focus on this topic, analyzing Roman political institutions. The conclusion then talks about civil religion (Bertram, Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Rousseau and the Social Contract 17 – 18).

The *Social Contract* is perhaps Rousseau's most popular and most often-cited work (Wokler 73).

1.1.2.2 Rousseau's proposal

As mentioned before, Rousseau believes that human beings are inherently good. In the state of nature, they enjoy their freedom and pursue their individual tendencies. What corrupts them is badly formed society. It encourages unhealthy dependence between people and creates a culture in which one is forced to resort to destructive behavior to get by (Wright 21). This is nicely summarized by one of Rousseau's most famous lines: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." (Rousseau et al. 100) Interestingly, he does not consider this state of nature to be factual. It does not have empirical value, only argumentative one (Bishop 105).

The question then is, why would people enter the social contract if they were originally doing well without it and society only corrupts them? Rousseau makes an important distinction between the individual and general will. In the state of nature, human beings are only concerned with their individual will. Alone, they are entirely free. However, there is something to be gained by submitting it to the general will, one that everyone participates in. Ideally, doing so should provide better protection of one's property and safety, which is undoubtedly beneficial (Bishop 110).

Rousseau's social contract creates an interesting paradox. While people do lose their natural liberty when they submit their individual will to the general will, they simultaneously acquire civil and moral liberty. Entering the contract is therefore marked by both loss and gain of freedom (Bishop 110).

Rousseau also introduces the legislator, embodiment of the general will, to explain how it ensures the obedience of individuals. The legislator does not take the form of an all-powerful monarch, like in Hobbes, for example. Instead, sovereignty resides in the people and the legislator is their representative (Bishop 110 – 111). In this, we can see Rousseau's inclination to democracy. Power is in the hands of many, and people choose who represents their voice.

1.1.3 Other approaches

Throughout history, many different approaches to social contract theory were proposed. Two major ones have already been mentioned before. Another that remain relevant in public consciousness are those of John Locke and John Rawls.

1.1.3.1 John Locke's proposal

John Locke drafted his take on the social contract in his *Two Treatises on Government*. He describes the state of nature as a state of perfect and complete liberty where everyone is free to do whatever they want with their lives. Nevertheless, it is not a state without morality; it is therefore only pre-political, not pre-moral. His state of nature is more or less peaceful, given that it is ruled by the law of nature. This law is given to us by God, who commands that people should not harm one another with regards to their life, health, liberty, and possessions (Friend).

This is largely different from what Hobbes claims. The state of nature and the state of war are not the same in Locke's view. However, war can always break out in his state of nature. Because there is no civil authority and the law of nature allows for the protection of one's own life, it is unlikely such a war would ever end shall it ever start. This is one of the strongest reasons for people to abandon this state and enter a social contract. Another crucial part in the formation of this contract is property. Civil authority benefits the people, as it protects their property, including the one in their own bodies (Friend).

Interestingly, Locke's state of nature is not formed by individuals, it is populated by families, who form conjugal society. As previously established, this society is not yet political, only moral. Civil government takes shape once individual men, representing their families, agree to give up their power to punish those who transgress the law of nature, and they leave it up to the public power of a government to do so instead. The power of the government is limited. In other words, what Locke proposes is constitutional monarchy. No one person holds absolute power (Friend).

1.1.3.2 John Rawls' proposal

John Rawls is responsible for reviving interest in the social contract in the twentieth century. He explores this topic in his work *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971 (Wenar). His take on the contract is rather unusual, so much so that some even claim he did not develop social contract theory in his work at all, despite his own claims to the contrary (Hampton, *Contracts and Choices: Does Rawls Have a Social Contract Theory?* 315).

In his work, Rawls establishes something he calls "original position". This lies at the center of his social contract. Unlike other contract theorists, such as Hobbes or Rousseau, he does not describe this as a state of nature (Schroeder 339).

The parties within this hypothetical situation do not consider crucial features of themselves. For instance, they do not know how talented or how wealthy they are, they cannot even envision what the best way to live would be, if someone were to ask them. These parties should then together come up with principles of justice to regulate the basic institutions of their society. By selecting the principles, they enter a binding contract to uphold them. Because Rawls specifies the parties are ignorant of matters that would allow them to favor themselves, he implies that principles of justice cannot be justified by appealing to morally irrelevant considerations (Hinton 1).

The contract is not meant to explain how society came to be or the origins of civil authority, it is rather supposed to mark certain principles of justice as preferable to others. For Rawls, the contractual agreement is a matter of convenience. It removes people's prejudices and attempts to figure out ideal justice, one that is not influenced by them (Schroeder 340).

This is but a brief summarization of what Rawls proposes, however it should be sufficient to understand what his social contract involves and provide a different, more contemporary outlook on it than the original contract thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

1.2 Genres

In the following part, there is a short introduction to the two main genres Collins writes within in *The Hunger Games* series – dystopian and young adult literature.

1.2.1 Dystopian literature: a hyperbolic social critique

Dystopia is a term that is not only literary, but also historical, though it is mostly associated with the former. Generally, when the adjective “dystopian” is used, people tend to equate it with futures full of chaos and ruin. A dystopian future is typically defined by a totalitarian regime that is full of inequality, imprisonment, intolerance, and other negative characteristics (Claeys 5). It often critiques social conditions and political systems and is meant to draw attention to problematic parts of them, some of which might be vulnerable to abuse, as well as different flaws and contradictions within them (Booker 3).

Dystopian literature is usually not set in the current time and real-life locations. On the contrary, it tends to take the reader somewhere completely unfamiliar. Setting the story somewhere imaginatively distant provides an opportunity to further highlight social and political problems. It also offers fresh perspectives that might not arise when the focus is on reality. This literary strategy is called defamiliarization (Booker 3 – 4). In other words, the setting is shaped in a way that is most convenient for the critique or commentary the writer is trying to make. This might result in exaggeration and generalization for the sake of accentuating certain themes.

1.2.2 Young adult literature: in defense of simplicity

There is much confusion about what young adult literature includes. Because of these misunderstandings, it has often been disregarded as cheap literature, containing little to no substance (Crowe 120). Is this justified or can young adult literature serve as an art form that offers substance, insight and literary merit?

To define what young adult literature is, we must first consider who a “young adult” is. According to Crowe, it should be someone who is old enough to be in junior high or high school (121). In Czech context, the range would go from sixth or seventh year of elementary school to third or fourth year of high school. To put it simply, young adults are teenagers. Logically, the genre is then consisted of literature that is marketed towards this age group.

The disregard for young adult literature is often rooted in its simplicity and subject matters. On the other hand, there is a potential for these factors to serve as a useful vehicle towards interpretive insight, not obstacles or reasons to dismiss it. For example, young non-readers might find literature more approachable thanks to these assimilations. By reading YA fiction, they warm up to reading in general and it might spark their interest in other literature as well in the future. The subject matter is often relevant to their lives and the characters are relatable, as they tend to be around the same age as the reader. This should not be taken lightly, either. Young people are naturally drawn to genres or art forms that resonate with their own experience, and classical literature might often not evoke that feeling for various reasons. YA literature can make various topics more digestible (Crowe 121 – 122). While YA literature should not be the only source of enrichment and information for young people, it should not be entirely tossed aside, either.

1.3 Suzanne Collins

Suzanne Collins is an American author and screenwriter. She was born on August 10, 1962, in Hartford, Connecticut. Her father served in the U.S. Air Force. Because of that, her family frequently moved. She received her B.A. in theater and telecommunications from Indiana University and M.F.A in dramatic writing from New York University (Cunningham).

She began her professional writing career in 1991. Originally a screenwriter, she worked on multiple Nickelodeon shows, such as *Clarissa Explains it All* and *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*. She also wrote multiple stories for *Little Bear* and *Oswald*. Collins served as a Head Writer for Scholastic Entertainment’s *Clifford’s Puppy Days* and a freelancer on *Wow! Wow! Wubbzy!* as well. Children’s author and illustrator James Proimos later convinced her to try writing children’s books (*Suzanne Collins – Biography*).

Her first notable contribution to children's literature was *Gregor the Overlander*. The novel, later developed into a five-part fantasy war series, *The Underland Chronicles*, follows an 11-year-old Gregor as he explores New York City's underground where humans coexist with giant anthropomorphic sewer dwellers (Cunningham). Despite the intended audience, the series often explores serious topics, such as genocide and biological warfare (Cunningham).

Collins is most known for *The Hunger Games* saga, a dystopian war story consisting of five novels. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* is a significant part of this series. (*Suzanne Collins – Biography*) Due to this, it will be discussed in more detail in its own separate part of this text.

In 2013, she released a critically acclaimed autobiographical picture book, *Year of the Jungle*, in collaboration with James Proimos. However, it had not been her first picture book. That title belongs to *When Charlie McButton Lost Power*, her 2005 work, illustrated by Mike Lester (*Suzanne Collins – Biography*).

Over the years, Collins has garnered many acknowledgments by notable publications, as well as multiple nominations and awards for her work. Her books have sold over 100 million copies worldwide (*Suzanne Collins – Biography*).

1.3.1 Context of The Hunger Games series

The first installment of the dystopian *Hunger Games* series was released in 2008. Two sequels, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, followed in 2009 and 2010 respectively. For a while, this was the complete series. However, in 2020, the author released *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, and in 2025, *Sunrise on the Reaping*, both of which are prequels to the original trilogy (Cunningham).

The author describes the conception of the series as follows: “I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss' story came to me. One night I'm sitting there flipping around and on one channel there's a group of people competing for, I don't know, money maybe? And on the next there's a group of young people fighting an actual war. And I was tired, and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way, and I thought of the story.” (Collins, *The Hunger Games*) She also cites her father as an inspiration for the story, especially its serious subject matter. She says: “He was in the Air Force, a

military specialist, a historian and a doctor of political science. When I was a kid he was gone for a year in Vietnam. It was very important to him that we understood about certain aspects of life. So, it wasn't enough to visit a battlefield; we needed to know why the battle occurred, how it played out, and the consequences.” (Collins, THG) It is not uncommon for Collins to cite philosophers as her inspiration either, most recently, David Hume (*Scholastic to Publish New Novel in the Worldwide Bestselling Hunger Games Series by Suzanne Collins*). Judging by this, it can be said that her work was always meant to be taken as political and sociological commentary.

There is no question the novels have had a great impact on today's youth. They have been sold in 55 languages, topping major bestseller charts. Every entry in the series has received a film adaptation, grossing over 3.3 billion dollars worldwide. (*Suzanne Collins – Biography*). The series is a phenomenon, and its influence should not be underestimated.

2. Practical part

The practical part of the thesis examines the novel itself, as well as briefly considering its predecessors in the series. Using the knowledge provided in the theoretical part, it specifically views the text through the lens of social contract theory and tries to prove that the theory is, in fact, connected to it. It is divided into three parts, focusing on setting, characters and relationships, and the story respectively.

2.1 Setting

The Hunger Games series is set in Panem – a dystopian version of what once was North America. It is divided into twelve districts and the capital city Capitol, which governs them with an iron fist. To keep their power, they organize a tournament where two adolescents from each district fight to death every year. This spectacle is known as the Hunger Games (Collins, THG blurb).

From this, it can be assumed the world is not democratic at all, as is often the case within the dystopian genre. Unlike the original *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the regime is still not well-established in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Its cracks and imperfections can still be seen at this point, giving us a glimpse into its infancy. The following section of the thesis discusses the politics of the world, as well as what might be the reason for the current establishment within it and the implications for its future.

2.1.1 Panem's politics in relation to Hobbes' idea of monarchy

Although the leader of the country is referred to as a president in the book (Collins, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* 23), we cannot in any way call Panem a democracy. Throughout the series, no elections are held, making the leader's title ceremonial, rather than true to the definition of the term.

Despite the fact that there is proof of other people being able to influence the leader, for example the Head Gamemaker (Collins, *TBoSaS* 125), nothing suggests this regime could be anything but an autocracy, or, at best, an oligarchy. There is a very small group of people within the richest part of the country, which takes on the responsibilities of ruling, mostly protecting their own interests and keeping their status. While most of them rely on tradition

to support their standing, it is not uncommon for someone who suddenly comes to money to be able to climb to the top.

A great representative of someone relying mostly on their name to support their position is our main protagonist Coriolanus Snow. His story revolves heavily around saving the legacy of the powerful dynasty he is a part of. “Snow lands on top!” (Collins, TBoSaS 9) is a recurring quote in the book, signaling the family’s pride and refusal to give up what has been lost.

When it comes to the riches being crucial in who has influence and privileges in the Capitol, there is no better example than the Plinth family. Originally from District 2, they were able to buy their way into the city and infiltrate the upper class thanks to the riches they gained by selling munitions during the war (Collins, TBoSaS 16–17).

The presidents and his partners then serve the story in the same way Hobbes’ monarch functions – an omnipotent, unchallenged ruler, to whom the people offer a part of their freedom in exchange for peace. This coercive peacekeeping legitimizes all the cruel antics the government resorts to in order to maintain their power.

Panem is undeniably a fascist state as well. Apart from the autocratic rule, the richest class also sternly believes that they are better in every aspect. District people are simply just animals to them, belonging in a cage (Collins, TBoSaS 64). Another proof of fascism is the constant militarism, signaled by the presence of Peacekeepers, who are responsible for keeping the districts in check, as well as ensuring they meet the quotas set for them by the Capitol (Collins, TBoSaS 18). Every act of defiance against the regime is violently punished. For example, Coriolanus finds himself exiled and forced to become a Peacekeeper after breaking the rules by helping his own tribute (Collins, TBoSaS 320). Violence in general is always the answer in Panem. It is everywhere, putting fear in people and making them think twice about ever trying to rebel. The most effective fear tactic are the Hunger Games themselves. The Treaty of Treason describes them as a war reparation and the price of the rebels’ treachery – an explanation of this horrifying spectacle, embedded in the law (Collins, TBoSaS 23).

Hobbes does not necessarily envisage an overtly tyrannical regime, yet his Leviathan deems certain abuse of power to be acceptable, as long as the chaos of unruled society is averted. In his view, the terrors mentioned before, no matter how extreme, might all be overlooked. The main creative impetus and plotline of the novel stands in opposition to this tyrannical establishment.

The regime introduced here is intentionally very straightforward. It is often exaggerated, and its cruelty is constantly on display. The reader is supposed to immediately catch that this form of rule is bad. Looking at the last couple of paragraphs of this thesis, it is not difficult to surmise Collins' writing is cliché, too sensational and simple to effectively provide any nuanced political commentary. While many of these critiques might be true, they might often come from a place that does not necessarily understand what the novel aims to do. Collins' storytelling and world-building is rather effective, if it is looked at from a specific perspective.

Collins started off her career writing books for children, and while *The Hunger Games* trilogy, together with *The Ballad*, are in no way intended for young children, she did not stray too far away from her roots, as the series belongs to the young adult genre. Keeping that in mind, simplifying the subject matter, or making the point obvious, might not be entirely misconceived. Likewise, the novel belongs to the dystopian genre, which tends to exaggerate on purpose to make the message more deliberate and also to snap the reader to attention via the hyperbole. Painting obvious traits of fascism and dictatorships as bad might seem like beating a dead horse to anyone who is familiar with these topics, yet it might be quite helpful to younger people, who might have never learned about anything like this before. Once there is an understanding of the political regime, a follow up question might be a simple: "Why?"

At this point, the focus shifts to the social contract theory, which is an underlying theme of *The Ballad*. Through painting the monarch and the ruling class as nothing but cruel, a decision is made to critique what Thomas Hobbes considered to be the ideal form of rule. It encourages the readers to think about the topic, which can be considered important in today's political climate.

2.1.2 War and its impact on the setting

While the perfect environment for the regime we see in the novel is created by countless aspects, none of them are as prominent as war. After all, the author herself chooses to introduce us into the novel by the following quote: “During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.” (Hobbes and Pogson Smith 96) The setting entirely relies on this being the basic premise and belief spread within it, as it fully justifies the existence of autocratic rule.

People are afraid of war, they are afraid of going back to a time of chaos and suffering, which makes them far more tolerant of the government’s wrongdoings. Although it is only mentioned in passing, its impact cannot be understated.

For people like Coriolanus, whose family lost everything because of the war (Collins TBoSaS 17), being complicit and obedient is a form of survival. He also longs for the power that was promised to him with his name, and he is willing to do anything to get it.

The Plinths, on the other hand, climbed to the top of the social ladder thanks to their involvement in war and siding with the winning side (Collins, TBoSaS 16–17). The Capitol in general has gained significant momentum. They were the winners of this war, giving them credibility and justifying any demands they might have. They remain scarred but have started to rebuild (Collins, TBoSaS 5).

Lucy Gray and the Covey’s lives were completely ruined by it. Prior to the war, they had no home as traveling artists but were forced to reside in District 12, the worst of the districts, afterwards. They were pushed to the outskirts of society and forced to conform to a new regime that did not fit their lifestyle at all (Collins TBoSaS 52–53). All district people, especially those from the places that did not side with the Capitol, now face a similar fate.

As per previous mention, the Hunger Games also depend on the outcome of the war. They are seen as a punishment and reminder of the rebellion.

This order is unfair yet widely accepted. If the Capitol fails, the country will, once again, fall into chaos and resort to never-ending violence. That is the belief many hold, and that is the connection to Hobbes' social contract.

The natural state of humanity is, according to the claims made in *Leviathan*, war. People are inherently violent if they are given full freedom. For this reason, Hobbes suggests an omnipotent ruler should be put in charge, to put an end to the terror and keep peace. If they can achieve this, their methods are irrelevant.

Here, it feels logical to consider the context of *Leviathan*. Hobbes wrote it during the civil war in England. He decided to stand on the side of the monarchy, as they represented order amidst all the chaos. This view can easily be projected onto the citizens of Panem; it is the exact reason why they accept the autocracy as well. Fear is a powerful tool. It is no wonder witnessing the atrocities of war might lead people, real or fictional, to conclude that mankind is inherently bad and a tyrannical regime that holds this malevolence at bay has its merits.

2.1.3 Implications for the future of the world

Because *The Ballad* is a prequel, the future of the setting is set. There is a remarkable opportunity to see what the full extent of the author's commentary on the different social contract theories and forms of rule might be. The reader does not have to guess if everything ends badly for the aggressor, they know it does.

As mentioned before, the Ballad shows the establishment of a fascist, autocratic regime. It follows Coriolanus Snow, who is not against this autocratic establishment. Though his beliefs are challenged multiple times, at the end of the day, he always stands on the side of the Capitol. This offers a unique perspective, giving us a glimpse into why someone might support a government such as this one. Coriolanus as a character will be discussed further in a different chapter of this thesis. For now, it is only crucial to know he was the reason why the Games became more of a phenomenon, due to his proposal about making the whole process more entertaining and introducing betting on the winner and sponsoring the tributes (Collins, TBoSaS 102–103). As the Games gain power and popularity, so does the regime itself. This simultaneously leads to the rise and the subsequent demise of the entire political system.

Coriolanus' ruthlessness and cunningness eventually landed him the presidential seat, which we can see in the original trilogy (Collins, *Mockingjay* 200). Throughout the series, he turns to more and more brutal antics, doing everything in his power to keep the regime afloat. The insistence on keeping the Games going and using the fear of war to control people turns out to be ineffective. As brutality rises, so does the disappointment and desperation of his subjects, laying the perfect groundwork for a revolution.

The entire series showcases that the rule of one is unsustainable. Peace is not enough to justify it. This is in direct contrast with Hobbes' ideas. From the text, one might guess the author is choosing to criticize his approach and focus on displaying all that can go wrong should it be widely accepted. The novel does not support the belief that people are inherently bad, or that the natural state of humanity is war. The author does not appear to be in favor of dictatorships, either. Thankfully, we do not only have Hobbes' perspective on what the social contract is.

Over the course of history, there were many different outlooks on the matter, however the other two that remain in public consciousness and are widely taught are the ones John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed. Because the series ends with the rebels succeeding in their revolution (Collins, *Mockingjay* 454) and a return to democracy, it is not wrong to surmise the author is in support of the two, particularly Rousseau. This ending is seen as positive, though not without its own problems. We can only guess what becomes of Panem afterwards, however it is suggested the people are doing better under this new form of rule.

As previously mentioned, such claims can often feel reductive and one-sided. They do, however, serve well enough as an introduction to various topics. I also believe teaching young people the importance of democracy is not something that should be judged too harshly, no matter how shallow the takes may appear to a more well-learned portion of society.

2.2 Characters and relationships

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes offers a variety of characters, all with different outlooks on the state of the world. Though it mainly follows Coriolanus, he is often challenged by those with different views and must grapple with things his privilege previously sheltered

him from. The supporting characters range from being completely against the regime, to taking more of a moderate position, to being the very reason the system is still in place. Through that, each of them provides a unique outlook on the social contract as well. The following part of the thesis aims to explore this and take a closer look at the novel's key characters and their relationships.

2.2.1 Coriolanus Snow: the monarchist

The entire novel is centered around Coriolanus Snow. It is an interesting choice, as the reader previously only knows him as the dictator from the original trilogy who rose to power by poisoning anyone who stood in his way (Collins, *Mockingjay* 200). This story shows his humble beginnings and youth. It also offers some explanation as to why he is the way that he is. He is the character whose purpose is to defend the current system and Hobbes' concept of ideal rule.

It is no wonder Coriolanus would stand on the side of the Capitol and its leaders. He is, after all, a citizen of the city. His childhood, full of privilege, has been violently turned on its head and became a nightmare once the rebels attacked during the war. Both of his parents died, and for years he had to survive on scraps, even witnessing his neighbor resort to cannibalism during the worst moments of the war (Collins, *TBoSaS* 31 – 32). Due to this, he is not particularly fond of anyone from the districts. He does not understand their motivations or why they did what they did, as his upbringing does not let him consider their suffering. He only sees his own. Status, riches, and power were always integral parts of his life, and once his family lost everything in the war, he was willing to do anything to keep up appearances and possibly, one day, gain it all back.

It is also worth mentioning that Coriolanus has been subjected to an enormous amount of propaganda throughout his life. His grandma, who ended up raising him and his cousin after the war, was a nationalist and instilled patriotic pride in the children at an early age (Collins, *TBoSaS* 4).

Given everything that he has been through, his support of the current government is not surprising. Anything is better than war. He believes that order is needed, and who else should keep it than the mighty winners of the war and people who are, in his opinion, far more

superior to the savages in districts? In many ways, the beginning of Coriolanus' story corresponds with the origins of *Leviathan*. As I previously mentioned, Hobbes also survived a civil war, and his defense of monarchy mainly stemmed from that experience.

However, there are moments when Coriolanus doubts his views. He questions them as he forms stronger relationships with Sejanus Plinth and Lucy Gray Baird in particular.

Sejanus comes from District Two, although he is a Capitol citizen now (Collins, TBoSaS 16). Fate constantly thrusts him together with the protagonist, forcing Coriolanus to spend time with someone who he does not believe deserves the riches or his newly gained status. Sejanus is described as shy and sensitive. Due to his origin, Capitol-born children used to make his life a living hell, an effort Coriolanus supported but did not participate in (Collins, TBoSaS 17).

The two develop a strange relationship. Sejanus considers the protagonist a friend, he cares for him so much that he leaves his life behind to enroll and join him in his banishment to District Twelve (Collins, TBoSaS 338 – 339). It can also be said other people consider them to be friends. Sejanus' mother even says to Coriolanus: "We're glad Sejanus has such a good friend." (Collins, 174 – 175) When it comes to Coriolanus, though, his feelings towards Sejanus are not always clear. He mostly dislikes being associated with him (Collins, TBoSaS 208). Yet it is difficult to claim never cared about him at all. Whether he likes it or not, Sejanus is a huge part of Coriolanus' life.

No matter their relations, Coriolanus ends up betraying Sejanus in the end to uphold the system. Once he catches him plotting against it, he records this conversation and provides the information to the Capitol (Collins, TBoSaS 447 – 452). For the crime of treason, Sejanus is hanged shortly after (Collins, TBoSaS 470). This is a turning point in Coriolanus' development. It is so inhumane even he is disgusted by himself (Collins, TBoSaS 471 – 473). The act shows the depth of what he is capable of committing in the name of returning to Capitol's good graces. Going forward, though he tries to deceive himself into not believing it, Coriolanus is loyal to the system. There is no going back for him, he will do anything to please it, anything for power.

Perhaps even more than Sejanus, Lucy Gray is another character that challenges his views. She is a singer from District Twelve, reaped as a tribute in the Hunger Games (Collins, TBoSaS 24). Coriolanus' job is to mentor her and prepare her for the Games (Collins, TBoSaS 14). If he leads her to success, he is sure to get one of the prizes offered by the school, putting him on track to regain his family's former glory and fortune (Collins, TBoSaS 8). Lucy Gray's success is therefore crucial, and though he has little faith in her at the beginning, she proves to be quite a character, as she is able to garner a large amount of interest before she is even brought to the Capitol (Collins, TBoSaS 24 – 29).

Spending time with her forces Coriolanus to rethink everything he knows about the district people. She is not savage; she is smart, talented, and charming. The country quickly falls in love with her, giving Coriolanus and Lucy Gray an advantage (Collins, TBoSaS 171). Though he initially only cares for her well-being because of the prize, eventually, he starts to grow feelings for her (Collins, TBoSaS 189 – 190). This, once again, shakes his world entirely. He finds himself committing crimes to keep her safe and make sure she wins, something that eventually leads to him being banished and losing everything (Collins, TBoSaS 320). We see Coriolanus struggle with these feelings for the better portion of the story.

However, he ends up being more loyal to the system than the woman he loves. At the end, he gives in to his paranoia, betraying Lucy Gray, just like he betrayed Sejanus. Though the text does not confirm whether he killed her or not, it is suggested that he did (Collins, TBoSaS 505). If there were any doubts previously about where his loyalty lies, there are none after this moment.

As Coriolanus loses Sejanus and Lucy Gray, he also loses the voice of empathy in his mind. Throughout his journey, we see him battle with his convictions; a fight he loses in the end. His upbringing, surroundings, and experiences were all far too strong. He could not change his mind. Supporting the system turns from a means to an end to a full lust for power, as his actions become more and more unacceptable. In the epilogue, we can then see glimpses of his future, as he fully integrates and serves the Capitol (Collins, TBoSaS 511 – 517).

The title of this chapter, calls Coriolanus “the monarchist”. This is an accurate description of his role and attitude towards the system. While there are some doubts in his mind about the truthfulness of Hobbes’ social contract, and its moral implications, most of these are erased by the end of the story. He defends the system, tries to appease it, and he reaps rewards for these attitudes. In the end, when he has a choice to either slowly gain back his status and work himself up again, or run away with Lucy Gray, leaving the Capitol and everything he has ever known behind, he chooses the former. His fearful delusions lead him to the conclusion Lucy Gray is betraying and running away from him. The only solution he sees is to eliminate her. He is not punished for behaving unjustly. He is rewarded for it and gets on a path to turn from a monarchist to the monarch (Collins, TBoSaS 488).

Coriolanus is an excellent example of who the leader, according to Hobbes’ social contract, can become. Despite his successes, the reader is not supposed to feel happy for him. He symbolizes the danger a system like this can pose. He is a perfect example of who the monarchy promotes and represents. Is it justifiable to have someone as rotten as this in a position power, just to avoid war and rebellion?

The rest of the series, as well as Coriolanus’ action in this novel, suggest the answer to that question should be negative. Once again, the story pushes a certain view on Hobbes’ social contract, which might be considered fairly problematic, as it only shows one side of the argument. Offering at least one side to introduce the concept is better than offering none at all, though.

2.2.2 Lucy Gray Baird: a symbol of liberty

As previously established, Lucy Gray stands in opposition to Coriolanus. Through her behavior and actions, she makes him question everything he has been taught. Lucy Gray is the antithesis of what the actual conclusion of the story is, and she represents everything the system is not at this point.

In every way possible, Lucy Gray defies expectations. She comes from the poorest of districts yet possesses little to no characteristics associated with that place. Before the war, her people were traveling artists, and she still follows the tradition of her ancestors, though her kind is now forced to reside in District Twelve (Collins, TBoSaS 52 – 53). She does not

fit the mold Capitol has decided to force her and her kind into, nor does she make any effort to do so, which makes her quite fascinating.

Lucy Gray lives in a violent system, yet she rarely uses violence herself. Her biggest strengths are her words, wits, and presentation. Even when she is forced to kill, she is not direct with it, poisoning her opponents instead of fighting (Collins, TBoSaS 293 – 294). Lucy Gray does not believe or support a system that treats her like an animal, nor does she see violence as an answer. “I think there’s a natural goodness built into human beings. You know when you’ve stepped across the line into evil, and it’s your life’s challenge to try and stay on the right side of that line.” (Collins, TBoSaS 493) This quote from her perfectly summarizes her worldview. Despite everything, Lucy Gray refuses to subscribe to the idea of inherent evilness, which immediately makes her stand out from the rest of the cast. Another example of her beliefs can be found in one of her songs. She sings:

Everyone’s born as clean as a whistle –

As fresh as a daisy

And not a bit crazy.

Staying that way’s hard row for hoeing –

As rough as a briar,

Like walking through fire.

This song is meant to be about Coriolanus. She continues: “I turn into dust, but / You never stop trying. / It’s why I / Love you,” and finishes with: “That’s why I / Trust you – / You’re pure as a driven snow.” (Collins, TBoSaS 478 – 481) Coriolanus knows this is not an accurate representation of him, his actions are morally wrong, which is why he always feels guilty and paranoid around Lucy Gray. She loves and trusts him, something he values dearly, yet also something that puts an unbearable burden on him, due to his previous dubious actions that she is not familiar with. She clings onto Coriolanus’ goodness, a part of himself he no longer believes he possesses.

Lucy Gray is aligned with what Jean-Jacques Rousseau considers to be the origins of humankind. According to him, at the beginning, people might have been alone, but generally happy and good. It was when society was formed that humanity started to act wrong.

In a way, she represents the voice of regular people, as well as the voice of reason for everyone around her. She is a testament to how powerful words can be. Standing in opposition to the autocratic regime, Lucy Gray can be seen as a representation of an entirely different form of rule – democracy. This can also be used as proof that she most closely aligns with Rousseau.

Lucy Gray is generally portrayed in the novel as good. The author obviously wants us to side with her and consider her ideas to be the most reasonable ones. Dramatic as it may sound, her exit also marks the exit of goodness and liberty from the story. When she disappears, Coriolanus loses his mind. She is a victim of her beliefs, forced to disappear after trusting someone she should not have.

It is not said whether Lucy Gray died or just vanished, either way, her words live on. In the trilogy, it is her songs that play a major part in the revolution against the Capitol. To give an example of this, Lucy Gray writes a song called “The Hanging Tree” about an event taking place in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Collins, TBoSaS 485 – 486). This song is later on sung by Katniss Everdeen, the main character and the person who sparks the rebellion in the third installment of *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins, Mockingjay 144 – 146). Katniss is also from the same district as Lucy Gray (Collins, THG 4). Even though all hope appears to be lost with Lucy Gray, liberty, in the end, perseveres and the ideals she shares, democracy among them, reappear through Katniss and the other participants in the revolution.

The narrative makes Lucy Gray suffer; it makes her a martyr. This further reinforces the idea that the reader should root for her. Once again, the author is clearly trying to push the importance of democracy, and the power one individual can hold against an unjust regime. It is through Lucy Gray that Collins criticizes Hobbes’ social contract the most. She offers a perspective that is fresh and remains relevant in the trilogy as well.

2.2.3 Dr. Volumnia Gaul: the mastermind

Dr. Gaul is a character who shows up in the *Ballad* scarcely. Despite that, her impact cannot be understated. If Coriolanus is a monarchist and Lucy Gray represents the oppressed voice of the people, Volumnia Gaul is the mastermind behind the system. She understands how it works, why it works, and what it needs to survive. While many other characters are forced to undergo some sort of change and have big revelations about themselves and their convictions, Gaul's opinions remain static. According to her, people are inherently violent and cruel without common power to keep them in check (Collins, *TBoSaS* 243). For her, the nature of the social contract is not in question. She shares Hobbes' ideas entirely. She appears in the educational sphere, spreading her views to the students. This makes her incredibly dangerous. If *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* has an antagonist, it is her.

Through her assignments and claims, Dr. Gaul influences the young minds of the Capitol. Her relationship with Coriolanus is especially important. Coriolanus respects her and tries to do everything to impress her. It is her assignment that leads him to come up with different ways to popularize the Games, an act that revitalizes the concept and ensures their continuation for decades to come (Collins, *TBoSaS* 102 – 104).

Volumnia is also crucial for the justification of this thesis, as she is the only character to bring up the topic of a social contract explicitly in the novel. She asks Coriolanus: "What sort of agreement is necessary if we're to live in peace? What sort of social contract?" (Collins, *TBoSaS* 244) This question comes after Coriolanus is forced to spend time in the arena and kills one of the tributes in self-defense. "What a wonderful opportunity for you. Transformative," (Collins, *TBoSaS* 242) she says in relation to this event. She is fascinated by the violence in the arena and obsessed with human nature.

Though their conversations are rather brief, Coriolanus is deeply affected by her world views. He desperately wants to believe himself to be a decent human being, a notion that gets destroyed every single time he talks to Dr. Gaul. After his first kill, she is the one who convinces him the actions and decisions were his own, no matter how hard he wants to blame the circumstances. She makes him think about who human beings are and what type of

government they need because of that. She subjects him to being a witness and a perpetrator of violence, only to prove her point (Collins, TBoSaS 242 – 244).

He is her star student, willing to entertain even the most questionable of assignments. She sees potential in him and decides to exploit it. Whereas Lucy Gray and Sejanus pull the protagonist towards democracy, Gaul's influence leads him to support the system as it is, as well as making him believe in the inherent cruelty of humankind. To put it bluntly, she grooms him into becoming the ruthless dictator we see later in the series.

Gaul's questions, power, and ability to manipulate others end up being one of the driving forces of the main character's development. If she was not present in the story, one might argue Coriolanus might have ended up differently.

2.3 Story

Throughout this thesis, it has been established the social contract plays a role in the setting and defines the characters as well. Now, it seems appropriate to provide a couple of examples from the story as well. Several chapters throughout the novel showcase characters in extreme situations. They show us what human beings are capable of when there are no rules or common power to keep them in check. This closely ties to social contract theories and one of the questions that lies at their very core – how do people act outside of society, with no form of rule above them?

2.3.1 The Games

Perhaps the most obvious example of the story being influenced by Hobbes' social contract are the Hunger Games themselves. They can almost be seen as a sort of simulation of humanity without society and rules. People's behavior in the Games shows that humanity will result in violence if left ungoverned. In a life and death situation, humans return to their basic instincts and do anything to protect themselves. Or so one would think. Interestingly, once the Games begin in the novel, there is no action. At first, the tributes generally mind themselves (Collins, TBoSaS 206 – 218). It is not until Sejanus and Coriolanus, two people who do not belong in there, enter the arena, that the carnage begins.

Sejanus, in grief, enters the arena to honor Marcus, a dead District Two tribute he once knew (Collins, TBoSaS 223 – 224). Coriolanus is sent to retrieve him safely from the arena (Collins, TBoSaS 228). After convincing Sejanus to return to safety, both of them find themselves in a fight with the tributes before they manage to escape. During this quarrel, Coriolanus ends up beating Bobbin, one of the tributes, to death (Collins, TBoSaS 236 – 237). After this incident, both boys are chased by Coral, Mizzen, and Tanner, another tributes, who attempt to kill them, but only end up hurting Coriolanus (Collins, TBoSaS 237 – 239).

Dr. Gaul later describes the event as follows: “What happened in the arena? That’s humanity undressed. The tributes. And you, too. How quickly civilization disappears. All your fine manners, education, family background, everything you pride yourself on, stripped away in the blink of an eye, revealing everything you actually are. A boy with a club who beats another boy to death. That’s mankind in its natural state.” (Collins, TBoSaS 243) This is an almost exact description of Hobbes’ natural state of humanity. The story directly provides an example of this natural brutality.

As the Games offer no other solution, we see more displays of violence throughout their duration. Coral especially becomes quite deadly. For instance, the next day after the incident with Coriolanus and Sejanus, we see her murder one of the girls with a trident (Collins, TBoSaS 252). Coral and her group continue to engage with the others, starting fights and going for kills (Collins, TBoSaS 276 – 277). It is clear she wants to live. The killing is a means to an end, she practically has no other choice but to continue. Despite doing everything that was expected of her, she does not end up victorious (Collins, TBoSaS 300). She ends up being a great example of the system not caring even for those who decide to appease it.

For all that Lucy Gray represents, even she cannot defy the circumstances. Although indirectly, she becomes a killer as well. By poisoning a bottle of water, she ends up murdering Wovey (Collins, TBoSaS 293 – 294).

No one is truly innocent in the arena. As they struggle to survive, most of the tributes end up putting themselves first and result in fighting or killing. After such display, it might not be

hard to understand why the citizens of Panem are inclined to believe the cruel government they are subjected to is the only right solution.

2.3.2 District Twelve

Another part of the story that should be highlighted are the events from District Twelve. The districts are generally painted as savage by the Capitol. If considered as such, they, once again, allude to the idea of a lawless state of humanity.

Throughout his stay in District Twelve, Coriolanus is much more inclined to use violence than before. He does not hesitate to kill, whether it is someone he barely knows, someone he was considered a close friend of, or even his partner. Those events have already been described in other parts of the thesis.

Of course, one might argue that the circumstances simply gave him no other choice. On the other hand, it can also be claimed that this is just another example of how low human beings can go if they appear in a setting they believe to be inferior and brute. In Twelve, Coriolanus is forced to deal with such a setting in his eyes. He is out for himself, and he can choose to act however he wants. Coriolanus chooses violence, and he believes everyone else would choose it as well. What he does during his time there further reinforces his belief in what Gaul put in his head. Everything circles back to the quote from Hobbes in the epigraph: “During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.”

Conclusion

This thesis has sought connections between different social contract theories and *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. We have managed to identify them in every aspect of the novel to some extent. The setting, the characters and their relationships, and the story are all deeply influenced by these theories.

Collins is choosing to comment on Hobbes in particular. As has been mentioned multiple times throughout the practical part, it seems plausible to surmise that she is mainly trying to criticize what his ideas about humanity in its natural state and the ideal form of rule are. She would, after all, not be the first one to do so. If you take what Hobbes is proposing very literally and put it into practice, you end up with Panem. It is a rule of one, and the system is very clearly corrupt and broken. Life is miserable there, at least for the people who refuse to condemn everything those in power do.

Of course, there are problems with this approach. The dystopian genre tends to exaggerate to get the point across and young adult literature is often less complex, given who the audience is supposed to be. Not every autocracy has to be as terrible as this one, yet a slight hyperbole has become an established literary device used for emphasis and clarity. Making the Capitol so obviously evil may be seen as reductive and dismissive of a larger, more complex conversation that is to be had about such topics. The novel clearly shows us just one side of things, which is considered to be problematic in social sciences. On the other hand, Collins is not a sociologist or a political scientist. She is a novelist, and it is therefore not her responsibility to follow the rules as they do.

Interestingly, as she criticizes Hobbes' approach, she also ends up proving his point in certain parts of the novel. When she puts the characters in extreme situations where rules do not apply, they turn violent, which validates Hobbes' theory. A reader who is not alert enough might end up confused by the text, as these instances contradict what seems to be the overall message of the novel. If one does pay attention, they might notice the characters actually do not behave in these ways willingly but rather are forced to do so. However, it feels important to mention that someone who does not read the text closely might come out of it with a different conclusion than intended.

On the other hand, Collins does a very good job explaining why people might support oppressive governments. She displays dire consequences of not following the biddings of those in power, as well as the manipulation and propaganda often present in such regimes. She is being one-sided by making the Capitol as terrible as possible, but perhaps that is not a bad thing to do. The story serves as a powerful tool for young people to understand the importance of democracy and tries to push them to always be aware of fascism and its indicators. In the current political climate, when more and more young people turn to far-right politics, I consider what she seems to be trying to accomplish to be commendable and important.

Though her critique of Hobbes' social contract and the presentation of other theories might not be perfect or complex, the text does provide valuable examples of why the theories should not be put into practice. Though some may disagree, they are hypothetical scenarios. There is usually no way to provide empirical evidence to support them. Taking a theory as a fact and using it to validate an entire society is wrong. This is, once again, a useful lesson to teach and one that might stick with the audience.

As an aspiring future teacher of English and social sciences, I cannot resist connecting my findings to education. Teaching political philosophy can often be a daunting task, as it is often very difficult to grasp, and people, especially students, find it boring. For that reason, I welcome every opportunity to make it more interesting. I do believe *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* might be a useful tool for introducing some of the topics mentioned above and it is a book I would recommend to younger students. The plot can make them engaged, whereas the overall message provides a solid theoretical knowledge to build upon. It gives teachers an opportunity to closely connect two subjects and provide students with an example of literature often being tied with politics.

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Prohlášení o použití umělé inteligence / AI usage statement

CZ: Prohlašuji, že při psaní této práce nebylo využito nástrojů umělé inteligence.

ENG: I hereby declare that no artificial intelligence tools have been used during the writing of this thesis.