

5.6. Memory Challenges in James Dashner's and Suzanne Collins's Dystopias

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Abstract

The human brain can register, store, and retrieve almost all the sensory processes of knowledge we experience during our lifetime, enabling us to learn, solve problems, be creative, interact with others and master our identity. This vital faculty is called memory, and we attribute to it whatever we are and do. Good memory performance is not without its challenges. Exposure to traumatic events, alcohol, various drugs and hallucinogenic substances, as well as certain medical interventions can disrupt the natural functioning of memory, leading to the loss of recollections, reality control, and self-awareness. We aim, therefore, to briefly explore these aspects from a theoretical point of view and to support our statements using as case studies the teenage boys and girls depicted by Suzanne Collins and James Dashner in their dystopian series *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner*. The protagonists of these books have their memory altered either by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and tracker jacker venom, or completely erased through an operation. Consequently, they face numerous difficulties in coping with daily issues, recovering their memories, and reconstructing their self-identity. Their psychological struggles, although revealed in a fictional realm, are not far from those experienced by real people when positioned in exceptional situations.

Key words: dystopia, memory, post-traumatic stress disorder, recovery, trauma

Memory is generally defined as the “cognitive process of memorizing (encoding), storing (retaining) and updating our information and experiences in a structured, constructive, even creative way” (Zlate, 2015: 52). Without memory, the consciousness of an individual would be reduced to “a string of bead-like sensations and images, all separate” (James, 2007: 520). They would live in an instant present, having no knowledge of the past or anticipation of the future.

Living outside “the retrospective and the prospective sense of time”, an individual would behave spontaneously, deprived of stability and finality (James, 2007: 606). They would not be troubled by any problems, but would not be able to create anything else either.

People retain information in various ways depending on their psychological structure and the impact of their experiences. There are people who can remember certain things fast and easily, whereas others do it more slowly, with greater difficulty. Likewise, some information may be retained for longer periods, while other data may quickly disintegrate and even disappear completely. Forgetfulness is usually perceived as a negative thing, as it involves the loss of information. In fact, this is a natural phenomenon which makes room for new information. According to Robert N. Kraft, “forgetting allows us to manage our complicated lives—encouraging us to remember what’s important, inspiring us to experience the present more fully, and restoring us after painful events in our lives” (2019). However, when people undergo an experience that causes high levels of emotional arousal and the activation of stress hormones, their memory and implicitly, their identity can be dramatically impaired. In Allan Young’s view, “the traumatic memory becomes a fixed idea rather than an ordinary memory because the individual is unable to assimilate its meaning” (1995: 35). Nowadays, “traumatic memory” is usually referred to as PTSD. People suffering from PTSD are caught in a mental web, which keeps them prisoners of depression and anxiety. They feel betrayed and alone and consider oblivion the ultimate means of survival. They estrange themselves from family and society for fear that their memories may emerge at any time and expose their inner torments. This incapacity and the refusal to relate to others harden their burden. At the same time, amnesia, “the pathological loss of the ability to acquire or recall information”, may have a more traumatic effect than the constant repetition of traumatic memories (Lafleche & Verfaellie, 2004: 130).

The characters in the dystopian series written by Suzanne Collins and James Dashner suffer from PTSD or have their memories altered by various substances and scientific procedures. We explore their condition in order to offer a better understanding of the way in which memory can be disturbed and perhaps restored.

Suzanne Collins’s dystopian series consisting of *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010) is seen by Stephen King as “a violent, jarring, speed-rap of a novel that generates nearly constant suspense” (2008). Placed in a futuristic North America, known as the Republic of Panem, the books reveal a nightmarish society ruled by a totalitarian regime, which submits its citizens to various forms of physical and psychological torture.

Memory plays a major role in these texts. The protagonist, Katniss Everdeen reveals in great detail all the events she witnesses, the people she meets, and

the emotions she experiences. She employs in her narration the first person singular and the present tense, giving the impression that the events take place on the spot. However, time can be open to interpretation, as Katniss might be reliving everything that happened to her.

During the annual Hunger Games (a reality show where kids are forced to hunt and kill each other) and a subsequent civil war, the girl is exposed to numerous terrifying and dangerous events, which menaced her life, bodily integrity, and her loved ones. She experiences intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings about her past, clearly suffering from PTSD. Katniss is haunted by flashbacks and nightmares, and estranges herself from her family and friends, feeling afraid and angry, and losing her self-control. In this sense, Katniss confesses:

Nightmares—which I was no stranger to before the Games—now plague me whenever I sleep. But the old standby, the one of my father being blown to bits in the mines, is rare. Instead I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempt to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer’s bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato’s horrific end with the muttations. These are the most frequent visitors. (Collins, 2009: 54)

Like many other people suffering from PTSD, Katniss tries to escape traumatic memories by indulging in alcohol and drugs. Her friends and family try to help her proposing methods, which include everything from sleeping with her in the same bed to encouraging her to have a hobby. By the end of the series, Katniss continues to struggle with trauma and wonders how to explain her nightmares to her children. Her solution to cope with traumatic memories is to “make a list in [her] head of every act of goodness [she has] seen someone do. It’s like a game. Repetitive” (Collins, 2010: 398).

Her partner, Peeta Mellark, experiences similar symptoms of PTSD. However, unlike Katniss, who tries to bury her bad memories, Peeta chooses to confront them using art. After discovering his paintings, Katniss feels sick and says:

Peeta has painted the Hunger Games. ... The golden horn called the Cornucopia. Clove arranging the knives inside her jacket. One of the mutts, unmistakably the blond, greeneyed one meant to be Glimmer, snarling as it makes its way toward us. And me. I am everywhere. High up in a tree. Beating a shirt against the stones in the stream. Lying unconscious in a pool of blood (Collins, 2009: 53).

Asked about the therapeutic success of his endeavour, Peeta confesses that he is less afraid of going to sleep at night, or at least, this is what he tries to believe. This is Peeta's way of showing that memory can be self-controlled.

During the civil war, Peeta is taken prisoner by the Capitol and administered the tracker jacker venom, which induces terror, hallucinations, and nightmarish visions. Peeta's memories about Katniss, the girl he loves, are distorted on purpose, making him feel threatened by her. As Katniss becomes a sort of modern Joan of Arc, fighting against the Capitol, Peeta is mentally programmed to liquidate her. All this is possible only through memory manipulation. His recovery is long lasting, painful, and difficult. In order to help Peeta, his rescuers have him play a game called "Real or Not Real". Peeta mentions something he thinks happened, and they tell him if this is true or imagined, usually providing a brief explanation. When it comes to general facts known by everyone else as being true or false, Peeta finds it easier to understand and accept reality. See his dialogue with Jackson:

"Most of the people from Twelve were killed in the fire."
 "Real. Less than nine hundred of you made it to Thirteen alive." "The fire was my fault." "Not real. President Snow destroyed Twelve the way he did Thirteen, to send a message to the rebels." (Collins, 2010: 272)

The greatest difficulty emerges, however, when it comes to recovering intimate memories regarding his lover Katniss, or those things that no one else knew, but him:

"You said that same thing to me in the first Hunger Games. Real or not real?" "Real," he says. "And you risked your life getting the medicine that saved me?" "Real." I shrug. "You were the reason I was alive to do it." "Was I?" The comment throws him into confusion. Some shiny memory must be fighting for his attention, because his body tenses and his newly bandaged wrists strain against the metal cuffs. (Collins, 2010: 321)

The end of the series, shows that, despite all the efforts put into Peeta's recovery, his memory is not entirely restored. Just like Katniss who makes lists of good things, he continues to play this game, trying to enforce his connection to reality and ensure his proper conduct. Thus, he sometimes whispers to Katniss, "You love me. Real or not real?" And she answers him back, "Real" (Collins, 2010: 388).

Memory also plays a key role in James Dashner's trilogy consisting of *The Maze Runner* (2009), *The Scorch Trials* (2010), and *The Death Cure* (2011). The series is praised for its "fast-paced, nonstop action" (Deseret News, 2009). In the context of a virulent pandemic that turns people into zombies, a medical organization called WICKED seizes state power and treats people as lab rats. Locked inside a dangerous maze and having their memory erased, the characters begin a personal fight to recover their past and self-identity. The series begins with Thomas, the protagonist, who wakes up, totally confused, knowing nothing about his previous life, not even his real name:

"Where am I?" Thomas asked, surprised at hearing his voice for the first time in his salvageable memory. It didn't sound quite right—higher than he would've imagined ... It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language—it was disorienting (Dashner, 2009: 6).

As he cannot identify the process that induced his oblivion, the boy is tormented by confusion, and finds it extremely challenging to remember his family and other aspects of his past. Although, the other teenagers he meets in the maze, try to help him by sharing the fact that they also experience memory loss and intense feelings of fear, Thomas cannot feel resigned. He wants to find a solution, escape confinement, and rediscover himself as a person.

At the end of the story, the teenagers face a major dilemma. WICKED makes them choose between recovering their full memory after undergoing a new type of brain surgery or preserving the information they started to store from the moment they woke up in the maze. Some of them accept the proposal and recover their memory. They learn about their parents, friends, and lives before the experiment, and reinforce their genuine identity. Thomas, however, refuses to have WICKED restore his previous memory. In the course of the story, the boy discovers that he was part of WICKED and helped scientists develop some of the physical and psychological methods of torture, during which many kids suffer and die. In this case, he confesses, "I remember enough to be ashamed of myself" (Dashner, 2011: 9). Readers are able to learn more about the boy's inner torment from an omniscient narrator:

The thought gave him mixed feelings. He wanted his memory block finally cracked for good — wanted to know who he was, where he came from. But that desire was tempered by fear of what he might find out about himself. About his role in the very things that had brought him to this point, that had done this to his friends. (Dashner, 2010: 127)

Thomas did indeed work for WICKED, but his actions were motivated by the strong belief that he was finding a cure for humanity. In his mind, all sacrifices were meant for a good purpose. After becoming the victim of his own experiments, however, his perspective changes: "But living through this kind of abuse is a lot different than planning it. It's just not right" (Dashner, 2011: 9). Remembering how his friends struggled for their lives, Thomas feels ashamed of who he used to be and refuses to trust WICKED anymore. He fears that the doctors might install the wrong memories inside his brain only to use him again, for evil purposes.

If the erasing of memory based on surgery is dramatic, contracting a virus, which turns its victims into bloodthirsty and irrational monsters is even worse. In Dashner's series, the Post-Flares Coalition releases The Flare (VC321xb47), a lab-created virus which gradually erases people's memory, personality, and all traces of humanity, spreading terror. Thomas's best friend, Newt, experiences the transformation caused by the virus. Having his brain damaged, the boy loses his memories about his friends and acts insane. In a moment of lucidity, he begs his friends to leave him behind, feeling that he would not be able to control himself:

I don't expect you to understand, but I can't be with you guys anymore. It's gonna be hard enough for me now, and it'll make it worse if I know you have to witness it. Or worst of all, if I hurt you. So let's say our bloody goodbyes and then you can promise to remember me from the good old days. (Dashner, 2011: 186)

Sadly, in Newt's case the transformation cannot be stopped and death becomes the best solution.

Taking all into account, we may conclude that each of the dystopian series explored here represents a game of trust or lack of trust in one's own memories and feelings. The protagonists depicted by Suzanne Collins and James Dashner face many moments of doubt and frustration concerning their past experiences, not knowing whether they are real or fake, well preserved, altered, or even erased, naturally stored by their brains, or inserted there by their enemies. The recovery of memory is not at all a guarantee that they can return to their initial psychological state. In most cases, it only reveals an important step in their evolution as individuals.

The way in which these characters are constructed and how they manage their memory issues proves that their authors are good analysts and fine connoisseurs of human psychology. The experiences from the series discussed here may be selected from the pages of two works of fiction, but they can also be met in reality. Memory and its challenges play a vital role in our existence.

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