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A Comparative Study of Human Nature, Societal Collapse & Inherent Violence in the Young Adult Fictions of William Golding, Cormac McCarthy and Suzanne Collins

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of how human nature, societal collapse, and inherent violence are represented in selected young adult and crossover fictions by William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Suzanne Collins. Although separated by historical context, genre, and intended audience, the works examined reveal a shared concern with the fragility of social order and the ease with which violence emerges when institutional control collapses. Golding's depiction of children stranded without authority exposes a bleak vision of innate savagery beneath civilized behavior. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscapes strip society to its barest moral choices, where survival often tests the limits of compassion and ethical responsibility. Collins, writing within the framework of dystopian young adult fiction, presents a mediated and politicized form of violence that critiques spectacle, power, and systemic oppression while still foregrounding adolescent

agency. Through close textual reading and thematic comparison, this paper argues that all three authors portray violence not as an anomaly but as a latent human capacity activated by fear, scarcity, and social breakdown. However, their narratives diverge in moral outlook. Golding suggests an almost inescapable darkness at the core of humanity, McCarthy balances despair with moments of fragile moral hope, and Collins allows for resistance and reform through collective action and empathy. By placing these texts in dialogue, the study highlights how young adult fiction and related forms function as a critical space for examining ethical formation, power structures, and the conditions under which societies fail or endure. The comparison underscores the genre's capacity to confront unsettling truths about human behavior while remaining accessible to younger readers.

Key Words

Human Nature, Societal Collapse, Violence, Dystopian Fiction, Young Adult Literature, Moral Ethics.

Introduction

Young adult and crossover fiction has increasingly become a powerful space for exploring complex questions about human nature, violence, and the collapse of social order. Far from being simplistic or morally

reassuring, many works written for or accessible to younger audiences confront readers with unsettling portrayals of survival, ethical breakdown, and the limits of civilization. This study examines how such concerns are articulated in the works of **William Golding**, **Cormac McCarthy**, and **Suzanne Collins**, whose narratives, despite differences in context and form, interrogate the fragile boundary between order and chaos.

The relevance of these themes is rooted in the historical and cultural anxieties that shaped each text. Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), written in the aftermath of World War II, reflects deep skepticism about the belief that civilization naturally restrains human brutality. McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) emerges from late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fears surrounding environmental collapse and moral exhaustion, presenting a world where survival itself threatens ethical meaning. Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), written in the context of global media culture and political inequality, reframes violence as spectacle and control, particularly as experienced by the young (Golding, 1954; McCarthy, 2006; Collins, 2008).

Studying these texts together is significant because they place children and adolescents at the center of social collapse. Youth, traditionally associated with innocence and moral possibility, become both victims and agents of violence. This narrative choice forces readers to confront whether brutality is learned through social systems or emerges when those systems disintegrate. While Golding suggests that violence is an inherent aspect of human nature once authority disappears, McCarthy presents violence as a tragic but often reluctant response to extreme scarcity. Collins, by contrast, emphasizes structural violence, arguing that cruelty is sustained and normalized by political power rather than innate savagery.

The primary objective of this paper is to comparatively analyze how these authors represent human nature under conditions of collapse and how violence functions within their imagined worlds. The central questions guiding the study are: Is violence portrayed as an inescapable human instinct or as a product of circumstance? How does the absence or corruption of social institutions affect moral behavior? And what role does youth play in either accelerating or resisting societal breakdown? This comparative approach aims to demonstrate that young adult and crossover fiction offers a serious and nuanced examination of humanity's darkest impulses while still engaging questions of responsibility, choice, and moral endurance.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of human nature and violence in literature have long centered on the tension between innate instinct and social conditioning. Philosophical debates rooted in thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau continue to inform literary criticism, particularly in narratives that depict social collapse. Within this critical tradition, the works of William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Suzanne Collins have attracted sustained academic attention for their stark portrayals of violence and moral breakdown.

Critical responses to Golding's *Lord of the Flies* often emphasize its pessimistic view of human nature. Scholars such as James Baker argue that the novel rejects the idea that evil is socially imposed, instead portraying savagery as an inherent human trait revealed when civil structures disappear (Baker, 1965). Other critics focus on Golding's symbolic framework, suggesting that the island functions as a microcosm of the modern world, where democracy, reason, and morality collapse under fear and desire for power (Kinkead-Weekes & Gregor, 2002). The novel is frequently read as a postwar critique of Enlightenment optimism and human rationality.

McCarthy's *The Road* has generated extensive debate around morality in post-apocalyptic fiction. Critics note that while the novel depicts extreme violence, cannibalism, and social decay, it simultaneously preserves a fragile ethical core through the relationship between father and son. According to Hillier (2011), McCarthy resists total moral nihilism by framing compassion as an act of resistance rather than a natural instinct. Unlike Golding, McCarthy is often interpreted as suggesting that morality can survive collapse, though only through deliberate and painful choice. Violence, in this context, is tragic and defensive rather than celebratory.

Studies of Collins's *The Hunger Games* largely situate the trilogy within dystopian young adult literature and political critique. Scholars such as Pharr (2012) argue that the series exposes how authoritarian systems manufacture violence as entertainment to maintain control. Unlike Golding and McCarthy, Collins shifts the focus from individual moral failure to institutionalized cruelty, emphasizing surveillance, media manipulation, and class oppression. Critics also highlight the role of adolescent resistance, noting that Katniss's moral conflicts complicate simplistic notions of heroism and agency.

Despite extensive scholarship on each author individually, comparative studies that place these texts in direct dialogue remain limited. Existing research rarely examines how differing genre conventions and target audiences shape representations of violence and human nature. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing critical perspectives across these works, demonstrating how young adult and crossover fiction collectively interrogate the conditions under which humanity fractures or endures.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that address human nature, violence, and the breakdown of social systems. Central to the analysis is the long-standing debate between innate human savagery and socially conditioned behavior. Political and moral philosophy, particularly the contrasting views of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, provide a useful foundation. Hobbes's assertion that human life in the absence of authority becomes "nasty, brutish, and short" informs readings of unchecked violence, while Rousseau's belief in innate human goodness disrupted by society complicates interpretations of moral decay. These opposing frameworks help contextualize how violence emerges in fictional worlds marked by collapse.

In literary studies, dystopian and post-apocalyptic theories further shape this framework. Dystopian fiction is often understood as a critique of existing social and political systems, projecting contemporary anxieties into imagined futures (Moylan, 2000). Post-apocalyptic narratives, meanwhile, focus on survival after systemic failure, emphasizing ethical decision-making when laws, institutions, and communal norms no longer function (Berger, 1999). Both genres foreground crisis as a testing ground for morality, making them particularly suited to examining human behavior under extreme conditions.

Violence, within this framework, is treated not merely as physical aggression but as a social and ethical phenomenon. Slavoj Žižek's distinction between subjective violence (visible acts of brutality) and systemic violence (embedded in political and economic structures) is especially relevant. This distinction allows for an analysis of how overt acts of cruelty coexist with less visible forms of oppression and control (Žižek, 2008). Such an approach is crucial when comparing texts that depict spontaneous savagery alongside institutionalized violence.

The role of youth is another key theoretical concern. Childhood and adolescence are often culturally associated with innocence, moral flexibility, and potential. Literary critics argue that placing young protagonists in violent settings destabilizes these assumptions, forcing readers to question whether morality is learned, inherent, or situational (Trites, 2000). In narratives of collapse, young characters frequently function as moral barometers, reflecting both the failures of adult society and the possibility of renewal.

By applying these theoretical perspectives, the study examines how William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Suzanne Collins conceptualize violence and human nature differently. Golding's work aligns closely with Hobbesian pessimism, McCarthy's fiction balances existential despair with ethical endurance, and Collins's narrative reflects critiques of systemic and political violence. Together, these frameworks enable a comparative reading that moves beyond plot-level brutality to interrogate the deeper moral and philosophical questions embedded in young adult and crossover fiction.

Analysis of Selected Texts

William Golding: Inherent Savagery and the Collapse of Order

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* presents one of the most influential literary explorations of human nature under conditions of social collapse. By isolating a group of schoolboys on an uninhabited island without adult supervision, Golding constructs a controlled social experiment that strips civilization to its surface rituals. The gradual descent of the boys into violence and chaos forms the core of Golding's argument: that the impulse toward savagery is inherent in human beings and merely restrained, not erased, by social institutions.

From the outset, the boys attempt to replicate the structures of the civilized world. The conch shell symbolizes democratic order, reasoned speech, and collective agreement. However, as fear intensifies and survival becomes uncertain, these symbolic structures lose authority. The erosion of rules is not caused by external forces but by the boys' internal desires for power, dominance, and release from moral restraint. Golding suggests that civilization is fragile precisely because it depends on voluntary moral discipline rather than innate goodness (Golding, 1954).

Violence in the novel evolves from play to brutality. Early hunting scenes, initially framed as games, gradually take on ritualistic and sadistic qualities. The killing of Simon marks a crucial turning point, revealing how fear and group mentality override individual conscience. Critics such as James Baker interpret this moment as evidence that evil operates collectively, emerging when personal responsibility dissolves within the crowd (Baker, 1965). The boys' actions are not driven by necessity alone but by a growing pleasure in violence, which reinforces Golding's pessimistic view of human nature.

Jack's rise to power further illustrates how authority shifts from reason to force. His leadership is sustained through fear, punishment, and spectacle, anticipating later dystopian depictions of authoritarian control. Ralph, who represents order and moral responsibility, becomes increasingly powerless, suggesting that ethical leadership struggles to survive in the absence of institutional enforcement. Golding thus rejects the idea that moral behavior is instinctive, portraying it instead as a learned discipline that collapses when social pressure fades.

Scholars often link Golding's vision to the moral disillusionment following World War II. The novel reflects a loss of faith in progress and rationalism, arguing that modern atrocities are not historical anomalies but expressions of a deeper human flaw (Kinkead-Weekes & Gregor, 2002). In this sense, *Lord of the Flies* serves as a foundational text for later dystopian and young adult narratives, establishing a bleak framework in which societal collapse reveals, rather than creates, human violence.

Cormac McCarthy: Moral Survival in a Violent World

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* offers a stark meditation on violence and human nature in the aftermath of complete societal collapse. Unlike William Golding's enclosed social experiment, McCarthy presents a world where civilization has already failed beyond repair. Law, community, and history have disappeared, leaving only isolated individuals struggling to survive. In this setting, violence is not simply a manifestation of innate savagery but a grim, often unavoidable response to scarcity, fear, and the absence of social trust.

The novel's landscape is defined by constant threat. Cannibalism, murder, and exploitation dominate encounters between survivors, reinforcing the sense that ethical norms have been erased along with institutions. Yet McCarthy complicates this bleak vision through the relationship between the father and the son. Their repeated insistence that they are "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire" introduces a fragile moral framework that resists total nihilism (McCarthy, 2006). Violence, when enacted by the father, is typically defensive rather than predatory, framed as a tragic necessity rather than a source of pleasure or power.

Scholars have noted that *The Road* presents morality as an active choice rather than an innate condition. Hillier (2011) argues that McCarthy portrays ethical behavior as a form of resistance, maintained through

conscious effort despite overwhelming evidence of human cruelty. This perspective contrasts sharply with Golding's vision of inherent savagery. In McCarthy's world, the problem is not that humans naturally seek violence, but that extreme conditions erode the structures that support moral restraint. Compassion survives only in private, intimate relationships, not in society at large.

The child in *The Road* plays a crucial ethical role. The son consistently questions his father's violent instincts, showing empathy toward strangers and refusing to accept cruelty as inevitable. His moral clarity suggests the possibility of ethical renewal, even if it cannot yet reshape the world. Critics often interpret the child as a symbolic bearer of hope, representing the endurance of human values beyond social collapse (Cant, 2008).

Stylistically, McCarthy's sparse prose mirrors the stripped-down moral landscape of the novel. The absence of quotation marks and conventional punctuation reinforces the breakdown of order while emphasizing the emotional weight of ethical decisions. Violence, when it occurs, is abrupt and unsettling, denying readers any sense of catharsis.

Ultimately, *The Road* presents a vision of human nature that is neither wholly pessimistic nor reassuring. While acknowledging humanity's capacity for extreme brutality, McCarthy insists that moral responsibility can persist even in a ruined world. Violence, in this framework, is not inherent but situational, challenging readers to consider what it truly means to remain human when society itself no longer exists.

Suzanne Collins: Institutionalized Violence and Youth Resistance

Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* presents a distinct but equally unsettling vision of violence and societal collapse, one shaped not by the absence of authority but by its excess. Unlike the worlds of Golding and McCarthy, Panem is governed by a highly structured political system in which violence is deliberately organized, televised, and normalized. Collins shifts the focus from individual savagery to institutionalized cruelty, exposing how power structures manufacture violence to maintain control over the population.

At the center of the narrative is the annual Hunger Games, a state-sponsored spectacle that forces children to fight to the death for public entertainment. This ritualized violence serves multiple functions: it punishes rebellion, reinforces class hierarchy, and conditions citizens to accept brutality as inevitable. Scholars argue that Collins critiques contemporary media culture by showing how suffering becomes consumable when framed as spectacle (Pharr, 2012). Unlike spontaneous violence born of fear or survival, the violence in Panem is calculated, aestheticized, and politically motivated.

Katniss Everdeen's role complicates traditional representations of heroism and agency in young adult fiction. While she is skilled in violence, her actions are largely reactive, shaped by the need to protect herself and others within an oppressive system. Collins consistently emphasizes Katniss's moral discomfort, particularly her resistance to killing for sport. This hesitation underscores the novel's central claim: violence is not innate but learned and enforced by social structures. The Capitol's manipulation of rules, images, and narratives ensures that ethical choice is constrained, if not outright denied.

Youth, in Collins's work, becomes a site of both vulnerability and resistance. The use of children as instruments of state violence highlights the moral bankruptcy of the ruling regime, while also positioning adolescents as potential catalysts for change. Critics note that Katniss's refusal to fully perform the role assigned to her destabilizes the system itself, transforming personal survival into political defiance (Trites, 2000). Her symbolic power lies not in physical dominance but in empathy, solidarity, and the exposure of injustice.

Violence in *The Hunger Games* thus operates on two levels: the physical harm inflicted within the arena and the systemic violence embedded in poverty, surveillance, and coercion. Collins's narrative suggests that societal collapse does not always manifest as chaos; it can also appear as rigid order sustained through

fear. This perspective stands in contrast to Golding's emphasis on innate savagery and McCarthy's focus on moral endurance after collapse. Instead, Collins argues that cruelty is most dangerous when it is normalized, bureaucratized, and presented as entertainment.

Through this framework, *The Hunger Games* expands the discourse on human nature in young adult fiction, asserting that ethical resistance remains possible even within violently controlled societies, particularly when youth challenge the systems that seek to exploit them.

Comparative Discussion

A comparative reading of the works of William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Suzanne Collins reveals both shared concerns and significant ideological differences in their portrayals of human nature, societal collapse, and violence. All three authors depict environments in which established social systems fail or become corrupted, yet the causes and consequences of violence vary according to narrative context, genre, and moral outlook.

A key similarity across the texts is the exposure of social order as fragile. In *Lord of the Flies*, the collapse occurs rapidly once institutional authority is removed, suggesting that civilization is sustained by thin, external restraints. *The Road* depicts a world where collapse is already complete, leaving individuals to navigate a moral vacuum. In *The Hunger Games*, by contrast, society has not disintegrated but has reorganized itself around systematic oppression. Despite these differences, each text demonstrates that when ethical norms are no longer collectively enforced, violence becomes a dominant mode of interaction.

The authors diverge sharply in their interpretations of why violence emerges. Golding presents violence as an inherent human impulse, arguing that savagery surfaces naturally when rules disappear. McCarthy offers a more conditional view, portraying violence as a tragic response to extreme scarcity rather than a fundamental instinct. Collins shifts responsibility away from individual nature altogether, emphasizing structural and political forces that normalize cruelty. These distinctions reflect broader philosophical positions on human behavior, ranging from pessimistic determinism to cautious moral humanism.

Youth plays a crucial role in shaping these narratives. In Golding's novel, children replicate the worst tendencies of adult society, reinforcing the idea that innocence is an illusion. McCarthy's child figure functions as a moral counterweight, suggesting the possibility of ethical continuity even after collapse. Collins positions youth as both victims and challengers of violent systems, highlighting adolescent agency as a force for resistance. These varying representations underscore how young adult and crossover fiction use youth perspectives to question moral responsibility.

Genre and audience further influence the portrayal of violence. Golding and McCarthy offer bleak, unresolved conclusions, while Collins, writing for a young adult readership, allows space for collective action and reform. Together, these texts demonstrate that while violence may be pervasive in conditions of collapse, its meaning and moral implications remain deeply contested.

Conclusion

This comparative study has examined how human nature, societal collapse, and violence are represented in the selected works of William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Suzanne Collins. Although these texts differ in genre, historical context, and intended audience, they collectively expose the instability of moral and social systems when subjected to fear, scarcity, and power imbalance. Each narrative challenges the assumption that civilization naturally safeguards ethical behavior, instead presenting violence as a recurring response to crisis.

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* offers the most pessimistic vision, asserting that violence is an inherent aspect of human nature that emerges once social constraints dissolve. McCarthy's *The Road* complicates this view by depicting violence as situational and morally burdensome, emphasizing that ethical responsibility can survive even in a devastated world. Collins's *The Hunger Games* shifts the focus toward institutional and

systemic violence, arguing that cruelty is often produced and sustained by political structures rather than individual instinct. Together, these perspectives illustrate that violence cannot be understood through a single moral framework but must be examined in relation to social conditions and power dynamics.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its focus on youth-centered narratives. By placing children and adolescents at the forefront of collapse, these authors force readers to confront uncomfortable questions about innocence, responsibility, and moral formation. Youth in these texts are not passive victims but active participants whose choices either accelerate destruction or preserve ethical values. This emphasis underscores the capacity of young adult and crossover fiction to engage with serious philosophical and social issues.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that narratives of collapse function as moral testing grounds. They reveal both humanity's capacity for brutality and its potential for empathy, resistance, and renewal. By reading these works together, the paper highlights how young adult fiction serves not only as entertainment but as a critical space for examining the conditions under which societies fail and the fragile possibilities through which they may endure.

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