"I Can't Think About Kissing": Strong Female Protagonists and Romance in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract
Though science fiction is dominated by males, strong female protagonists in this genre have become very popular. Current dystopian young adult literature starring girls incorporates romance, blending a traditionally masculine genre with a typically feminine genre. The heroines in dystopian young adult novels are empowered by their own femininity and are able to bring about societal change, taking power not generally given to young females in patriarchal societies. Romance, an often ridiculed genre, has recently been incorporated into science fiction narratives in order to create more authentic characters who deal with both societal problems and personal relationships. Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series will be used as an example of how science fiction and romance can be combined in young adult literature and how this combination is empowering and positive for a strong female protagonist like Katniss Everdeen.

Degree Type
Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department
English Language and Literature

First Advisor
Annette Wannamaker

Keywords
Science Fiction, Love, Empowerment, catching fire, mocking jay, adolescent

Subject Categories
English Language and Literature

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“I CAN’T THINK ABOUT KISSING”:
STRONG FEMALE PROTAGONISTS AND ROMANCE IN DYSTOPIAN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

By

Mollie Hall

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
Honors College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
with Honors in Children’s Literature, Department of English Language and Literature

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on December 1, 2012
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Abstract

Though science fiction is dominated by males, strong female protagonists in this genre have become very popular. Current dystopian young adult literature starring girls incorporates romance, blending a traditionally masculine genre with a typically feminine genre. The heroines in dystopian young adult novels are empowered by their own femininity and are able to bring about societal change, taking power not generally given to young females in patriarchal societies. Romance, an often ridiculed genre, has recently been incorporated into science fiction narratives in order to create more authentic characters who deal with both societal problems and personal relationships. Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* series will be used as an example of how science fiction and romance can be combined in young adult literature and how this combination is empowering and positive for a strong female protagonist like Katniss Everdeen.
Introduction

The use of romance – often the most feminine-leaning genre of literature – is relatively new in Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction, a genre that typically skews masculine. Dystopian literature has surged in popularity in the last several years, especially in the teen market. Young adult authors including Paolo Bacigalupi and Maggie Stiefvater as well as some children’s literature scholars take part in a discussion on “The Dark Side of Young Adult Fiction” on Room for Debate, published online by the New York Times (online). Though all of the individuals involved in the discussion cite slightly different reasons for why dark literature is popular, they all acknowledge that dystopian literature and other potentially violent or emotionally intense novels are being read by large numbers of teenagers and adults (online). For some reason, we like experiencing a time in the future where many things have gone wrong. One aspect of the new dystopian fiction that readers may connect with is the emergence of unlikely heroic protagonists: girls. As a subset of the science fiction genre, dystopian novels such as 1984, Brave New World, and The Giver have generally had males at the lead. Some books still do, but the most popular works of dystopian fiction as of late star young women. The girl protagonists in YA dystopian fiction act in ways dramatically affect their societies, shaking up the government-imposed structures and working to put a new system into place that fixes the downfalls of the previous administration. These activist girls may strike a chord with readers because today’s youth, especially girls, have little power in a system that holds a bias toward adults, especially adult males. The depictions of the future that are being so widely read are ones that show that anyone can have the power to change the world.
As YA dystopian literature seems to depict more female protagonists, there seems to be a rise in romance in the genre as well. The girls in these books can be strong and tough, but they can also fall in love. They have many characteristics that are considered to be feminine and therefore weak; however, the traits that society often looks down upon become their greatest assets. The new stars in YA dystopian literature worry more about fixing their broken worlds than about fitting into certain gender norms. Romance is pursued, but it is a side pursuit in the female protagonist’s journey instead of the goal.

This combination of the romance and science fiction genres creates a tension due to their seemingly opposing natures. Traditionally, these genres are geared toward different audiences, with the main distinction being gender. Love stories are usually written and read by women and dystopian sci-fi novels are often written and read by men. Focus is another point of contrast: science fiction is seen as centering on societal problems, whereas romance often centers on interpersonal relationships. They also have differing reputations: while both genres are both discounted by some individuals, science fiction gets some credit for being intelligent for its speculations on the future whereas romance is seen as simplistic fluff. In a patriarchal society, a male-dominated genre is valued over a female-dominated genre. As separate as dystopian literature and romance may seem, authors still find ways to entwine them. While some of the hybrid novels combine the genres more successfully than others, all are creative in the ways in which the genres are brought together. One of the potential goals of using romance in dystopian fiction may be to create more authentic characters, so that, instead of thinking about only problems or only relationships, the characters must learn to balance both, as is done by most people in real life.
This paper will start with a definition of the "strong female protagonist," which is central to the argument that the teenage girls in this newer literature are different from their predecessors both in books featuring females and in the traditionally male Bildungsroman or development novel. Scholarship on science fiction and romance will be used in order to try to place female-led YA dystopian fiction in between two seemingly conflicting genres. Girls' reading preferences are important to consider due to the fact that they may help explain the emergence or popularity of literature with females in non-traditional roles. Examples from several YA science fiction novels with romantic elements will be included as evidence of the trends emerging in this new group of novels. Lastly, one of the best-known and best-selling series in the dystopian YA group, The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne, will be used to demonstrate how romance and femininity are ultimately empowering and positive for strong female protagonists working to change their dystopian worlds.
The Strong Female Protagonist

Through her development over the course of a novel or series, a strong female protagonist embraces her attributes, even the traditionally “weak” feminine ones, and uses her voice to change the world for herself and others. She is empowered by her own actions and finds success without emulating masculine power. The following review of scholarship on empowerment and feminism in children’s literature and on the structures of the traditionally male-dominated Bildungsroman and hero’s journey will serve to illustrate how the strong female protagonists in current literature differ from the characters – boys and girls – that came before them.

Empowerment is central to the concept of the strong heroine. Realizing one’s own agency is important for all people, but it is especially crucial for women because they need to stand up for themselves in patriarchal societies. Not all men are powerful, but they all have an advantage in their attempts at success because they are favored by most institutions. In their book Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001, Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair admit that all main characters in YA literature are empowered in some way through their maturation (26). Therefore, female empowerment needs to help girls “find strength by valuing positive feminine characteristics instead of striving to be as competitive, assertive, and powerful as boys, even though societal norms tend to endorse those latter qualities” (27). Strong female protagonists act in such a way that a link is forged between strength and femininity, taking some of the power away from patriarchal ideals. Girls also need to win power for themselves; according to Brown and St. Clair, “empowerment is not synonymous with entitlement, so meaningful empowerment should result from
purposeful action rather than innate talent or coincidental circumstances” (27). Handing power or responsibility to women in an attempt to raise their status is no different than handing the same things to men in a patriarchy. Power should be earned by the individuals who want it most, regardless of their gender.

Feminism, particularly the second wave, has led to the increased empowerment of females not only in real life but in fiction as well. Feminism in children’s and YA literature teaches young people to support equality between the sexes. Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses feminist children’s literature in her book *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novel*. She refers to feminist children’s literature, but by this she means children’s literature as an entire grouping, including texts for young adults. Trites defines a feminist children’s novel as “a novel in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender. A key concept here is ‘regardless’: in a feminist children’s novel, the child’s sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her development” (4). Instead of boxing a character in, gender in feminist tales can be embraced for its positive aspects. Heroines are able to resist the expectations that are placed upon them due to their gender and use their unique qualities to help them overcome the structures that confine them (6-7).

Strong female protagonists rebel against patriarchy in the culture in which they are created. Authors create characters that are already undermining gender norms and then depict them fighting against other unfair systems. Such defiance features prominently in dystopian literature, where governments go to extremes to impose their wills upon citizens. Strong girls may be filtering into dystopian literature because such characters may find new ways to subvert the power structures in the novels. Feminist
characters in fiction find their own power, but the power mentioned is very different from that which is used to oppress them. According to Trites:

Feminist power is more about being aware of one’s agency than it is about controlling other people.... When I describe feminist protagonists as empowered, I mean that within the text they are able to do what they want to do, what they need to do. I most emphatically do not mean that by having power, the feminist protagonist enacts the age-old paradigms of power that have shaped too many societies. I use the term ‘power,’ then, to refer to positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness.

(8)

It is important to remember that seemingly empowered female characters using power in an oppressive way are just negative as the male characters that have oppressed them in the past. Girls need to embrace positive traits that have traditionally been associated with femininity, like cooperation and nurturing, and stand up for themselves in order to truly be empowered. The only way to subvert the idea of female weakness is to show that females can be strong and female at the same time.

Strong female protagonists subvert the traditionally male Bildungsroman with which readers may be familiar. The Bildungsroman is a type of development novel, but it has a very specific definition. Trites tackles the idea of the Bildungsroman in her book Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature. She defines them as “novels in which the protagonist comes of age as an adult” (10). They focus on the development of the individual, showing how “the hero self-consciously sets out on a quest to achieve independence” (11). The use of the word “hero” in the definition implies
the young male focus of the genre. In the introduction to the essay collection *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland argue that this type of character development contains a deep-rooted male bias. They notice that “critics have assumed that society constrains men and women equally. In fact, while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever” (7). Women in patriarchal societies have varying degrees of freedom to pursue their chosen careers or lifestyles, but men still have a greater array of options available due to their maleness. The *Bildungsroman* is set up to show the ways men can climb in society. Annis Pratt discusses what happens when female characters are inserted into the traditional *Bildungsroman* form, stating that “[the protagonist] is radically alienated by gender-role norms from the very outset….The woman’s initiation [is] less a self-determined progression towards maturity than a regression from full participation in adult life” (qtd. in Trites 12, emphasis in original). Women cannot fit exactly into male’s roles because they face different pressures in society than men do. Women’s development needs to be empowering and it needs to assign a value to feminine traits and feminine ways of maturing that are so often looked down upon by society.

Like the *Bildungsroman*, the typical hero’s journey narrative needs to be changed if it is going to be able to include females in meaningful ways. In *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature*, Margery Hourihan addresses the outdated and sexist model of the hero. One inescapable aspect of the hero myth is that women cannot be heroes. Any females who try to take on the role are “little more than honorary men who undertake male enterprises in a male context and display ‘male’
qualities: courage, single-minded devotion to a goal, stoicism, self-confidence, certitude, extroversion, aggression” (Hourihan 68). This definition of “hero” is very narrow, only allowing toughness and physical strength to have any value. Bringing women into the hero myth as protagonists is a step in the right direction, but, Hourihan argues, they cannot just copy their male predecessors:

The inference readers are likely to draw from such a story is that, if they wish their lives and deeds to be worthy of notice, women must strive to behave as much like men as possible. Nor do such stories pose any challenge to the heroic definition of ideal manhood, for the women display the same courage, prowess, and rationalism, and rigid sense of purpose. (206)

Depicting female heroes in the same way as men, with no changes in the traits they seem to value, perpetuates the idea that only masculine traits can have worth and that only men can have power. In order to really subvert the hero myth and male dominance, feminine traits need to be portrayed in hero stories; they should be used positively, and they need to be used by men as well as by women.

Strong female protagonists in current YA literature empower themselves and value all of their traits, whether they are traditionally considered to be masculine or feminine. They take what is traditionally seen as “unheroic” and instill it with value. Heroines seem to carry a heavy load, at least in the overall picture of literature and culture, because they stand for the subversions of whole genres and an inclusivity that has long been absent in those genres. This inclusion of females in heroic narratives will enrich not only those narratives but also society as a whole by allowing the reader to
recognize the potential inside everyone. Each person, regardless of gender or any other factors, can hold the power to change the world if he or she realizes the power of finding and raising his or her own voice.
Science Fiction: How Girls Fit in

Science fiction, referred to as “sf” in some scholarship, contains many subgenres. Dystopian fiction seems to be the most popular of these subgenres at this moment in literature, and especially in movies. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a dystopia is “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible” (“Dystopia, N” online); it is the opposite of a utopia, or “a place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions” (“Utopia, N” online). Those statements are relatively vague, and understandably so, since authors and other creative types present many different versions of dystopian societies. The *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* has a more specific entry on the topic:

Dystopian images are almost invariably images of future society, pointing fearfully at the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction....Although these works are emotional reactions against ideas which seem various, the basic fears which they express are very similar. The emphasis may differ, but the central features of dystopia are ever present: the oppression of the majority by a ruling elite (which varies only in the manner of its characterization, not in its actions), and the regimentation of society as a whole (which varies only in its declared ends, not in its actual processes). (“Dystopias” online)

This definition of dystopia still allows room for the many ways they are portrayed in literature and popular culture, while it focuses on the unifying themes across the different versions. Government control and the fear that stems from this control are in most if not
all dystopian texts. The ways in which societies fall apart correspond with what each author views to be the downfall of contemporary life, whether it is an environmental or technological cause or whether humans have destroyed their world through combat. The protagonist in dystopian literature responds to what is wrong with his or her society and tries to fight against it.

Dystopian literature and science fiction in general have always been biased toward men in both characters and audience. This probably originates from the prevalence of men in the sciences and political arenas, with women only being able to take part relatively recently. Farah Mendlesohn includes several discussions on the role of girls in science fiction in her book *The Inter-galactic Playground: A Critical Study of Children’s and Teens’ Science Fiction*. She notes that most science fiction seems to be written for boys in part because “Reading Girls seem to be willing to read anything proposed to them” (Mendlesohn 37, emphasis in original). A common conclusion of gender-based research in the field of children’s and young adult literature is that girls will read about boys and girls, but boys will only read about boys, so texts are often geared toward boys to appeal to the largest audience. Holly Virginia Blackford acknowledges the persisting privilege men and boys receive in literature and education despite the fact there have been more female authors and characters in the last several decades (4). Blackford chose to study girls because of the lack of focus girls receive, and the results are published in her book *Out of This World: Why Literature Matters to Girls*. Blackford expected to find that the girls she interviewed would favor texts that feature females or characters like themselves, but she was surprised by the outcomes, which “go against the grain of thirty years, or more, of teacher wisdom: the belief that readers are engaged by
stories with characters and social worlds that they can relate to themselves and their own experiences” (6). Instead, “the girls wish to read or see fiction in order to experience something radically different from their everyday lives” (6). Young women try to read about people unlike themselves, so that likely explains why they will read about boys. The effort to read for difference does not exclude them from reading about other girls, since factors like race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, and more factors can differentiate people within a biological sex. The reading habits of girls can help to explain why the strong girls of dystopian YA literature are resonating with readers: they live in worlds usually much worse than present society and they have power that is not given to girls in current patriarchies.

Male readers have made up the assumed audience of science fiction, and so male characters have dominated not only in number, but also by taking the best or most heroic roles. Girls have generally been pushed to the sidelines. Mendlesohn compares the newer girls in children’s and YA science fiction to the older versions; she finds that “girls in sf in the 1950s were either distant figures of admiration, distractions to ‘sensible’ boys...or good chums distinguishable from the boys mostly by their willingness to take direction or their mild passivity” (114). Female characters in early science fiction fit into what are now outdated gender roles of being subservient to males. They were often only boyish enough to squeeze them into the literature. Oppositely, some girls in science fiction have been portrayed to an extreme where “the ‘girlness’ that is being promoted is often so super-feminine as to render the sf content mere window dressing” (117). Authors also tend to think that girl characters should favor emotions over intellect (118). A complete absence of women would have raised some eyebrows, even fifty or sixty years ago, but
including token females made things okay until the rise of second-wave feminism. A genre that uses intellect and scientific fact to ground speculations of the future should be able to move past largely unflattering and untrue stereotypes of females and depict them in a realistic manner.

Mendlesohn and other scholars have noticed a change recently where girls are beginning to take center stage in science fiction:

As Mike Levy has argued ("Sci Fi as Bildungsroman"), there are a number of narratives in which female protagonists revolt either against future patriarchies, or against the narrow conditions of society as a whole.

As a result, ‘modern’ children’s and teen sf does quite well by girls. Where girls appear as the protagonists they seem to have as much liberty as the context of the story allows. (15)

A change is taking place allowing girls to fill more varied roles in science fiction. In the essay cited by Mendlesohn, Levy cites a few examples. One, the Morrow series by H.M. Hoover, follows a preteen girl and boy, Tia and Rabbit, as they try to leave their post-apocalyptic society for a more advanced one and the possibilities they have there (Levy 106-107). According to Levy, the series fits the Bildungsroman pattern, and "if Hoover has in fact made any concession to what might be expected of a traditional female protagonists, it lies in her decision to give Tia a quasi-maternal role by pairing her with a younger, seemingly helpless, male character, Rabbit" (107). It might not be the ideal example because it follows a masculine development pattern, but it does offer some opportunities to incorporate Tia’s feminine qualities and therefore differentiate her somewhat from the boys both in that series and in science fiction in general.
Girls emerging in contemporary science fiction are not female characters in male roles, nor are they clichéd, overly feminine beings. The young women in current YA dystopian fiction often take on roles that were traditionally meant for young men, but they infuse some femininity into their roles in order to become empowered. Females in science fiction should have the same nearly unlimited possibilities that males have had throughout the history of the genre, and the current wave of strong heroines have shown readers that there are multiple ways to be a young woman and to hold power, even in a male-dominated genre such as science fiction.
**Romance: Conventions and Feminism**

Unlike in science fiction, female characters have typically been the primary focus of romance novels. As a genre, romance tends to have a bad reputation with non-romance readers. It is described as a “women’s” genre, and like most other female-oriented things in patriarchal society, it is seen as weak. Some individuals go so far as to say that it is anti-feminist. Though the genre may have its detractors, it has many loyal readers from teens to adults. Romance is even starting to make its way into other genres, like the dystopian YA fiction at the center of this paper. The crossover of love stories into other literatures will be explored in the next section, but the conventions of romance need to be outlined before considering how they work outside of the genre. This section will explore the patterns of romance novels, the reasons women read them, the reactions of girls to the romance genre, and the possibility of feminism in the genre.

A large portion of this section is based upon Janice A. Radway’s book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Radway takes romance and its readers seriously, unlike a large portion of society. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, she surveyed women from the Midwestern town of Smithton (name changed for the study) who all used the same bookstore and read romance novels (Radway 46). A woman named Dot, who worked in the bookstore and tended to recommend books to the other women, was the center of the group (47). Radway used the forty-two completed questionnaires she received as the basis of her analysis of romance literature (48). The patterns in the book are found in most love stories, though the ideals described are from the Smithton women (119). Radway’s study is a good resource
because it goes into detail on many of the conventions of romance and gives actual reader reactions, something often missing in scholarly reviews of literature.

Most romance novels feature a similar story arc: they tend to focus on the heroine and her development as a romantic/sexual being. Certain characteristics are applied to nearly all heroines, as Radway notes in her study. She finds that all protagonists commence by rebelling against their femininity, either possessing more masculine than feminine traits or participating in typically male-oriented activities. Most of the supplied examples have to do with the character's occupation, ranging from an anthropologist in a novel by Elizabeth Peters to a pianist in Florence Stevenson's *Moonlight Variations* (124). The females do not have traditional roles such as secretaries or teachers. Radway explains the reason for this defiance of gender norms:

> Although it is tempting to interpret this distaste for women as evidence of female masochism and of a desire to see feminist tendencies succumb to the power of love, it can be explained more fully by connecting it with the heroine’s and the reader’s impulse toward individuation and autonomy, a step that must be taken, at least within patriarchy, against the mother, that is, against women. (124, emphasis in original)

The woman in the romance novel has to be an individual, separate from her family and others, before she can be the object of a man’s affection. Whether or not her relationship at the end of the novel with her love interest allows her to remain an individual will be discussed later. Another common trope in romance is that the heroine is inexperienced. She tends to be "characterized by childlike innocence and inexperience. Most of the heroines, in fact, are seventeen to twenty [years old]" (126). Even in adult romance
novels, the protagonist is an adolescent female. Radway notes that Tessa in *The Proud Breed*, written by Celeste De Blasis, is sixteen years old (125). While she does not mention their ages, she also cites Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* and Elisabeth Barr’s *The Sea Treasure* as having particularly naïve protagonists (126). This could be because a young person has more options open to them than an older person, having not yet established herself in a career or in a position as a wife. Besides her lack of life experience, the heroine of the typical romance novel is sexually naïve. She perceives herself differently than the people around her see her, being “considered by everyone else, including the hero, to be an extraordinary example of full-blooming womanhood” (126). The romantic protagonist fails to acknowledge her own beauty. It is brought to her attention by the love interest when he experiences an “inability to master his desire for her once she is near him. When he forces his attentions upon her, she is...overcome by her own bodily response which she cannot control” (126). As part of the narrative formula, the heroine can only be sexually awakened by the hero, who also ends up being the man she is with at the end of the narrative.

Despite the protagonist’s obliviousness to her own body and her attempts to rebel against female gender norms, she is ultimately shown to be feminine. Radway notes that the initial attempts to challenge gender “do not threaten the reader, in large part because the fact of her true femininity is never left in doubt...She is always portrayed as unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding” (127). Feminine traits prevail in the protagonist’s development; she is the ideal person for her male counterpart to love. The heroine’s nurturing abilities serve the purpose of preparing the man for their relationship:
It is the combination of her womanly sensuality and mothering capabilities that will magically remake a man incapable of expressing emotions or of admitting dependence. As a result of her effort, he will be transformed into an ideal figure possessing both masculine power and prestige and the more "effeminate" ability to discern her needs and to attend to their fulfillment in a tender, solicitous way. (127-128)

After her attempts to avoid conforming to gender expectations, the romantic female protagonist has to embrace her femininity in order to help the hero become a proper lover, capable of both strength and sensitivity. When she helps transform him, she has come to "believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary....She will have established successfully an external connection with a man whose behavior she now knows how to read correctly" (149). The heroine has to learn trust in order to get the type of relationship she wants with the hero. Once she gains this trust, "the romance's conclusion promises her that her needs for fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love will be satisfied perfectly" (149). The happy ending of the love story gives the hero a balance of power and emotions and gives the heroine a connection to the man with whom she has fallen in love. Everyone is fulfilled, even if the characters are in somewhat traditional gender roles.

The reasons why women read romance novels, including the genre's current success, are a topic of debate in the literary world. Radway addresses the potential misconceptions before incorporating input from actual romance readers. For example, according to some scholars including Ann Douglas, "the coincidence of the romance's increasing popularity with the rise of the women's movement must point to a new and
developing backlash against feminism” (Radway 19). Such arguments pit romance readers against feminists, making it look like the groups are mutually exclusive and that romance readers are trying to fight against the women’s movement. Radway believes that the connection being made here might be too direct. She finds that “because literary critics tend to move immediately from textual interpretation to sociological explanation they conclude easily that changes in ...generic popularity must be the simple and direct result of ideological shifts in the surrounding culture” (19). Radway discusses the ways in which critics can sometimes jump to a conclusion without considering evidence beyond popularity, and that such conclusions lead them to make blanket statements about an entire genre. Radway does not rule out the possibility that readers could be flocking to romance because they are trying to make a statement against the women’s movement, but she believes “it is conceivable that it is equally a function of other factors as well, precisely because the romance’s recent success also coincides with important changes in book production, distribution, advertising, and marketing techniques” (20). Publishers are always trying to reach a larger audience in order to make higher profits, so in the 1980s when Radway was researching, they may have tried a new way to get books to consumers that led to the increase in romance’s popularity. The reading of romance does not need to be seen as some sort of declaration against feminism; it can also be explained by the marketplace.

Though Radway researched romance in the 1980s, new statistics seem to fit with her findings. Romance novels do seem to be everywhere, even in most grocery stores, so women see them more than when they may have been found only in bookstores. Now e-readers are gaining in popularity as well, making it even easier for people to buy books.
The Romance Writers of America, an organization for authors, features statistics on both sales figures and readership for romance. RWA cites figures from the *Business of Consumer Book Publishing 2012* when dealing with monetary figures. According to the data online, “romance fiction revenue actually increased from $1.355 billion in 2011 to $1.368 billion in 2012, and it remains the largest share of the consumer market at 14.3 percent” (“About the Romance Genre” online). The success of romance continued while the rest of the publishing industry experienced a dip in sales (online). The genres that fell in sales included children’s and young adult literature (though it is not clear if young adult romance was included in overall romance figures because it is included as a subgenre of romance on a related page on the RWA site) (online). The popularity of e-books is especially high with romance readers: while e-books made up 26 percent of total book purchases, they made up 44 percent of romance purchases (online). It is difficult to dismiss romance as a lesser genre when looking at such high sales numbers. While commercial success certainly does not equate to quality of literature, it is what publishers are looking for when trying to decide what will attract readers in the coming quarters.

In regards to readership, RWA includes data from a survey they conducted through Bowker Market Research in March 2012 that consisted of “a sample size of at least 1,000 respondents” (online). According to the survey, 91 percent of romance buyers are women, and most of them are aged between 30 and 54 years old (online). Readers tend to stick with the genre once they start reading, and “41 percent of romance buyers have been reading romance for 20 years or more” (online). The survey also asked respondents about their tendency for reading romance versus other genres, producing the data that “forty-four percent...consider themselves ‘frequent readers’” (read quite a few
romances); 31 percent are ‘avid readers’ (almost always reading a romance novel); and 25 percent are ‘occasional readers’ (on and off, like when on vacation)” (online). The data from the RWA and Bowker Market Research survey shows some things that most people would expect (women making up an overwhelming majority of the readership), and some that they might not consider, like the large portion of readers who have been reading romance for multiple decades. This is a large group of readers who will continually return to the genre for their preferred reading experience. Romance is more popular now than it has ever been, and may continue to be so if younger readers are hooked by the genre.

Now that the increased readership of romance has been at least somewhat accounted for, it is time to consider why women read romances. In her questionnaires with the Smithton women, Radway asked why the women in the town read romance, and many of them mentioned the idea of reading for escape (88). This “escape” is both literal, as a way for the women to take a break from the responsibilities of their lives, and figurative, as a way of stepping outside of themselves and “identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects” (90). The idea of reading to experience a life unlike one’s own echoes what Holly Virginia Blackford found in her study of girl readers who tend to read for difference. Adult or young adult females may share the same reason for reading as they to escape their everyday lives because of the oppression they face as women in a patriarchal society. That explanation is purely speculative, but it does draw upon the reality of a lack of power that many girls and women experience. They can have power, albeit in a vicarious way, by reading a
narrative where a character either has control or is able to gain a level of control in her life.

Despite this, many other girls seem to want to fight against love stories, or at least the ways that they are pushed upon females. Blackford found in her study that “girls are highly aware of the fact that the category of heterosexual romance is marketed toward girls and women (the pinker section in the bookstore), while fantasy and science fiction targets boys and men (the darker section of the bookstore)” (59). She also noticed that many girls denounce the genre of romance due to the fact that they are expected to like it on the basis of their gender (59). These young women may also be trying to resist traditional visions of femininity, instead seeking out characters that defy societal expectations. Even in a world that has been shaped by the women’s movement, femininity is still often perceived as a weak and undesirable characteristic.

Romance readers and non-readers, including critics and some girls, interpret the gender issues in the genre very differently. Debates about the appearance of feminism or antifeminism in romance novels are ongoing, complicated by the fact that the novels themselves contain conflicting concepts of gender. The whole novel hinges upon the heroine’s ability to use her feminine characteristics to soften a manly hero into being able to show some emotion and a level of dependency he would not admit without her. Radway argues that the woman’s need to help the man transform is problematic at best, because “at the same time that the romantic fantasy proclaims a woman’s power to re-create a man in a mold she has fashioned, it also covertly establishes her guilt or responsibility for those who remain unchanged” (128). The heroine is ultimately held accountable for the hero’s actions after she has reformed him, even though he should be
able to account for himself as an adult. Another question raised by romance novels is how
the fictional women always make a sensitive and loyal individual out of someone who
starts out as aggressive and sometimes even cruel in his toughness (128). Real-life cases
of domestic violence show that some men can hurt the women they are supposed to love,
but the women in love stories rarely seem to be abused due to the fact that it would run
against the traditions of the genre. Furthermore, the conclusions of the novels almost
always undo any sort of gender defiance or autonomy the heroine has held onto as she
becomes subordinate in her relationship with the man.

While gender relations in romances are far from perfect, many readers can still
interpret the stories positively. Out of the Smithton study, Dot “believes a good romance
focuses on an intelligent and able heroine who finds a man who recognizes her special
qualities and is capable of loving and caring for her as she wants to be loved” (54). There
is something to be said about the way in which both the hero and the heroine of the
romance seem to get what they want out of the relationship. Critics should take into
account the character’s happiness at the end of the novel when trying to denounce the
women in the novels who choose to be in a relationship with the men they have changed.
The way some readers do not value romance is similar to the way in which some people
disparage homemakers when comparing them to working mothers. Instead of judging, all
of the choices women make should be appreciated and valued.

The key to entertaining the possibility of feminism in romance is in ensuring that
the man and woman are equal at the end of the narrative. This is especially crucial in YA
romance because if girls read this type of literature at all (as Blackford finds that they
often do not), they may encounter many women in diminished roles and come to feel that
female subordination is normal. Popular books often face the most scrutiny. Stephenie Meyer’s vampire romance *Twilight* series, though not dystopian, is a nice contrast to the newer sci-fi love stories because of its popularity and the ways in which it portrays gender. The series has received a lot of criticism for the main character Bella’s behavior. Many people tend to see Bella as a bad example for the girls reading the books. Anna Silver’s disdain for the series is clear in the title of her article “*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens”; she finds that it “perpetuates outdated and troubling gender norms” (122). Silver and other readers are bothered by “the disjunction between Edward’s beauty and flawlessness and Bella’s perception of herself as mediocre and average” (126). Bella is pursuing a relationship with a vampire who is much older, stronger, and, as she perceives, more attractive than herself; adults do not necessarily want girls to find themselves a similar relationship.

Others, such as Kristine Moruzi, see positive aspects to Bella as a heroine; Moruzi argues that the girl is “operating as a postfeminist agent pursuing her own agenda with regard...to her emerging sexual identity” (50). Bella has chosen to pursue a relationship with Edward, and though it may be an unbalanced match, it is her own choice. She also de-emphasizes her own femininity, and “instead, much of her power comes from her innate ability to withstand the vampiric abilities of others” (53). She is an oddity in her ability to withstand Edward’s mindreading and the powers other vampires have over each other and over mere mortals. Silver recognizes Bella’s alternative power as one of her redeeming qualities, in that “female power in the series is linked not to aggression...but rather to self-sacrifice and the defense of others” (131). In these ways, Bella shows some of the empowerment that is seen in the strong protagonists of current YA dystopian
fiction. However, these characteristics only emerge after she is made into a vampire by Edward in *Breaking Dawn*, the last book of the series, where Bella finally becomes an equal to Edward as a fellow vampire, his wife, and the mother of their child (129). The idea that a woman needs marriage and children to be powerful or to be equal to a man is problematic, resigning women to the domestic sphere of society, even if she does have power at the end of the series that she does not perceive herself as having at the beginning.

One of the most important factors in considering the gender implications of *Twilight* and other romances for both young adult and adult readers is the fact that readers can decide for themselves if what they are reading is positive or worth carrying into their lives. In regards to Meyer’s vampire saga, readers are able to recognize that it is not a perfect romance. Silver notes that “even on fan message boards heavily stacked with Edward supporters, readers vigorously debate the degree to which Edward is too controlling, and whether he is a good model for a boyfriend in today’s world” (126). Readers can see that Bella does not give herself enough of a voice against Edward and that Edward should give Bella more freedom before he makes her into a vampire.

Similarly, readers of other romances often see that the inferiority of women in romances is not good. Criticism about particular genres of literature needs to be tempered with the fact that the audience can often recognize these narratives as fiction and see where they fall short of reality. Authors of romances should still strive for balanced and realistic portrayals of both sexes and for narratives that emphasize the importance of equality between men and women; however, the reader is often smart enough to see when the author has not done so and will try not to follow the pattern he or she finds in texts.
Silver warns that “it is...essential that critics not create an imaginary, wholly passive reader of *Twilight*” (137), which is a sentiment that can be applied to romance as a genre. The audience can pull the positive elements out of the narratives, even the ones with the most negative gender relations or depictions of women. They also are able to reject or revise the negative aspects of these stories, when they are active and engaged readers. Romance can be empowering if only we choose to see it in that way.
Science Fiction and Romance: Putting them Together

After reviewing the previous sections on science fiction and romance, some major discrepancies between the two genres may begin to emerge. The most apparent way they clash is through the opposing gendered leanings in each: science fiction leans heavily toward masculinity in both readership and characters, and romance is angled toward femininity. Many authors have tried to bridge the gaps between the genres in different ways. This section will focus on the points of highest friction between the genres, the infiltration of romance into science fiction, and the two main ways that the genres are brought together by authors, particularly in YA literature.

Romance and science fiction clash fundamentally on the focus of each literature. In a romance, more importance is placed upon the emotional and, typically, sexual connections between hero and heroine. Science fiction, however, would rather contemplate the forces against which a hero and heroine are fighting. Mendlesohn explains the distinction clearly through an example she makes up using movie taglines: “if Hollywood would advertise a film with the tagline In the chaos of war, they fell in love! science fiction would pronounce, In the chaos of love, they fought a war!” (15). Dystopian and other science fictions tend to focus on larger societal problems, whereas romances focus on relationships between individual people. The distinction should not be taken as a reason to give more power or prestige to one genre over the other; it should instead be used to illustrate how the literatures and their readers are seeking completely different goals. I believe that authors, who blur the genres of science fiction and romance, can write more emotionally and psychologically authentic novels featuring characters that
focus simultaneously on both problems and relationships, especially as real people continually struggle with both.

Besides the polarized gendering of science fiction and romance and their differing focuses, the genres diverge from each other in other ways. Romance may have a more rigid plot structure in that almost all stories feature an innocent and somewhat unfeminine protagonist who comes to embrace her femininity and finds a way to soften her tough male counterpart so that they can either mate or get married. Though science fiction does have subgenres with different themes and views of the future, it does not appear to have quite as rigid of a structure overall. However, some subgenres like dystopian literature appear to have more narrative commonalities than others. In dystopian literature, like the YA novels being discussed later in this paper, a society that at first seems to be ideal or at least not too bad turns out to be horrible, the main character realizes the problems in the society, and he or she escapes it or decides to fight against it. The differences in the dystopias come mostly out of the worlds that the protagonists are trying to escape, and more complications emerge if the narrative continues in a series that allows the reader to see how the protagonists deal with the aftermath of their choices. Romance and dystopian fictions differ greatly in the types of stories they tell, but both rely on structured plots in order to set up certain expectations for readers.

Another way in which romance and science fiction (mostly dystopian fiction) are almost irreconcilable is in their tone, especially how tone is conveyed through the endings of novels. Readers are used to the happy conclusions in romances where everything is settled cleanly between the heroine and the hero and there are few lingering questions. Radway's study confirms this feeling; she found that most women reading
popular or traditional romances, who are using the books as an escape, look for happy books, and not ones that dwell on problems like those found in contemporary life (98-99). Some of the women in the survey go so far as to claim that a book cannot be a romance if there is an unhappy ending (99). Something particularly interesting to the discussion of romance and science fiction is the way in which the world of romance novels is described at one point in Radway’s text. In her discussion of the possibility of feminism in the romance novel, she writes that “for Dot and her customers, romances provide a utopian vision in which female individuality and a sense of self are shown to be compatible with nurturance and care by another” (55, emphasis added). It is interesting that Radway picks the adjective “utopian” in regards to romance novels since it is a word that usually shows up when discussing certain elements of science fiction. A relationship is then made between romance and reality, where reality can come to be described as “dystopian” due to the ways that gender roles are enforced in actual relationships. Readers’ preference of the world in romance novels over their everyday lives, at least in regards to women’s ability to be autonomous and to care while being cared for, is understandable. The use of science fiction words to describe these feelings may point to the way in which some future worlds might provide more possibilities for everyone, including females.

Science fiction does not appeal to many romance readers due to the perceived darkness of the genre. YA dystopian fiction and YA fiction in general have recently been criticized for featuring too much violence and other negative content. Meghan Cox Gurdon is one such commentator, having written a somewhat infamous piece for the Wall Street Journal that lamented that the teen readers of contemporary YA literature “spend their time immersed in ugliness” and that dark novels may damage their psyches or tinge
their outlooks on life (online). Many adults agree with Gurdon that teens experience too much coarse material in books, but they fail to acknowledge that this darkness can have a purpose. In dystopian fiction, authors create fractured worlds because they try to illustrate the extreme consequences of modern society's downfalls; these books would not contain a warning if they were no worse than the current state of the world. Furthermore, endings that are not happy are not necessarily negative. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair argue that less-than-joyous conclusions do have their purpose:

> Reading contemporary literature of the fantastic, one seldom encounters the happily-ever-after of the fairy and folk tales that are the ancestors of this genre. But what we do encounter is perhaps more inspiring: stories in which girls struggle with both internal and external foes and out of these struggles wrest something positive. (146)

Stories of major societal upheaval and war cannot have good outcomes for all characters, and expecting that is unrealistic. The empowerment of girls and other individuals in literature can often come through tough experiences. The heroine in dystopian literature who can find her own voice and use it to defy the oppressive systems of her society may not necessarily be happy at the end of her fight, but she will certainly be in a better state than she was originally.

The disparate nature of the romance and science fiction genres has not scared authors away from combining them. Love stories have slowly begun to find their way into dystopian novels. *The Hunger Games*, written by Suzanne Collins, is probably the most popular example of this and is a series where a romantic plot is woven into the main story of Katniss's attempts to survive the Hunger Games and aid in a rebellion against her
country's government. Similarly, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series is about a society, where people are divided by their personality traits, which eventually collapses into a war. A large part of Tris's involvement in her society includes her relationship with a young man she meets in the group she joins. Other similar YA dystopian novels follow more of a traditional romance pattern, like Ally Condie's *Matched* or Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*. *Matched* takes place in a society where citizens are matched with an ideal mate in their late teen years and its main character Cassia has to choose between marrying her male best friend with whom she has been matched or a mysterious young man who is not allowed to be matched. *Delirium* is set in an alternate present where love is considered a disease from which people need to be cured after they turn eighteen years old; Lena, who starts the novel as a law-abiding citizen waiting for her cure, falls in love with an older boy who has not been cured, and she eventually attempts to run from town with him. The novels described here represent a budding genre that features romance in a dystopian setting.

Mendlesohn argues that the incorporation of romance into science fiction is due to new ideologies held either by teens or about teens:

>Sf for teens and children had been for a very long time the last refuge for those teens who did not wish to engage in romance....Sometime in the 1990s this changed. The 'concerns' of teens were increasingly assumed to be 'realistic,' positing a rejection of 'adventure' as childish. (101)

Whether or not readers wanted to focus on more everyday concerns, authors or publishers decided that relationships were the right thing to try to infuse into science fiction. This outcome is ironic, considering that the sf genre tends not to show much interest in love or
sex outside of the possibility that these can be complicated by science. The change may not be in line with the traditional canon of sf literature but it has certainly taken hold with many readers, including females who may not typically seek out science fiction texts. Some of these texts, like The Hunger Games, have become hugely popular, and many are being adapted into films, which means that this new blended genre may find even more fans.

The ways in which authors use romance in science fiction differs, though there are a limited number of variations. Mendlesohn, who tracked the incorporation of romance into science fiction, notices something potentially strange about the way it is being used in the latest literature. She writes, "The romance novel in teen sf is a peculiar thing in that it seems to take one of two forms: two young people are thrown together and ‘inevitably’ fall in love (sometimes with a heavy pinch of destiny), and those novels where romance is the issue at stake" (Mendlesohn 123). Some authors choose to use romance as the dystopian element of the novel; others use a sf world as the backdrop to a love story.

Books where love is attacked or regulated by the government include the aforementioned Matched and Delirium. In both cases, officials pair up individuals with an optimal mate with whom they can marry and have children so as to continue the advancement of humanity. The romance in such novels can seem forced because it has to be there in order for the story to work. The love triangle that unfolds in Matched between Cassia and the two young men is such an example; the girl only considers Ky after being matched to Xander because she sees his face on a malfunctioning disk of information relating to her match. She is content with her match until she is presented with another option. Another pitfall in these narratives is that “rather a lot of the modern authors seem
to feel that they can substitute a romance between the male and female protagonists for a solid sf story” (Mendlesohn 103). Mendlesohn is viewing these books from her point of view as a science fiction scholar. She discounts romance the same way that most people do, doubting its seriousness or its possibilities. While some of the new novels may seem to prefer the romance plot over the dystopian one, this does not lessen their significance or meaning. Delirium, for example, focuses on Lena as she falls in love with Alex, the “uncured” boy who comes from the wilds surrounding the town where Lena lives. Beyond the traditional romance narrative, Lauren Oliver includes some elements that show the view of a larger group in the society, like when Lena, Alex, and Lena’s friend Hana go to parties thrown by people involved with the resistance against the government’s love cure. Romance is intricately woven into the dystopian elements of this novel that depicts love as something needing to be “cured.” In this and other novels, the reader gets some sense of what the society as a whole is like while reading about the protagonist’s relationship with a boy. Most of the romance/dystopian books explore the possibilities of future love, and while they may not be perfect, they can still be considered “solid sf stories” (103).

The other way that romance is included in science fiction, the one where “two young people are thrown together and ‘inevitably’ fall in love” (Mendlesohn 123), can seem more organic. In her characterization of these narratives, Mendlesohn is showing a bias against romance in general. She finds it logical that a heroine might develop interest in a hero with whom she is spending a lot of time, which is the only purpose Mendlesohn sees for romance in science fiction when it is not the source of societal problems. However, romance is in these stories for a reason. The use of romance as an aside from
the main plot could help to break up the tension of the narrative while still keeping the focus on the dystopian society. It also allows for more exploration and creativity on the part of the author because they are combining two genres that are set up as opposites. There is no exact formula for combining love stories with dystopian fiction and therefore there are more possibilities, not just in the narratives but also in audiences – sci-fi readers and romance readers can both find something worthwhile in a text. Some of the newer books focus more on the relationships between characters, and some focus on the speculation or scientific elements. There is nothing wrong with a romance novel with slight elements of science fiction or a dystopian novel where the lead characters fall in love. The dystopian YA novels that will be discussed in this paper have been marketed primarily as science fiction, though romance finds its way in. Authors have found ways to bring together these different genres and therefore offer something unique compared to what came before in both romance and science fiction.
The Hunger Games: The Girl on Fire

Suzanne Collins’s 2008 novel The Hunger Games and its sequels, 2009’s Catching Fire and 2010’s Mockingjay, are the most prominent examples in the recent surge of dystopian YA literature that features romance. Scholastic, the publisher of the three books, has already printed fifty million copies in the United States alone (Bosman online). The series has been successful enough to surpass J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series in sales on Amazon.com as of August 2012, though the Potter books have approximately three times as many books in print (online). The popularity of Collins’s books can be attributed in part to the film version of the first novel of the series, which was released in March 2012. As of September 2012, The Hunger Games grossed more than $400 million domestically, and it has grossed nearly $700 million worldwide as of June 2012 (“Box Office/Business for The Hunger Games” online). A film for Catching Fire will be released in November 2013, and the two parts of Mockingjay will be released in November 2014 and November 2015 (Staskiewicz online). The commercial success of the Hunger Games series in a short span of time is undeniable, and it can only get more popular with the release of each highly anticipated film.

The Hunger Games series has been marketed mostly as a science fiction series, though it incorporates romance as a subplot. Katniss Everdeen is a teenage girl who lives in the country of Panem, which is a dystopian future version of North America after a major war where the country has been divided into twelve districts and is controlled by a centrally-located Capitol. The districts provide resources for the Capitol and most of the citizens are poor due to the uneven distribution of finances and supplies. District Twelve, where Katniss lives, is the poorest district and the provider of coal. In order to maintain
control over the districts, the Capitol forces each district to send one randomly-chosen boy and one randomly-chosen girl into the Hunger Games, where they fight to the death until a single survivor wins glory for both himself or herself and for his or her home district. The series follows Katniss’s two experiences in the Hunger Games and the revolution that is sparked by her actions; she experiences many repercussions and psychological after-effects because of the things she has done. In addition to surviving in the Hunger Games arena and aiding in a revolt against the Capitol, Katniss also has to deal with her relationships with two young men who have feelings for her. Gale Hawthorne and Peeta Mellark are opposite in nearly every way except for their love for Katniss. Katniss works through her complicated feelings for the boys, but the romantic subplot is not as much of a focus of the text as are the Hunger Games and the revolution in Panem.

From the beginning of The Hunger Games, Katniss is set up as a girl who rejects femininity and embraces a typically masculine strength. She and Gale have to be breadwinners for their families due to the deaths of their fathers; they hunt illegally in the woods in order to acquire food and to make some money (Collins Hunger Games 12). Hunting and providing for the family are typically masculine activities. Katniss is forced to take her father’s place due to her mother’s breakdown (8). The girl sees her mother as weak due to her inability to care for her children, and she fights against that image of femininity by taking on masculine behaviors. Katniss feels a responsibility to her sister that is more like that of a mother due to her need to care for her while their mother could not handle it. When Primrose is chosen as the girl tribute during the Reaping for District Twelve in the Hunger Games despite the statistical improbability because it is her first
year in the games (entries increase with age and with the number of grain rations taken), Katniss cannot believe it (20-21). She volunteers to take her sister’s place, something that is uncommon in District Twelve, “where the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse” (22). The act of volunteering to save her sister could be interpreted as masculine or feminine: while men are traditionally the protectors of the family, there is also the trope of the mother who will do anything for her child. Katniss is Prim’s sister and has had to act as mother, so they have a very close bond. Katniss’s masculine behaviors at the beginning of the novel echo the way that romantic heroines reject femininity when the reader is first introduced to them. Katniss avoids girlishness because it does not fit into her life where she has to struggle to survive and take care of her family.

Though Katniss usually tries to avoid her femininity, she is forced to act feminine in the lead-up to the Hunger Games. She needs to wear fancy gowns and outfits before she is sent into the arena, as do the rest of the tributes. Katniss meets her stylist Cinna, who has to clothe her and make her stand out from the pack. He carries a theme of flames throughout her wardrobe, from a cape lit with synthetic fire (67) to a dress that seems to burn as she twirls in it (128). His goal is not necessarily to make her look girly but to have the viewers “recognize you when you’re in the arena....Katniss, the girl who was on fire” (67). Katniss becomes the Girl on Fire to her fans. She has to wear the designs that Cinna puts her in, but that is as far as Cinna goes to make Katniss feminine; he uses the image of fire to symbolize her strength that makes her unique. Effie Trinket, the Capitol’s handler for District Twelve, takes a different approach, trying to make Katniss act like a lady. There is a whole day where Effie trains Katniss for her interview with Caesar
Flickerman, teaching her how to walk in high heels and gowns, stand and sit with proper posture, and “say a hundred banal phrases starting with a smile, while smiling, or ending with a smile” (115). She stresses that fact that Katniss should “want the audience to like you” so that she will gain fans and sponsors (115). Katniss is supposed to make a good impression with the people of the Capitol, and Effie believes the best way for her to do so is to take on their mannerisms. Haymitch agrees that Katniss needs to be friendlier and try to make the audience like her. He tells her that she has “got about as much charm as a dead slug” (117). Katniss does not want to let the Capitol’s citizens learn anything about her, so Haymitch finally just tells her to “answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them” (118). As horrible as she is at it, Katniss has to be genial if she wants to be successful in the arena. Especially as a girl, sponsors might have a hard time supporting a tribute that does not seem to appreciate their contributions. In her attempts to make an impression, she has to try to conform to the expectations placed upon her and therefore act feminine to some extent.

Katniss’s generally unfeminine qualities include her lack of awareness of herself and her emotions. Peeta hints at how he feels about Katniss, saying “People will help you in the arena. They’ll be tripping over each other to sponsor you....She has no idea. The effect she can have” (91). He thinks highly of her and notices something about her that she does not recognize. The lack of recognition of one’s own appeal is another way in which Katniss relates to romantic protagonists. She has not had a chance to think about her femininity because she has so many other things to struggle with. Peeta is one of the few who can see through Katniss’s tough exterior. At the advice of their mentor Haymitch, the pair of tributes have to act like friends when with other tributes or out in
The forced interactions with Peeta lead to more uncertainty in Katniss about her feelings for her friend Gale. She admits to herself that “being in the woods with Gale...sometimes I was actually happy. I call him my friend, but in the last year it's seemed too casual a word for what Gale is to me. A pang of longing shoots through my chest” (112). With the story told in first-person narration from Katniss's point of view, the reader can sense the genuine confusion Katniss has over emotions toward Gale. She does not know if their partnership in hunting will eventually lead to romance or if it is making them into something like brother and sister. Later, Katniss considers the bonds she has forged with Gale and Peeta:

I can’t help comparing what I have with Gale to what I’m pretending to have with Peeta. How I never question Gale’s motives while I do nothing but doubt the latter’s. It’s not a fair comparison really. Gale and I were thrown together by a mutual need to survive. Peeta and I know the other’s survival means our own death. How do you sidestep that? (112)

The relationships that Katniss has with both boys arise out of necessity: she and Gale have to hunt for their families, and she and Peeta have to interact because they are the two tributes for District Twelve. She has not been able to interact with either of them in a completely neutral circumstance. It is easy to understand how Katniss does not know what to make of her feelings.

Right before the Hunger Games commence, Katniss and Peeta’s relationship is further complicated. Peeta reveals his love for Katniss in an interview with Caesar Flickerman before the Hunger Games start (130). Katniss is made so angry by Peeta’s revelation in front of the cameras that she shoves him into a vase of flowers so that he
will hurt his hands (134). She fears being perceived as weak after being made the object of a boy’s affections (135). Haymitch notes that having Peeta announce his attraction to her actually makes her more appealing for sponsors who will send food and other gifts into the arena to help her try to win (135). As the “star-crossed lovers from District Twelve,” both Katniss and Peeta are more marketable (135). Romance is non-existent in the arena, so it makes the pair unusual. The only thing they need to do to ensure the continuing support of the viewing audience is to make them believe the romance; it challenges Katniss because it takes her out of her comfort zone of acting masculine. What makes the Katniss-Peeta dynamic interesting is that Katniss is the masculine one and Peeta is somewhat feminine. He is not afraid to show his emotions, whereas Katniss feels the need to remain stoic.

While Katniss is generally seen as masculine, she embraces her femininity during the games. Her most feminine acts come when she has teamed up with Rue, a young girl from District Eleven who reminds Katniss of her sister Prim (208). She is able to nurture the young girl and show a maternal side, similar to the way she interacts with Prim. The friendship they form is futile because at least one will have to die in the Games in order for there to be a victor, yet they bond anyway. Unfortunately, Rue is attacked when Katniss tries to find her after blowing up some other tributes’ food (233). Katniss sings to the young girl as she dies, using a lullaby about a beautiful meadow (234-235). The singing could be seen as a feminine act because lullabies are often attributed to women and because she is doing it both to care for the young girl and to let out her own emotions. Nurturing Rue proves Katniss’s femininity, similar to the way in which seemingly masculine women in romances show that they are still feminine in order to be
less of a threat to readers. Later, Katniss places flowers all over Rue’s body, showing a compassion that is rare in the Hunger Games arena (237). When she does it, it is to memorialize the girl and to rebel against the Capitol: “They’ll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they’ll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it” (237). The arrangement of the flowers on Rue’s corpse is one of the first acts we see Katniss commit that is done to embarrass the people who created the Games that forced the young girl to be killed. Femininity in this instance acts as a source of power instead of a weakness. She has been empowered though her relationship with Rue to fight against the power that controls their lives.

When the rules of the Hunger Games are changed, Katniss is forced to perform a romance in which she is not initially interested. The Gamemakers have announced that two victors will be crowned if they are from the same district, which gives an advantage to the pairs of surviving tributes like Peeta and Katniss (244). Katniss yells Peeta’s name aloud when she hears the change is announced, though it is unclear if this is due to her relief at not having to kill Peeta or if it is a deeper feeling she is beginning to feel for him (244). Katniss recognizes that she has not been acknowledging Peeta’s feelings for her while she was in the arena:

The star-crossed lovers...Peeta must have been playing that angle all along.... Our ‘romance’ must be so popular that condemning it would jeopardize the success of the Games. No thanks to me. All I’ve done is managed not to kill Peeta. But whatever he’s done in the arena, he must have the audience convinced it was to keep me alive. (247-248)
Unlike Peeta, Katniss is not a good performer. She finds it difficult to show her authentic emotions, let alone ones that she is pretending to have. She is forced to act like she is in love with Peeta once she finds him again and has to care for his wounds. At first she is reluctant, ignoring his whispered request for a kiss to play up the romance (253). Later, she tries to perform the romance by giving Peeta a quick kiss (260). Haymitch works out a system with Katniss despite the fact they cannot directly communicate; he sends some broth from a sponsor, and Katniss “can almost hear his snarl. ‘You’re supposed to be in love, sweetheart. They boy’s dying. Give me something I can work with!’” (261). It takes a lot of coaching in order to get Katniss to act as if she is in love. Romance has never been an interest for Katniss before because she has had to fight so hard just to survive. She has since been thrust into a scenario with a somewhat unfamiliar boy that requires her to act in a completely new way. It would be difficult for anyone, but it is especially so for Katniss.

In her efforts to act believably romantic, Katniss feels more confusion about her feelings for Peeta. She initially struggles to articulate her feelings for him when he asks why she saved his life (297). While she cannot bring herself to say it aloud, Katniss acknowledges that, “I don’t want him to die. And it’s not about the sponsors. And it’s not about what will happen back home. And it’s not just that I don’t want to be alone. It’s him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread” (297). She obviously has a connection with Peeta that goes beyond their partnership in an attempt to survive the Games. Their budding romance, though initially artificial, has an emotional resonance for Katniss. Shortly after she realizes that she does not want to live without Peeta, they kiss. It is different from their previous kisses because both are relatively healthy at this point, not
injured or sick like they were (298). Katniss also seems to feel that it is more than just for show: “This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another” (298). She has an emotional attachment to Peeta, and kissing has brought her closer to him romantically. This might be a relationship that Mendlesohn would call “inevitable” because Peeta and Katniss are forced to act like they are in love in order to survive the Games. A romance between them in District Twelve might have been unlikely, but not impossible. Peeta admits that his crush on Katniss goes back to grade school, and Katniss remember the time he gave her a loaf of bread when she was starving after her father’s death (301). They may be acting out their love, or at least Katniss is, but their performances have a basis in long-held emotions.

After Katniss starts to have more of a romantic connection to Peeta and after they become the final two living tributes, the rule allowing for two victors is redacted (342). As popular as Katniss and Peeta’s romance must have been with the Hunger Games audience, the Capitol could not allow such a drastic change to the system. Katniss realizes that “they never intended to let us both live. This has all been devised by the Gamemakers to guarantee the most dramatic showdown in history. And like a fool, I bought into it” (342). The romance between Peeta and Katniss undermines the system of the Hunger Games by bringing tributes together instead of pitting them against each other. For the Gamemakers, forcing them to fight to the death should be intense enough to grab the attention of the audience. Though it is inevitable, neither of the two living tributes wants to carry the guilt from the death of the other with them for the rest of their lives (343). Katniss considers whether it would be possible for them to get out of killing
each other, and she realizes that “they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol.... If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...” (344). There needs to be a winner for the Games in order for the viewers to see anything positive in an event that kills off twenty-three young people from across the country and so that citizens can feel some measure of hope that will keep them from revolting against the Capitol’s rule. Due to her understanding of the Games system, Katniss is able to take some power away from the people who are controlling her life in the arena. She comes up with a plan where she and Peeta will both eat poisonous berries so that they die and leave no survivors of the Games (344). Just as they put the berries in their mouths, an announcement is made declaring both Katniss and Peeta the victors of the Hunger Games (345). The scheme works and the Capitol is forced to let both tributes live so that there will be survivors. Katniss despises her government for forcing children into the Games, and she acts on her feelings. The act of eating the berries is empowering for Katniss because it allows her to change her fate and to affect a greatly unfair societal system.

Though Katniss empowers herself at the end of her time in the arena and she fights against the Capitol’s system, she still has to try to please the audience by continuing her performance of romance with Peeta. Haymitch tells her about the government’s reaction to the berry incident: “Word is the Capitol’s furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can’t stand is being laughed at and they’re the joke of Panem....Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren’t responsible for your actions” (357). Katniss cannot be seen by the citizens of Panem as a rebel, or else she will undermine the system of the Games and the control it
allows the Capitol to exert upon the districts. In order to make up for her actions in the arena, Katniss has to make everyone believe that she is pursuing a romance with Peeta. When she has an interview with Caesar Flickerman after the Games, she gives him halting answers. She says that, after hearing that the original rule change would allow them both to live, she called out Peeta’s name “maybe...because for the first time...there was a chance I could keep him” (368). She claims that she “just...couldn’t bear the thought of...being without him” when she needs to defend the double suicide attempt (369). The pauses in her answers could be interpreted as hesitations while she tries to decide what to say in order to sound authentic, or she could be pausing because she wants to seem so overcome with emotion that she cannot talk in a normal sentence. She tries to appear emotional and generally feminine so as to keep the Capitol’s audience sympathetic to her and to try to eliminate the idea of her being a threat to the country. As important as it is for Katniss to fight against the unfairness of the Capitol, it is also important to play along with them so that they do not suspect her motives.

While Katniss knows that she is acting her part of the romance with Peeta, Peeta is unaware of this. Katniss inadvertently reveals that she had to be coached in order to pretend she was in love with him, at least in the beginning of their time in the Games (372). Peeta has admitted multiple times that his feelings for Katniss are genuine, so of course he is hurt by the fact that the girl he has been attracted to for such a long time does not seem to feel the same way. Katniss does not know what she actually feels about Peeta and what emotions are leftover from acting the romance throughout the Games. She considers what she would like to tell him if he would talk to her:
I want to tell him that he’s not being fair. That we were strangers. That I did what it took to stay alive, to keep us both alive in the arena. That I can’t explain how things are with Gale because I don’t know myself. That it’s no good loving me because I’m never going to get married anyway and he’d just end up hating me later instead of sooner. That if I do have feelings for him, it doesn’t matter because I’ll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children. And how can he? How can he after what we’ve just been through? (373)

Katniss typically ignores her emotions, so when she is faced with so many at once she does not know what to do. Peeta does not understand her confusion because he is more open about his feelings. This once again emphasizes the dynamic in their relationship where Katniss is more masculine and Peeta is more feminine. Katniss battles not only the unfair system that puts her and her family in poverty but also the psychological effects it has had on her. She cannot have a family because she does not want her children put into the Hunger Games. She is not sure exactly how she feels about Peeta, but she cares deeply enough for him that she does not want him to miss out on family or other things he may want that she does not feel she can give him. Katniss needs time to process what happened during the Games so that she can determine what she wants from a relationship and if she feels the same way about Peeta that he feels about her. Katniss’s performance of love for the fellow tribute from District Twelve has confused her as to which of her emotions are real and which are left over from trying to satisfy the audience throughout Panem.
The portrayal of romance is different in *The Hunger Games* in novel form and as a film. The movie as directed by Gary Ross places more emphasis on romance than the novel does, and it plays up the tension between Peeta and Gale, which does not emerge in the series until later. When Katniss first kisses Peeta in a cave they’re staying in, the film includes a shot of Gale back in District Twelve, looking unhappy at the turn of events.

While Katniss is in the arena in the novel, the reader only knows of Katniss’s thoughts and of the events in the arena. Showing Gale might have been a way to connect what is happening in the Games to what is happening outside, but in addition it is a way to start hinting at the tension that comes in the following books between the two main boys in Katniss’s life. While the film plays up the romantic tension, it also plays down the performance aspect of Katniss and Peeta’s relationship. Darren Franich of *Entertainment Weekly* notes that the romance between the District Twelve tributes should be like something out of a reality television show but instead Katniss kissing Peeta is “treated as a swoony moment” (online). The film also neglects to express the performance of the romance by leaving out the part at the end where Katniss accidentally tells Peeta that she was pretending to be in love with him. Franich laments the omission of this scene because “that is a hell of a way to end a book: With betrayal, and confusion, and bitterness” (online). Collins uses the intense situation with Katniss and Peeta to differentiate her novel from a typical romance narrative: instead of ending happily, the lovers now have an emotional distance between them. By leaving out this scene, the film has a tidier conclusion and it gives the appearance of the typical arc of hero and heroine “living happily ever after.” The increased romance in the film version of *The Hunger Games* and the neglect of the performance angle make the relationship between Peeta and
Katniss seem much more conventional than it really is. As the other two books in the series, each with a slight increase in romantic content, are adapted into films, it will be interesting to see if the dystopian elements will be neglected in order to play up the love story and the increasing rivalry between Gale and Peeta as Katniss tries to decide who she wants to be with.
Catching Fire: “I can’t think about kissing”

The narrative of Catching Fire picks up months after The Hunger Games and follows Katniss’s life after the Games. Besides making appearances throughout the country to celebrate Peeta’s and her victory, she also has to try to decide how she feels about both Peeta and Gale. Love triangles seem to be trending in young adult literature—just look at the popularity of the Twilight series with its Edward-Bella-Jacob dynamic. What is interesting is that Radway finds that adult romance readers tend to prefer a lack of love triangles and instead want to read “one woman-one man” novels (123). Love triangles may be something that sets young adult romance apart from adult romance. In the case of the Hunger Games series, Katniss cannot decide between Peeta and Gale; they are so different and her only experiences with romance so far have been for the cameras. Katniss has to try to make up her mind between the young men while being sent back into the arena with other former victors, including Peeta, as part of a special anniversary Games announced by the Capitol. At the same time, uprisings begin to take place across Panem. Katniss has a lot to deal with, so while romance is increased in Catching Fire compared to The Hunger Games, it is far from the central focus of the novel.

One of the most daunting tasks Katniss faces in Catching Fire is proving her love for Peeta to President Snow. After the incident with the berries that allows both of them to survive the Hunger Games, Snow personally visits Katniss to make sure she knows what the act has done to the country: “Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem” (Collins Catching Fire 123). The president fears that the way the Girl on Fire undermined the Capitol will inspire others to act to overthrow his regime. He goes so far as to threaten
Gale’s life if Katniss does anything out-of-line (24). He knows that she cares about Gale, potentially more than she cares about Peeta. Gale is also mostly out of the public eye, so his death or disappearance would not raise any red flags with most citizens of Panem. Snow is determined to have Katniss that she is in love with Peeta, thereby diffusing the tension in the districts, or else she is a failure (29). It has always been difficult for Katniss to act like she has been in love, and Snow’s ultimatum puts that much more pressure on her to perform.

Despite the fact that Katniss hurt Peeta over her admission that she was acting in love during the Games, she still has an ally in the boy who survived with her. Soon after her discussion with President Snow, Katniss renews her efforts to perform the role of a girl in love. She makes sure to show affection to Peeta in public. When they kiss, Katniss “can feel the steadiness that Peeta brings to everything. And I know I’m not alone. As badly as I have hurt him, he won’t expose me in front of the cameras. Won’t condemn me with a halfhearted kiss. He’s still looking out for me. Just as he did in the arena” (42).

Katniss realizes that Peeta could have easily cast her aside and let the Capitol dispose of her. The fact that he stands with her after she has caused him great pain is a testament to his love for her. Katniss greatly admires his goodness, which she gets to see again when, during a visit to District Eleven, he promises monetary gifts to the families of Rue and Thresh, who both died in the Games but helped Katniss and Peeta (59). After Peeta makes this promise, Katniss thinks about a potential future with him: “I hear Haymitch’s voice. ‘You could do a lot worse.’ At this moment, it’s impossible to imagine how I could do better. The gift...it is perfect. So when I rise up on tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn’t seem forced at all” (59). In this instance, Katniss’s actual feelings overlap with her
performance and make it more authentic. The line between fake and real love starts to blur.

Katniss and Peeta’s efforts to distract Panem’s citizens with their romance seem to have little effect. Shortly after Katniss kisses Peeta, she speaks up to personally thank Thresh and Rue’s families (60-61). This prompts a man in the crowd to whistle a tune that Rue taught Katniss in the arena, and then the rest of the District Eleven citizens give Katniss the District Twelve three-fingered salute (61). She did not expect a rebellious reaction from the people in attendance; suddenly, “the full impact of what I’ve done hits me. It was not intentional -- I only mean to express my thanks -- but I have elicited something dangerous. An act of dissent from the people of District 11. This is exactly the kind of thing I am supposed to be defusing!” (62). Katniss is inadvertently inspiring people to act out against the unfairness of the Capitol; the act with the berries has resonated throughout her society, and many have taken it as a call to rebel. As Katniss is rushed inside a building and away from the dissenting citizens, she sees the man who whistled get shot by a Peacekeeper, Panem’s version of a police officer (62). This emphasizes the fact that Katniss’s actions in the arena have continuing consequences for many people. Peeta has been left in the dark about the need to keep the districts from rebelling and gets angry at Katniss and Haymitch for not letting him get involved (66). Peeta then proposes to Katniss on live television in an effort to help keep district tensions down (73). Unfortunately, President Snow lets Katniss know that the impending wedding is not yet enough to satisfy his need for proof of their love (74). Even with both Katniss and Peeta working to show they are serious about their romance, they cannot stop the ideas of revolution that are spreading throughout Panem. Once Katniss’s actions sparked
rebellion against the already fragile governmental system in the country, it was inevitable that it would all go up in flames.

In the wake of the District Eleven uprising, Katniss starts to separate from her former hunting partner. She spends time with Gale in the woods one day and tells him that she wants to run away from District Twelve (95-96). Gale agrees to go with her and then declares his love for her; in response, Katniss can only say “I know” (96-97). She fears letting another person into her life (97). She already has so much pressure on her to act like she is in love with Peeta that pursuing a romance with Gale would only confuse things more. If caught with Gale, who has been called her cousin to eliminate him as a romantic threat to Peeta, Katniss would irrevocably prove that she is not interested in Peeta. Katniss reveals her intentions to bring Haymitch and Peeta along on their escape because she cares about both of them, and Gale gets angry (98). As well as he tends to understand Katniss, he cannot see why she would want to save them unless her love for Peeta is more than just a trick. His jealousy blinds him from the fact that Katniss has only survived so long due to the help of Peeta and Haymitch, who kept her alive and relatively safe in the arena as well as making sure she keeps playing her part in her romance with Peeta. Gale also gets angry with Katniss because she wants to leave the district while there is a rebellion to fight for (100). He goes so far as to throw some gloves away that she had just given him and say “I don’t want anything they made in the Capitol” (100). Katniss believes Gale’s statement refers to her more than the gloves: “Does he think I am now just another product of the Capitol and therefore something untouchable? The unfairness of it all fills me with rage. But it’s mixed up with fear of what kind of crazy thing he might do next” (101). The pair that once relied on each other for survival is now
being torn apart due to the aftermath of Katniss’s time in the Games. While Gale wants to fight the power, Katniss just wants to survive. She jeopardizes her relationship with Gale in order to keep him and her other loved ones alive.

Despite the tension growing between Katniss and Gale, she still cares about him. As she returns from the woods, she finds that Gale is being whipped by a Peacekeeper due to his attempts to sell game that he illegally hunted (105). She runs in front of him and takes a hit from the whip in order to stop the abuse (106). She cares enough about him to put herself in danger in order to save his life. After they bring Gale home and care for his wounds, Katniss kisses him while he is under the influence of pain medication (118). She later talks with her mother about her feelings for Gale. When her mother asks if she loves him, Katniss thinks,

Of course, I love Gale. But what kind of love does she mean? What do I mean when I say I love Gale? I don’t know. I did kiss him last night, in a moment when my emotions were running so high. But I’m sure he doesn’t remember it. Does he? I hope not. If he does, everything will just get more complicated and I really can’t think about kissing when I’ve got a rebellion to incite. (125-126)

Katniss fully acknowledges that she has different feelings for Gale than she has for Peeta, but she does not know what to make of these emotions. Being in a romantic relationship is too much for her, between acting with Peeta and being a symbol of revolution for the oppressed citizens of Panem. As much as she wants to resolve her confusion over her feelings for Gale, the most she can do in the midst of everything else is to do everything in her power to keep him alive.
While Katniss and Gale experience a fracture in their relationship, Katniss and Peeta have to continue their mostly fake romance. It is revealed that the tributes in the next Hunger Games are going to be victors from earlier editions (172). Katniss knows that, as the only living female victor from District Twelve, she will be forced into the arena again (173). At the Reaping, Haymitch is chosen as the male tribute but Peeta volunteers to take his place (186). With only one of them being able to survive, Katniss “[has] a mission. No, it’s more than a mission. It’s my dying wish. Keep Peeta alive” (189). This puts her at odds with Peeta, who is determined to save her life at the cost of his own. As they keep up the “star-crossed lovers” act, it becomes more tragic for the Capitol audience since only one will survive. Peeta discusses their desire to get married when he is interviewed by Caesar Flickerman, even claiming he and Katniss had an unofficial ceremony while at home in District Twelve (255). He also drops a bombshell by claiming that Katniss is pregnant (256). The audience does not know it is a lie meant to make her more appealing to sponsors so that she will survive. Katniss begins to think, “isn’t it the thing I dread most... about the future – the loss of my children to the Games? And it could be true now, couldn’t it? If I hadn’t spent my life building up layers of defense until I recoil at even the suggestion of marriage or a family?” (257). She has now been given the most feminine role she could possibly hold: wife and mother. Like her attempts in *The Hunger Games* to take on feminine characteristics, her maternity makes her less threatening to the Capitol; how could a pregnant teenager lead a rebellion? Peeta has given the girl he loves the best possible chance for her to survive the Games.

The once fake romance between Katniss and Peeta becomes more authentic over time. Peeta, who has always truly been in love, cares so much for her that he will give her
up so that she can be happy with Prim, her mother, and Gale (351-352). He is much nobler than Gale, who is extremely jealous of Peeta and would not let Katniss be with him if that was what she truly wanted. Even though Peeta insists on dying for Katniss, she needs him as much as he needs her. As they spend time together in the arena, she realizes that the connection she has with Peeta is familiar. As they kiss, Katniss “feel[s] that thing again. The thing I only felt once before…. There was only one kiss that made me feel something stir deep inside. Only one that made me want more. But my head wound started bleeding and he made me lie down” (352). Like the romantic protagonists in Radway’s study, Katniss experiences a sexual awakening with the main hero of her story. Gale wants to be romantic with her, but she only responds to Peeta. Although their relationship used to be one-sided, Katniss finally realizes that she has certain feelings about Peeta that make them more compatible in a romantic relationship than she would be with Gale.

Despite the increase of romance in Catching Fire compared to The Hunger Games, Katniss still focuses primarily on the situation in Panem. As she and the tributes she is working with attempt to set up what she believes to be a trap for the tributes that are hunting them, she remembers what Haymitch told her as she was sent into the arena for a second time. She recalls that he said, “You just remember who the enemy is…. That’s all” (378). Then she considers his statement, asking, “why would I need reminding? I have always known who the enemy is. Who starves and tortures and kills us in the arena. Who will soon kill everyone I love” (378). The other tributes may be a threat to Katniss’s life, but they are not her true enemies; they have been forced into being killers and all they want is to survive. The leaders of the Capitol should be the targets of her wrath. As
she realizes this, she shoots an arrow covered in wire that destroys the force field around the arena (378). By taking down the defenses that hold the victors in, Katniss has made it possible for the rebels to fly in on hovercrafts and save her and some of the other victors (381). After her wounds from the arena are healed, Haymitch is able to explain that a plan was established before the Games that the victors would be broken out of the arena and a rebellion would be incited (385). He and Plutarch Heavensbee, one of the Gamemakers who was actually on the side of the rebels, tell her that she is going to be the face of the revolution in Panem (386). Katniss soon realizes why: “The bird, the pin, the song, the berries….I am the Mockingjay. The one that survived despite the Capitol’s plans. The symbol of the rebellion” (386-387). She is the one who started it all with the poisonous berries, so it makes sense for the rebels to pick her as a symbol. When Katniss asks about Peeta’s whereabouts, she is told he is in the Capitol and was only kept alive in order to keep her alive (387). Katniss’s romance and the fate of the country are once again conflated; she has not had a chance to have a relationship with Peeta outside of a tense context. She has to try to unite the people of Panem while worrying about the well-being of the only boy that gives her romantic feelings. Her role as a strong female protagonist in a dystopian novel with a love story means she has to balance relationships and societal problems, just like people in real life. Katniss’s appeal comes from her ability to endure so much and yet keep on going.
Mockingjay: “Real or not real?”

_Mockingjay_ is the conclusion to the _Hunger Games_ series, starting where _Catching Fire_ leaves off. Katniss has been saved from the arena and now lives in District Thirteen, once thought to have been exterminated, but actually surviving underground. The idea of Katniss as the Mockingjay, which was introduced in _Catching Fire_, has come to fruition; she is forced to act as the face of the rebellion in commercials and through live appearances. Peeta is eventually saved from the Capitol’s torture, but his memories of Katniss have been tainted so that he fears her. Katniss has to balance her duties as Mockingjay and Peeta’s damage with her own mental repercussions from being sent into the Hunger Games twice, causing post-traumatic stress symptoms. As the finale of the series, _Mockingjay_ gives the reader some closure both on the political situation in Panem and in Katniss’s relationships with Gale and Peeta. The romantic plot converges with the dystopian and because not just a choice between two boys, but a choice between political ideologies.

Katniss has to move from performing her romance with Peeta in the previous novels of the series to performing as the Mockingjay, representing the rebellion against the Capitol in political commercials called propos (short for “propaganda”). In setting up the Mockingjay’s persona, Plutarch comments that Katniss should appear to still be in love with Peeta, especially since she is supposedly pregnant (Collins _Mockingjay_ 39). He also makes a remark about how she is free to pursue a relationship with Gale off-camera (40). Katniss takes offense at the statement, especially “the implications that I could so readily dispose of Peeta, that I’m in love with Gale, that the whole thing has been an act…. The very notion that I’ve devoted any thought to who I want present as my lover,
given our current circumstances, is demeaning” (40). The authenticity of Katniss’s love for Peeta is being questioned yet again, even though she has done everything in her power to prove that it is real. Plutarch’s comment is also insulting because it insinuates that she wants Gale because he is close, since she cannot be with Peeta while he is in the Capitol, and it insinuates she is a silly teenage girl who puts romance above larger, more significant political concerns.

In addition to continuing her love with Peeta, Katniss has to be made more appealing. Peeta is good with words, so he can find the right thing to say to come off as charming. Katniss, however, has a rougher personality and therefore she does not do as well in making people like her. When they try to plan the sorts of things Katniss can do in her propos, Haymitch asks for “moment[s] where she made you feel something real” (74). Katniss listens as people reveal their choices:

The moments begin to come thick and fast and in no particular order.

When I took Rue on as an ally. Extended my hand to Chaff on interview night. Tried to carry Mags. And again and again when I held out those berries that mean different things to different people. Love for Peeta. Refusal to give in under impossible odds. Defiance of the Capitol’s humanity…. ‘They were Katniss’s [moments],’ says Gale quietly. ‘No one told her what to do or say.’ (75)

Katniss is always asked to act a certain way, but performance is not her strong suit. The instances that make her the most likable are the ones where she has taken it upon herself to do something. Her empowerment makes her an appealing figure; the oppressed people of Panem can see themselves in her, and seeing her actions allows them to think they can
be like her and rebel against the unfair regime of the Capitol. As a strong female protagonist, Katniss finds her own voice and in turn gives a voice to many others who otherwise would not be heard.

While Katniss tries to become the Mockingjay that the rebels want, she also has to deal with her concern for Peeta. She fears for his life since he has been captured, assuming the Capitol will torture him for information on the uprising (150). When she discusses her feelings with Prim, Prim makes the point that the people holding Peeta hostage have to keep him alive because he is the only person they can reach who Katniss cares about (150). The rest of Katniss’s family and friends are with the rebels in District Thirteen, so they cannot be used to manipulate her. Peeta is the ultimate tool to use to try to get Katniss to cooperate. The rebels also recognize Katniss’s connection to Peeta. A plan to retrieve Peeta from the Capitol is revealed, and Haymitch says that President Coin and the other leaders of the rebellion will do “whatever it takes to keep you going. We can’t lose the Mockingjay now” (164). Katniss is so crucial in her role as the face of the revolution that they will expend resources to save Peeta from the Capitol. Gale signs up for the rescue mission (165) because, despite his jealousy towards Peeta, he probably thinks that trying to save his romantic rival will make Katniss love him. It is Gale’s only attempt at sacrificing something for Katniss, unlike Peeta, who was willing to give up his own life in order to save Katniss. When Peeta is finally brought back from the Capitol, Katniss is disappointed: the boy she has been waiting for attempts to kill her when she tries to approach him (177). Beetee, a former victor and scientist, explains that the Capitol has used a powerful poison to “hijack” Peeta and taint his memories of Katniss with extreme fear, to the point where he does not know what is real or fabricated (180).
Katniss has finally started to realize that she has romantic feelings for Peeta, and now she cannot pursue that relationship because he will have nothing to do with her. It adds more stress to Katniss’s already intense life as Mockingjay.

At this point in the narrative, Katniss is emotionally separated from both of her love interests. Gale starts to grow even more angry and jealous than he already was. After Peeta comes back in less-than-ideal condition, Gale admits to thinking “something selfish” (197). When Katniss asks him to elaborate, he says, “I’ll never compete with that. No matter how much pain I’m in…. You’ll never be able to let him go. You’ll always feel wrong about being with me” (197). Gale is presented as the opposite of Peeta: instead of finding happiness in Katniss being able to get what she wants, he needs her to want him. Peeta was forced into disliking Katniss through the hijacking, but Gale is choosing to get angry with his one-time hunting partner. Gale’s anger comes through not just with Katniss, but also in his attempts to help the rebellion against the Capitol. He develops a plan that is used to blow up a mountain in District Two despite the fact that there was no prior reason to attack that mountain base; his desire to preemptively strike potentially innocent people makes Katniss angry (221-222). It seems like, with Gale’s plan, “you could turn it into an argument for killing anyone at any time. You could justify sending kids into the Hunger Games to prevent the districts from getting out of line” (222). Katniss and the other rebels are trying to prevent something like the Hunger Games from ever happening again, but Gale’s methods of attack justify actions like those taken by the Capitol to contain the people of Panem. He wants to do to the privileged citizens what they have always done to those with fewer advantages. However, Katniss sees that this is not the correct method of bringing about change in the country; brute
force has not worked well for the Capitol since the districts are now rebelling. Katniss and Gale have greatly differing opinions on the issue of rebellion, and this void between them may be insurmountable. Collins is projecting the political climate of Panem onto Katniss’s relationships. The rift opening between Gale and Katniss represents the larger gap in society opening up in the war between the Capitol and the districts. Just as Katniss needs to reject Gale’s anger and violence, the people of the country need to topple the government that is oppressing them. Katniss’s choice between Gale and Peeta is more than just a love story; it is a reflection of an ideological battle.

Peeta’s slow recovery from the hijacking is driving him away from Katniss. It takes a lot of rehabilitation to bring back Peeta’s good memories of Katniss because they have been warped by fear and anger. His new opinion on Katniss is particularly dismaying for the girl who just wants him to be better. She believes that “all those months of taking it for granted that Peeta thought I was wonderful are over. Finally, he can see me for who I really am. Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly. And I hate him for it” (232). Katniss fears that the boy she loves will not be able to feel the same way for her anymore. Peeta’s goodness and Katniss’s aspirations to be better are part of Collins’s inversion of the typical romance plot in which the woman has to help the man find the ability to love. Katniss is more masculine and Peeta is more feminine, so she plays the role of hero and he plays the heroine. Peeta’s love for Katniss has been seen repeatedly in his actions, and now Katniss needs to prove her love to him. Peeta usually makes Katniss feel like a better person. Their romance has given her the ability to be more than she thought she could be, but she cannot be the person Peeta thinks she is when he has been forced to hate her. However, there is some hope: Katniss and others are
able to try to bring back Peeta’s memory by playing a game where he states something he currently believes and someone will tell him whether it is “real or not real” (270). Slowly but surely, Peeta can be convinced that what he is remembering is untrue and that Katniss has done a lot in order to save him. The mental hijacking that is separating Katniss and Peeta can bring them back together.

Though they are set up as romantic rivals early in the series, Peeta and Gale do not directly interact until they are with Katniss in the Capitol as part of a team sent in to capture President Snow. While resting one night, Gale and Peeta discuss their feelings for Katniss and who they think she is going to choose (328-329). They do not realize she is awake, but she hears their conversation. The young men bond over their shared interest in the Girl on Fire, who they both have loved long before her initial Hunger Games. They have proved their love to her in different ways: Peeta helps keep her alive both times in the arena, and Gale stays in District Twelve to care for her family as well as his own (329). When considering what Katniss will do when she is forced to decide between Gale and Peeta, Gale is very blunt. He says, “It won’t be an issue much longer. I think it’s unlikely all three of us will be alive at the end of the war. And if we are, I guess it’s Katniss’s problem. Who to choose…. Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without” (329). Though the remark essentializes Katniss’s complicated feelings for both Peeta and Gale, it has some truth to it. Gale understands Katniss because they are very similar; both have struggled for most of their lives just to survive in harsh conditions, and he does not anticipate a change in Katniss just because the war will be ending. Though she has been conflicted over which boy she wants a romantic relationship with, Katniss will have to choose at some point between the angry young man who
reflects more of her personality or the one who is slowly working his way out of a
torture-induced hatred for her but whose regular personality is more gentle.

Katniss has kept herself together relatively well in spite of everything she has
been through, but the death of her sister near the end of the novel pushes her over the
edge. She is severely burned by the explosion that claims her sister’s life while she tries
to help some children hurt by a previous round of bombs (347). She deals at once with
the physical and emotional pain of having her skin healed and trying to wrap her mind
around the loss of Prim (348). While she is in the hospital,

there’s much pain but there’s also something like reality.... These things
frighten me, and I try to return to the deep to make sense of them. But
there’s no going back. Gradually, I’m forced to accept who I am. A badly
burned girl with no wings. With no fire. And no sister. (350)

Everything Katniss has been through surrounding the Hunger Games and their aftermath
was in order to keep Prim safe. She was Katniss’s greatest love in life, and she has been
taken from her. Even as the Mockingjay, Katniss could not prevent her sister from facing
harm. Prim’s death deals Katniss a massive blow to her already fragile psyche. It also
forces Katniss and Gale apart permanently. She finds out that Gale may have been the
mastermind behind the trap that was intended for the citizens of the Capitol but ended up
killing Prim and others (357). This becomes Katniss’s strongest association with her
former friend: “even now I can see the flash that ignites her, feel the heat of the flames.
And I will never be able to separate that moment from Gale” (367). The pair was already
being separated by their disagreements on how to most effectively bring a revolution to
Panem, and Gale’s prevailing violence finally breaks Katniss away from him. She has
experienced enough anger and fire in her two times through the Games and the war in the
country to not want to be constantly reminded of the act that killed her sister. Katniss
cannot have a romantic relationship with Gale because he is no better than President
Snow and the people of the Capitol. Her choice of which relationship to pursue also
shows the political change being experienced in Panem. Katniss chooses not to go with
someone who symbolizes the violence of the previous regime, and instead she loves
Peeta, a young man who offers the optimism and peace that new leadership could bring.
She breaks the cycle of negativity that she fought against in favor of something better not
just for her, but for her country as well.

Katniss has been seen as powerful throughout the series, and she gets two last
opportunities to use her power. First, she votes with a group of surviving tributes on
whether or not to hold a final Hunger Games for the children of the Capitol, at the
suggestion of President Coin (369). Katniss considers her reasoning for voting either
way, though she finds it somewhat pointless because “all those people I loved, dead, and
we are discussing the next Hunger Games in an attempt to avoid wasting life. Nothing
has changed. Nothing will ever change now” (370). As much as she stands against the
violence and reasoning that led to the imposition of the Hunger Games in the first place,
Katniss can only see the continuing cycle of people oppressing and killing each other.
She votes to hold one last Hunger Games to make up in some small way for the loss of
Prim; Haymitch votes with her and their votes carry the decision to put children into the
arena one last time in order to send a message to the people of the Capitol (370-371). She
barely has time to consider what she has voted for when she is whisked away to a
ceremony where she will assassinate President Snow to signal the end of the war (370).
She thinks about the sort of leader Snow was and compares him to Coin. She recalls a conversation she had with Snow where “we had agreed not to lie to each other” (372). Katniss realizes that, while horrible, Snow did not blatantly lie and manipulate her in the ways that President Coin has. She takes her arrow and instead uses it to take out Coin (372). Panem loses its new leader, but Katniss is able to act one last time to change the course of her country’s future. She is eventually acquitted of the crime due to the psychological damage she has undergone from being in two Hunger Games and a war (378). Though Katniss has done something that is morally gray by shooting the woman who is supposed to be the new President of Panem instead of the man she is supposed to assassinate, she has likely saved the country from following a similar trajectory to the one they faced under Snow. Katniss is a strong female protagonist who shows the reader that one person can completely change the fate of a nation.

Along with the political climate in Panem, Katniss’s love life is finally resolved at the end of Mockingjay. Gale, previously seen as Peeta’s competition, moves to District Two to work for Panem’s military (384). This geographic separation is the final wedge between Katniss and Gale that keeps them apart forever. Without the threat of Gale, Peeta is able to come back to District Twelve and pursue a relationship with Katniss. Both have been psychologically scarred by the traumas they have been through in less than two years, but they are able to help each other heal. Katniss finally understand what Peeta does for her:

What I need to survive is not Gale’s fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that
life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again.

And only Peeta can give me that. (388)

Gale is too similar to Katniss in order for a romantic relationship between them to succeed. Peeta is a better foil for her, balancing her anger and toughness with his softness. The way that Peeta can love Katniss in ways that others cannot brings to mind Radway's finding that the Smithton women most liked romances that ended with the protagonist finding a man who treats her how she wants to be treated. Since her father's death and her mother's failure to care for her, Katniss has always had to focus on survival. Now that she and Peeta are out of the Hunger Games, the war is over, and their lives are more stable, she can pursue the happiness that she gets through her relationship with Peeta. He is even able to convince her to start a family, since the threat of her children being sent into the Games has been eliminated (389). Katniss has been able to use her empowerment to help the present and future citizens of Panem, and now she can finally do something for herself. After a hard-fought struggle against an oppressive government, she finally has the freedom to live her own life.
Conclusion

Strong female protagonists, such as Katniss Everdeen of Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* series, have made an impact in the current market of young adult literature. They bring changes to both romance and science fiction by blending gendered traits and genres into something completely new. As unlikely as girls may be as dystopian heroes, they can be the most effective by overcoming not just the oppression they face in their own societies but the patriarchy that is common in the fictional societies in which their stories are written. The most empowered female characters subvert the traditional hero narratives of masculine traits and brute force equating to power. The use of feminine traits like compassion and emotion to create change and to empower others gives a value to these traditionally feminine traits that is not generally bestowed upon them. Strong female protagonists show readers that anyone can have the power to change their world.

The tension between science fiction and romance helps to make possible the strong female protagonists in this new hybrid literature. The characters can tackle societal problems and personal relationships, instead of only one or the other independently as is generally found in the disparate genres. Girls like Katniss, once forced to be either just like the boys (only more subservient) or overly feminine, have now been able to take on a wider range of characteristics and roles. Furthermore, Peeta and other boys are allowed to exhibit a broader romance of masculine and feminine characteristics. Instead of simply pursuing romance, girls can fight wars and change their societies, and instead of simply fighting wars, boys can care about relationships. Girls and boys in current YA science fiction can have loving relationships and at the same time take part in the action. These
characters offer more possibilities not only for themselves but for the people who read about them.

The lasting impact of strong female protagonists in YA dystopian literature will not be seen until some time has passed. Their emergence, as well as the surge of romance in science fiction for teenagers, is hopefully more than just a passing trend. Katniss and the characters that follow her are important because they offer different versions of girlhood, as well as new examples of female power. The Girl on Fire is able to incite a national rebellion simply by pulling out a handful of poisonous berries. She can be both masculine, with her hunting prowess and her lack of emotions, and feminine, with her compassion towards others. Katniss’s greatest strength comes from her seemingly feminine actions and from her self-empowerment. She is more realistic than her predecessors in both science fiction and romance because, like ordinary people, she has to balance the problems of her society with her relationships with Peeta and Gale. She may be rough, but in the end she is able to change the future of her country and receive the love that she wants. Her romance with Peeta makes her a better person than she is on her own. Both male and female readers can learn several lessons from Katniss: anyone can act in such a way as to impact a whole society, the traits that are often considered to be the weakest can be one’s strongest assets, and even romance can be empowering. Hopefully future characters in dystopian YA literature will be as complex and inspiring as Katniss Everdeen, the Girl on Fire.
Works Cited


