

Handmaids, Tributes, and Carers

Handmaids, Tributes, and Carers:

Dystopian Females' Roles and Goals

Edited by

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To Lisi Rose.

There would not be enough adjectives in any language to describe the impact and influence that she has had upon my life and my work. Her intellectual brilliance, belief in me, and devotion are, and have been, my beacon of light in an, oft times, bleak world.

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INTRODUCTION

MYRNA J. SANTOS

The Strength of Female Characters in Dystopian Worlds

Thomas More's coined term of "utopia" seems to be a Latin pun: it is used in the sense of eu-topia, a "good place" or "ideal society," which More claimed was his intended sense, but the spelling of u-topia means "nowhere" and is often taken to suggest that eutopia is impossible, as well as, nonexistent. More's term eventually suggested a more practical word, dystopia, and speculative narratives have benefited from this concept over the course of many years. Roles of females, from all stages of life, are often critical to these dystopian narratives, frequently posting females as particularly powerful heroines, and often in young adult manifestations, such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies, among others. This collection seeks to explore the totality of these rich and varied roles, and proposals focusing on fiction, television, film or other media.

Though several earlier usages are known, *dystopia* was deployed as an antonym for *Utopia* by J. S. Mill in one of his Parliamentary Speeches 1868 (*Hansard Commons*) by adding the prefix "dys" (Ancient Greek: δυσ- "bad"), reinterpreting the initial *U* as the prefix "eu" (Ancient Greek: ευ- "good") instead of "ou" (Ancient Greek: οὐ "not").

A dystopian society typically reflects contemporary sociopolitical realities and extrapolates worst-case scenarios. Dystopian fictions invariably depict the concerns and fears of its contemporaneous culture. It has been noted that while life as we know it deteriorates for future generations, we distract ourselves from disaster by passively watching it as entertainment.

In recent years, there has been seen a surge of popular dystopian young adult literature and films. The topic of 'change' is so much a part of everyday life that young people inevitably are questioning their futures and how life on Earth will eventually become.

Dystopias are often filled with pessimistic views of the ruling class or a government that is brutal or uncaring, ruling with an "iron hand" or "iron fist." These dystopian government establishments often have protagonists

or groups that lead a “*resistance*” to enact change within their society. Dystopian fiction also frequently draws stark contrasts between the privileges of the ruling class and the dreary existence of the working classes. The economic structures of dystopian societies in literature and other media have many variations. A theme which occurs frequently is state control of the economy, for instance, state capitalism versus a free market economy.

“Soft” Strength & Dystopian Heroines personify strong female characters in dystopian worlds; they are ever present

There are many ways to be strong, and some of them are more obvious than others. If you demonstrate your strength by wielding a sword, blaster, or a bow and arrow, it is easy for readers to cheer you on. Mere survival in a world that is designed to grind you beneath its wheels is the kind of strength that does not always elicit cheering. Resilience, resourcefulness, venturing to hope in a world that crushes those hopes—these are the strengths that I believe are the most admirable in heroines trapped inside a dystopian society. Above all, however, is the strength to extend kindness when brutality is the norm.

Dystopian governments rely upon two things as a means of maintaining the status quo: fear and the careful control of information. In this bleak form of society, kindness becomes a threat because kindness breeds understanding, partnership, a shared sense of purpose, hope—all the things that are the building blocks of community. And here is where female roles figure most strongly.

Within a tightly-controlled environment geared toward the advantage of few at the expense of many, kindness is a dangerous virtue because it can fuel the subversive urge to disobey. The crowds watching the Hunger Games are wowed by Katniss’s prowess with a bow and arrow, yes, but it is her kindness toward Rue that wins the people over. She is not simply a mighty gladiator, unbeaten in the arena. Her strength is her humanity in a world that has lost its ability to be humane. Through her empathy, she exposes the cruelty of the Capitol’s lust for bloody entertainment. The strength of her kindness leads to revolution, which is why her message must be suppressed. People must fear reaching out to one another or else the Capitol’s iron-fisted rule will falter.

Just as important, strength is thinking for yourself in a world that wants to tell you what to think. It is realizing that The System doesn’t have your best interests at heart. In fact, the System’s machinery depends on your

submission to the narrow roles that exist for your gender. Margaret Atwood, whose *The Handmaid's Tale* has defined the female dystopic role, had this to say on the subject in a *Paris Review* interview: “Men often ask me, ‘Why are your female characters so paranoid?’ It’s not paranoia. It’s recognition of their situation.”¹ In some sense, dystopian literature is tailor-made for female heroines because preserving yourself within an overwhelming system of oppression on which you also depend has been the lot of women for millennia. The way in which the fight is portrayed is what is new. Women are now warrior figures who take up the physical tasks of rebellion—fighting, shooting, and other demonstrations of physical prowess.

The following chapters will explore various views of the strength and valor of the dystopian female within the context of the many and varied situations she confronts as the life she must endure presents itself. A collage will be placed before you – to explore, to sense, to absorb, to gain knowledge, and for some, to be “entertained.” Let the games begin!

¹ Mary Morris, “Margaret Atwood: The Art of Fiction No. 121,” *The Paris Review* 117 (Winter 1990): <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2262/margaret-atwood-the-art-of-fiction-no-121-margaret-atwood>

PART I:
MOTHERS AND OTHERS

CHAPTER ONE

NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD
IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

BERIT ÅSTRÖM

Introduction

Despite the central role Katniss's mother plays in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy, very little scholarly attention has been paid to her.¹ If she is referred to at all by critics, it is in passing, mentioning her depression and abdication as a parent. Indeed, there has been very little scholarly work done on the representation of mothers and motherhood in general in the novels.² Scholars have instead analysed the novels from the perspective of philosophy and ethics (Dunn and Michaud 2012, Risko 2012, Jansen 2015), space and place (Garriott et al. 2014), politics, activism and rebellion (Littman 2011, Henthorne 2012, Clemente 2012, Day et al. 2014, Despain 2012, Montz 2012), identity formation (King 2012, Layfield 2013), media studies (Mortimore-Smith 2012, Muller 2012, Wezner 2012, Wright 2012), ecocriticism (Bland and Strotmann 2014, Burke 2015), and gender, particularly as performed by Katniss and Peeta (Lem and Hassel 2012, DeaVault 2012, Broad 2013, Woloshyn et al. 2013, Jaques 2014, Hansen 2015).

¹ The only study I have found that discusses Katniss's mother in depth is Katie Arosteguy's "'I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed': Transformative Motherhood and Maternal Influence" (2014).

² One exception is Jennifer Mitchell's psychoanalytically informed study "'A Mom-Shaped Hole': Psychoanalysis and the Dystopian Novel" (2016), in which she contrasts *The Hunger Games* with Patrick Ness's 2008 novel *The Knife of Never Letting Go*.

The novels have been categorized as “a deceptively easy read”³, and in this chapter I investigate their, perhaps overlooked, complexity in the representation of motherhood and reproductive choices. The way the character of Katniss’s mother⁴ develops throughout the novels disturbs literary and cultural expectations of a good mother. Equally thought-provoking, and potentially disruptive, is the treatment of Katniss’s ambivalent attitude towards her own potential motherhood and her eventual, reluctant decision to have children.

Young adult literature offers various models for life choices,⁵ which is why the representations of motherhood in Collins’s novels are so important. The actions and attitudes of literary protagonists, perhaps particularly in dystopian novels, demonstrate different ways of negotiating identity and society. The novels may also challenge the readers to view their own societies from different perspectives, for example as regards parenting. As Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Mateusz Marecki have argued in their analysis of maternity scripts in YA literature, “young readers are invited to rethink cultural models of motherhood”⁶. Although Collins’s novels depict societies and gendered relationships that are, in many ways, conventional and heteronormative, I argue that they, albeit tentatively, point towards more nuanced constructions of maternity. Not always presenting easy and clear-cut choices, the novels can be read as suggesting alternative ways of parenting, or even the option of not becoming a parent.

Mothers and daughters in YA novels

Traditionally, the relationship between mothers and daughters in YA novels has tended to be fraught. Authors often choose to present the mother as failing the daughter through inadequate care or lack of

³Brianna Burke, “‘Reaping’ Environmental Justice through Compassion in The Hunger Games.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, (2015): 546.

⁴ Neither of Katniss’s parents is named in the novel. Whilst critics tend to refer to the father by his relationship to Katniss, many choose to refer to the mother as Mrs Everdeen, a designation never used in the novels. I have opted to refer to her as Katniss’s mother, since that is the more important relationship.

⁵ Victoria Flanagan. “Gender Studies,” *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature*. London: Routledge, 2010. 26.

⁶ Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, and Mateusz Marecki, “Understanding Motherhood as Maturation: Maternity Scripts in Lois Lowry’s *Son*.” *Children’s Literature in Education* 46 (2015), 192.

emotional support. It has been argued that this narrative pattern reflects the inevitable contempt a teenage girl feels for her mother, as part of her struggle to gain autonomy, what Sara K. Day critically terms “the diminishment or destruction of one woman to make room for another”⁷. The inadequate mother and the difficulties she causes her daughter are, according to Frances Nadeau, to be understood as part of a “powerful message of comfort” to young readers, showing them that “others have experienced the pain and confusion of growing independence”⁸. The painful mother-daughter relationship is thus presented by Nadeau and others as part of a natural and inevitable process of maturation in which the mother must be rejected, a process the novels are supposed to make easier.

That such a process is natural and inevitable has been questioned, however, by scholars such as Hilary Crew. Referencing Marianne Hirsch’s analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in adult literature, Crew critiques what she sees as the use of a Freudian “‘female family romance’ plot in which mothers are rejected and absented so that their daughters can form mature attachments with a father (or husband)”⁹. Quoting research into the lives of real teenagers, Crew argues that “the patriarchal ideology and gender bias embedded in Freudian discourse” has led to a “devalu[ation of] girls’ attachments to their mother” as well as a devaluation of “the voices of mothers”¹⁰. Crew continues by contending that there are other ways of narrating mother-daughter stories, which focus on “connection rather than liberation and separation.” However, a cultural script that has been in effect at least since the nineteenth century favors a “dependent, de-idealized mother,” who functions as a foil for the strong daughter¹¹. At first glance, Katniss’s mother may be regarded as yet another example of this literary tradition.

Western culture requires a “mother who is always loving, selfless, tranquil; the one who finds passionate fulfillment in every detail of child

⁷ Sara K. Day, “‘I Would Never Be Strong Enough’: Sarah Dessen’s Postfeminist Mothers.” In *Mothers in Children’s and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*, Ed. Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coates, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017: 206.

⁸ Frances Nadeau, Frances. “The Mother/Daughter Relationship in Young Adult Fiction.” *The ALAN Review* 22.2, (1995). doi.org/10.21061/alan.v22i2.a.5.

⁹ Hilary Crew, “Illuminating Daughter-Mother Narratives in Young Adult Fiction.” *Theory Development in the Information Sciences*, Ed. Diane H. Sonnenwald, 264-282. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016: 266.

¹⁰ Ibid, 269.

¹¹ Ibid, 272.

rearing,” Shari Thurer argues in her seminal work on the cultural construction of motherhood¹². Imposing such expectations on mothers, the “dominant ideology is loath to admit that not all women make good mothers, that not all women should be mothers”¹³. Women who for various reasons cannot, or will not, comply with such expectations are often made to feel deficient. In literature, adult as well as YA, this is reflected in the demonisation of maternal characters who deviate from the expected roles. I suggest, however, that Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* novels gesture towards a recognition of a more complex view of motherhood and mothering, where a mother might temporarily abdicate from the maternal role, or re-formulate it according to her own needs, and yet not be vilified as a bad mother. On the surface, the novels follow the formula of the weak, dependent and failed mother, facilitating the strong and independent daughter, and, as in so many other YA novels, “the mother’s subjectivity” is “mediated through her daughter’s narration”¹⁴. It is, after all, through Katniss’s first-person narration that we learn about her mother. However, in my reading I posit that the novels depict a potentially more mother-centered way of mothering, and even hint at the option of choosing not to become a mother.

Mothering in the *Hunger Games* novels

The novels are set in a future, post-war US re-named Panem, which has been divided into twelve, initially thirteen, districts. Each district produces raw materials and products for the tyrannical government of the Capitol. Katniss Everdeen lives with her mother and sister in a particularly poverty-stricken section of the poor mining District 12, the Seam, where starvation is a common feature of life. When Katniss’s father dies in a mining accident and her mother withdraws into grief and depression, it falls on the then eleven-year-old Katniss to support the family through hunting, fishing and gathering.

In order to stamp out any potential rebellion, the government requires that every district annually sends two children between twelve and eighteen years as so-called tributes to the Capitol to fight to the death in the televised Hunger Games. At the beginning of *The Hunger Games*

¹² Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994: xxii.

¹³ Lisa Rowe Fraustino, “Abandoning Mothers,” *Mothers in Children’s and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*, Ed. Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coates, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017: 221.

¹⁴ Crew, 275.

(2008), Katniss, now sixteen, volunteers to take the place of her twelve-year-old sister, Prim, who has been selected to go. Katniss, together with her fellow tribute Peeta Mellark, makes use of public opinion to force the government to allow them to win jointly. During the course of the novel, a love triangle develops involving Katniss, her childhood friend Gale, and Peeta. In the second novel, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2009), it transpires that Peeta and Katniss have inspired a rebellion, and the government forces them to compete in another Game in order to crush it. In the third novel, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss becomes the figurehead of the rebellion. Together with Peeta and Gale, she helps overthrow the government, but Prim is killed and Katniss severely injured. After the rebellion, a broken Katniss retreats from public life and settles down in District 12. The novel ends with Katniss and Peeta becoming a couple. In the epilogue, set many years in the future, it is revealed that they have two children.

In the novels, Collins depicts a variety of mothers: from Peeta's violent and abusive mother, whom Katniss terms a "witch"¹⁵ to Gale's warm, caring and hardworking mother, Hazelle, to Katniss's friend Madge's mother, who is bedridden with "fierce headaches" because she lost her twin sister to the games¹⁶ (*Catching* 107). Apart from the widowed Hazelle, these mothers fall short of the ideal in one way or another, and even Hazelle is unable to earn enough money to feed her children.

Where a mother in other YA novels may be "more of a prop than an active character"¹⁷, Katniss's mother plays a central role in all the novels, both when physically present and in Katniss's thoughts when she is not. Throughout much of the narrative, Katniss voices the cultural resentment towards a mother who does not live up to the expectations, a "woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones"¹⁸. After her husband's death, the mother is expected to find a job, as Hazelle did, but her emotional paralysis makes her unable to support her children. Katniss states that in hindsight she realizes "that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well"¹⁹. Katniss continually remarks on her mother's inadequacy as a parent and provider,

¹⁵ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, (New York: Scholastic, 2008), 45.

¹⁶ Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, (New York: Scholastic, 20), 107.

¹⁷ Einat Natalie Palkovich, "The 'Mother' of All Schemas: Creating Cognitive Dissonance in Children's Fantasy Literature Using the Mother Figure." *Children's Literature in Education* 46 (2015), 187.

¹⁸ Collins, *Hunger*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

and how this forces her to take on adult responsibilities, in many ways becoming the mother of her own mother: “I will always have to protect her”²⁰. She notes that in the end Prim too learns to treat their mother as a child from whom bad news must be kept, becoming “a young woman who...knows our mother can hear only so much”²¹.

As indicated, the novels are narrated in the first person by Katniss. She is very critical of her mother, not only for what she sees as her mother’s selfish indulgence in grief, but also of her appearance, habits and ideas. It is noted that the mother, who came from the merchant class, is “out of place,” and remains an outsider in the mining community of the Seam. The mother, unlike others in the community, cares about table manners and appearances, which Katniss constructs as negative, and even her taste in food is compared with her husband’s and criticized: Katniss remembers how her father bought her an orange as a treat, and contrasts that with how her “mother adores coffee,” which “tastes bitter and thin to me”²². Initially, it appears that to Katniss everything her mother is, or stands for, is wrong. Critics have chimed in with this seemingly relentless criticism, referring to Katniss’s mother’s “femininity” which is revealed in her “melancholy and weak temperament”²³, her “daintiness” and “maternal defection”²⁴, and her inability to care for her daughters²⁵.

The representation of Katniss’s mother, and her critical reception, can be read in the light of Rosie Jackson’s thought-provoking analysis of “mothers who leave.” Jackson discusses cultural expectations of mothers, and how literary mothers who choose to, or are forced to, leave their children are “actively maligned, punished, trivialised or marginalised out

²⁰ Collins, *Catching*, 38.

²¹ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*, (New York: Scholastic, 20), 40.

²² Collins, *Hunger*, 67.

²³ Jennifer Mitchell, “‘A Mom-Shaped Hole’: Psychoanalysis and the Dystopian Maternal,” in *Mothers in Children’s and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*, ed. Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 130.

²⁴ Rodney M. DeaVault, “The Masks of Femininity: Perception of the Feminine in *The Hunger Games* and *Podkayne of Mars*,” in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 192, 193.

²⁵ Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel, “‘Killer Katniss’ and ‘Love Boy’ Peeta: Suzanne Collins’s Defiance of Gender-Genred Reading,” in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 123.

of existence”²⁶. Such texts are “unremittingly” narrated from the child’s perspective and “the *mother’s* emotional and psychological reality, *her* inner needs, are left out of the picture” (19, original emphasis).²⁷ Although physically present, Katniss’s mother withdraws emotionally when her husband dies, abdicating from all responsibility.²⁸ Katniss, the focalizer of the story, is seemingly unable to see her mother’s point of view, or forgive her.

There is a parallel narrative of the mother, however. Katniss, who is not always a reliable narrator,²⁹ denounces her mother as passive and apathetic, yet at the same time presents her as active, capable, and respected in the community. Although the mother did withdraw into a state of depression when her husband died five years earlier, by the beginning of *Hunger*, she works as an apothecary. In *Catching Fire* she continues this work, taking an active part in village life, whilst caring for Katniss and Prim in the house Katniss has been given in the Victors’ Village. The mother also returns to her work as a healer, for example treating Gale after he has been flogged, impressing Katniss by turning into “a woman immune from fear”³⁰. In *Mockingjay*, she continues her work as a healer in District 13.

However, she does not mother in the way that Katniss expects. After Prim’s death in *Mockingjay*, Katniss is convalescing from her severe injuries, but although she and her mother share a room, the mother “is almost never there, taking her meals and sleeping at work”³¹. The mother privileges other people’s health over Katniss’s and it falls to Haymitch, the coach of male tributes from District 12, to nurse her back to health. As Katniss states, after Prim’s death, her mother “buries her grief in her

²⁶ Rosie Jackson, *Mothers Who Leave: Behind the Myth of Women without their Children*, (London: Pandora, 1994), 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. Lisa Rowe Fraustino notes how such “unexamined representations of selfish abandoning mothers help to perpetuate backlash culture by inculcating antifeminist resentments in young readers” (219).

²⁸ Jennifer Mitchell refers to how Katniss wishes to distance herself from her “love-struck and subsequently heartbroken mother,” suggesting that the mother’s love for the father also counts against her (130).

²⁹ Katherine R. Broad, for example, notes how Katniss simultaneously rejects and embraces the extravagances of the Capitol (“‘The Dandelion in the Spring’: Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, in *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, ed. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz, (London: Routledge, 2013), 119.

³⁰ Collins, *Catching*, 136.

³¹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, 411.

work”³². She finally chooses to move to District Four, to “set up a hospital”³³. In effect, the mother reverts to a career she had pursued before her husband’s death and chooses that over her daughter.

Although the narrative suggests that Katniss and her mother stay in touch, the mother chooses not to be physically present in her daughter’s future life after the rebellion. Discussing how literature constructs mothers, Jackson poses the question, “outside her relationship to her child, how can a mother exist at all?”³⁴ She contends that culturally, the mother without a child, the absent mother, is perceived as “grammatical nonsense,” a violation of “an internal grammar of motherhood” which regulates how women should relate to their children³⁵. A woman who leaves her children becomes impossible to describe, and is often punished by the narrative with emotional anguish, depression and death. She is not allowed to move on and construct a meaningful existence for herself.

This is where Collins’s text breaks with literary tradition. Although Katniss is angry with her mother throughout the novels, struggling with a need for comfort, yet not feeling able to trust her, she comes to re-evaluate her, and particularly her skills. During the Games, Katniss remembers things she has been taught, not only by her father, but also her mother, and she laments the fact that “I am not my mother”³⁶. When she needs to do more than just hunt, when she needs to care for the injured Peeta, she comes to value her mother’s skills and recognize her good qualities. She also recognizes that her mother has an identity outside that of mother: “When a sick or dying person is brought to her...this is the only time I think my mother knows who she is”³⁷. Her mother performs her maternal duties well enough, at least as far as Prim is concerned, but she appears to identify more strongly with her role as a healer. The parallel narrative perspective of the mother thus reflects Katniss’s maturation, which gives her the ability to accept that her mother is a person with her own needs and motivations.

The novels also deviate from the cultural notion that when a mother leaves, she leaves permanently and can never come back: “Her actions are final and irrevocable”³⁸. Although Katniss’s mother moves to a different district to pursue her own life and interests, she sends Katniss a letter, and

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 443.

³⁴ Jackson, 45.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Collins, *Hunger* 312.

³⁷ Collins, *Catching*, 135-36.

³⁸ Jackson, 43.

Katniss phones her in return. There is no representation of what happens later, but the narrative hints at a continued relationship.³⁹ If so, it is a relationship predicated not only on the daughter's needs.

When moving away from cultural expectations of the selfless, self-sacrificing mother, it becomes possible to appreciate the complexity of the representation of Katniss's mother. She can be viewed as an attempt at showing a different type of motherhood, in which the mother's subjectivity and needs are also addressed, and where a mother is permitted to choose to put herself before her child, and still survive to the end of the story. In this way, the novels invite the readers to "rethink cultural models of motherhood"⁴⁰. Jackson argues that representations of mothering "do not merely *mirror*, so much as *reproduce* or manufacture, a specific set of values and rules about the role of women"⁴¹. That makes this kind of representation important. The reader, who may not necessarily identify solely with Katniss, is shown that there are different ways of mothering, and that although, as Lisa Row Fraustino writes, "[m]otherhood...is a life sentence"⁴², there are different ways in which it can be served. Although "[i]deology dictates it as natural that women need to be mothers, mothers need their children, and children need their mothers"⁴³, it could be argued that Katniss's mother opens up for a different type of mothering, where relationships change, and a mother can prioritize herself over her child. Jackson notes the "old moral message: a mother who leaves cannot be allowed to succeed or survive," but Katniss's mother does both⁴⁴.

Choosing not to become a mother

Dominant western cultural, political and medical ideologies dictate that all women must want to become mothers. Motherhood is constructed as the core of feminine identity and a woman who is not a mother is not complete. This pronatalist stance is at times so strong that women are coerced into having children, leading to them later regretting motherhood, as Orna Donath has demonstrated⁴⁵. Rejecting motherhood, opting not to

³⁹ Mary Borsellino chooses to assume that the mother has "left Katniss forever" but there is nothing in the novel to suggest that (39).

⁴⁰ Deszcz-Tryhubczak, and Marecki, 192.

⁴¹ Jackson, 18. Original emphasis.

⁴² Fraustino, 223.

⁴³ Ibid, 219-20.

⁴⁴ Jackson, 41.

⁴⁵ Orna Donath, "Choosing Motherhood? Agency and Regret within Reproduction and Mothering Retrospective Accounts." *Women's Studies International Forum* 33

have children, is regarded as an ill-advised, ill-informed failure and women who make that choice are represented as “aberrant, immature, and unfeminine”⁴⁶. As Rosemary Gillespie has shown, women who opt for “voluntary childlessness” find their choices questioned, or are told that they will “change their minds with the onset of maturity”⁴⁷. Cultural pressures to have children are evidenced in the *Hunger Games* novels, particularly in Katniss’s conflicted feelings towards her own, potential motherhood. Her ambivalence, and the way the situation is resolved disturbs and disrupts heteronormative ideals. The ending does not present easy answers; it does instead invite continued questioning.

A feature of the oppressive societal structures in dystopian YA literature is “control of reproductive freedom”⁴⁸. In the *Hunger Games* novels this attempt at control is perhaps most overt in the observation that refugees are brought into the rebel-controlled District 13 because they are needed as “[n]ew breeding stock,” to make up the numbers⁴⁹. A more subtle representation is the narrative’s ambivalent attitude towards childbearing: balancing societal expectations against Katniss’s reluctance on the subject. As Bradford et al. have noticed in their study of children’s literature, even in novels which purport to be carrying out a “utopian enterprise,” striving toward social change, “the (heterosexual) marriage norm remains a highly valued social arrangement and fictional families remain tied to societal notions of ‘normality’”⁵⁰. Although Collins’s novels are set in a future world very different from the society in which they were written, they retain a number of conservative features.

In the heteronormative community of District 12 it is taken for granted that people will form relationships and reproduce; Katniss’s descriptions of life in the Seam evidence a strong emphasis on heterosexual two-parent families. Gale and Peeta both expect to have children. Yet, throughout all three novels, Katniss displays an ambivalent attitude towards having

(2015a): 200-209; “Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis.” *Signs* 40.2, (2015b): 343-367.

⁴⁶ Rosemary Gillespie, “When No Means No: Disbelief, Disregard and Deviance as Discourse of Voluntary Childlessness.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23 (2000): 225.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁸ Carrie Hintz, “Monica Hughes, Lois Lowry, and Young Adult Dystopias.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26 (2002): 254

⁴⁹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, 9.

⁵⁰ Clare Bradford, , Kerry Mallan, John Stephen and Robyn McCallum, ed. *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 133.

children in what Katie Arosteguy terms the novels' "overarching meta-narrative of mothering"⁵¹. Only a few pages into the first novel she states that she "never want[s] to have kids"⁵² (*Hunger* 11). Later, during the Games, she reflects that she will "never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world"⁵³, demonstrating that she has internalized the culture of the Seam: marriage without children does not appear to be an option. Although it appears that Katniss's main concern about children is the danger of the Games, she also seems uncertain whether there will be a future for her, and whether that should really include children. In *Catching Fire*, she returns to the question of children, briefly entertaining the notion that she might "one day have kids with Gale," before dismissing the idea as "a mistake" that was "never part of my plan"⁵⁴. Having children is clearly not a straight-forward concept for her, but she evidently feels that she needs to justify why she might not want them.

Nevertheless, in the epilogue it transpires that she and Peeta now have two children. To some critics, this is a happy ending. As Sarah Rees Brennan sums it up: "Katniss and Peeta have aged at least fifteen years and have children, and their society has been successfully readjusted"⁵⁵. Having children appears to be part of such a readjustment. One critic reads Katniss's motherhood as a "reward for her hard work and sacrifice," as well as a sign that she has "embrace[d]" her "maternal instincts"⁵⁶. Another suggests that Katniss having children "demonstrates [her] acceptance of herself" and her insight that "performing mothering afford[s] one the most growth"⁵⁷. The assumption is that Katniss, like all young women, wants to have children, as long as it happens in a safe environment. Her reluctance to have children is even pathologized; Blythe Woolston diagnoses Katniss's

⁵¹ Katie Arosteguy, "'I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed': Transformative Motherhood and Maternal Influence," in *Space and Place in The Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels*, ed. Deidre Anne Evans Garriott, Elaine Jones Whitney and Julie Elizabeth Tyler, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 146. Arosteguy reads the novels as a teleological "journey to motherhood," in which the main point is that Katniss reaches "maternal understanding" so that she can be able to "conceive of herself as a mother" (151-152).

⁵² Collins, *Hunger*, 146.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁵⁴ Collins, *Catching*, 427.

⁵⁵ Sarah Rees Brennan, "Why So Hungry for The Hunger Games?" in *The Girl Who Was on Fire*, ed. Leah Wilson, (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2011), 10.

⁵⁶ DeaVault, m197.

⁵⁷ Arosteguy, 157, 153.

ambivalence as a symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder⁵⁸. As Gillespie has found, the choice not to become a mother is often framed as “psychological illness”⁵⁹. The critics thus take the same position as the medical professionals, co-workers and relatives described by Gillespie’s voluntarily childless informants: they do not believe the character Katniss when she states what she wants. They assume that she will change her mind, once she has grown up, or that her desire not to have children stems from the trauma she has experienced during the Games.

Other scholars have criticized the epilogue. Some regard it as a “cop-out,” a reversion from the gender-transcending to the heteronormative. Mike Cadden, who opposes epilogues in literature in general, as “an antiquated narrative form “for which there “certainly can be no place” only finds Collins’s use of it permissible since it shows that Katniss does not live happily ever after.⁶⁰ She is forced to cope with the psychological aftereffects of severe emotional trauma, “show[ing] us that a life can be had following such horror”⁶¹. Yet, no critic seems to have reacted to how the narrative describes the circumstances of the children’s conception.

In a story that supposedly displays the protagonist’s strength of will and courage, the description of how Katniss came to be a mother is quite disturbing. She states that it “took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly”⁶². These phrases conjure up images of Peeta pestering Katniss, not taking no for an answer. That it takes her so long to acquiesce can be interpreted as an indication of how strongly she desires not to have children: she has been coerced into motherhood. Broad has noted that Katniss as a revolutionary “yields to others to make decisions for her”⁶³. Similarly, she does not choose a partner; “in the end, the men make the choice for her”⁶⁴, since Gale moves away to District Two, while Peeta remains in District 12, caring for Katniss. Eventually they become lovers, although this development is not presented so much as something Katniss chooses, as Peeta wearing down her resistance, what

⁵⁸ Blythe Woolston, “Bent, Shattered, and Mended: Wounded Minds in the Hunger Games.” in *The Girl Who Was on Fire*, ed. Leah Wilson, (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2011), 165.

⁵⁹ Gillespie, 224.

⁶⁰ Mike Cadden, “All Is Well, The Epilogue in Children’s Fantasy Fiction,” *Narrative* 20.3: 2012, 355, 343.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁶² Collins, *Mockingjay*, 454.

⁶³ Broad 124-25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

Zoe Jaques refers to as a “somewhat forced union”⁶⁵. Becoming a mother is yet another decision that someone else makes for her.

Overall, sex does not play much of a part in Katniss’s life. Sara K. Day has discussed how YA dystopian literature treats young female protagonists’ sexual desires and reproductive choices, most often framing them as problematic, “figur[ing] young women’s sexuality as threatening rather than natural or empowering,” taking the choices away from them⁶⁶. She points to the heteronormative assumptions informing many novels, “anticipat[ing the characters’] seemingly inevitable futures as wives and mothers”⁶⁷, which can be seen as an echo of how culture views all women as “future mothers.” Throughout the novels, Katniss does not display any sexual desire, apart from a few instances of experiencing emotions she does not understand, when kissing Peeta. At no time is there a question of lust, of a desire to explore her own sexuality.⁶⁸ Day links YA novels with western concerns about “women maintaining their chastity” reflected in “social and political discourses in which young women themselves are almost never invited to participate”⁶⁹. In the same way, the novels present Katniss as chaste, uninterested in sex. She is not allowed to make decisions about her love life. Haymitch and Peeta concoct the idea that Katniss and Peeta should present themselves as “star-crossed lovers,” without discussing it with her. Peeta later announces the lie that Katniss is pregnant as part of the Game, again without consulting her. These are decisions she is not allowed to make for herself. Katniss’s choice to have children could be interpreted in the same way. She did not want to, but since Peeta “wanted them so badly” she gave in.

In the heteronormative script of motherhood, it is claimed that women may be reluctant to have children, but once they are born, everything will fall into place, and they will experience the bliss of motherhood. In the epilogue, Katniss makes it clear that this has not happened for her. When she felt the fetus move during the first pregnancy, “I was consumed with a

⁶⁵ Zoe Jaques, “‘This Huntress Who Delights in Arrows’: The Female Archer in Children’s Fiction,” in *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*, ed. Lori M. Campbell, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 160.

⁶⁶ Day, 91.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ This could be compared with Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011), which also features a sixteen-year-old protagonist, Tris. Despite having led a sheltered life, where physical contact is circumscribed, she recognises that she is physically attracted to a young man, and acts on that attraction.

⁶⁹ Day, 84.

terror that felt as old as life itself"⁷⁰. The second pregnancy "was a little easier, but not much"⁷¹. Holding the children in her arms "tame[s]" the terror, but does not take it away. There is nothing reassuring or life-affirming about Katniss's description of how she became a mother, or the future she envisions, although she does state that "Peeta says it will be OK"⁷². The language she uses is instead reminiscent of that used by some of Orna Donath's informants, women who regret having had children. These Israeli women's lives are affected by the government's pronatalist policy where it is an "obligation to be a mother"⁷³. Many of the informants have known "sometimes since childhood," that they did not want children, like Katniss, who knew this at the age of 16.

Katniss's resistance finally breaking down owing to Peeta's insistent pleas echoes the statement of one of Donath's informants that "[s]ince the day we got married, he just wouldn't stop...putting terrible pressure on me to have children"⁷⁴. The woman went along with the husband's demands even though "I felt all along that it's...wrong"⁷⁵. Another woman stated that she did not want children, but felt that "it was the price I had to pay for my relationship"⁷⁶. If she wanted to be part of a couple, she would have to become a mother. This resonates with Katniss's seeming inability of envisaging adult sexual relationships that do not involve children: "the kind of love that leads to ...children"⁷⁷. In the world Katniss inhabits, just as in the real world of the readers, love is expected to result in children.

Katniss's reminiscences in the epilogue may be intended to be read as romantic, as a testament to how much she loves Peeta, and to his abilities as a father, but there are sinister undertones to the text that may support the "cultural-temporal heteronormative logics that often affect our choices and actions"⁷⁸. The description of Katniss's experiences plays into the "hegemonic assumption" that being a mother "naturally leads to the evaluation of motherhood as worthwhile" regardless of "the varying difficulties"⁷⁹. As one of Donath's informants states: "It is other people's

⁷⁰ Collins, *Mockingjay*, 454.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Collins, *Mockingjay*, 455.

⁷³ Donath, 201.

⁷⁴ Donath, 205.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Collins, *Hunger*, 453.

⁷⁸ Donath, 203.

⁷⁹ Donath, 205.

dream, but you've still realized it"⁸⁰. Similarly, children were never part of Katniss' idea of the future, but she has fulfilled Peeta's dream.

Katniss lives in a fictional world, which operates under its own laws, but the way this world constructs relationships, families and childbirth echoes those of the real world in which the readers live. The novels depict a world of unquestioned heteronormativity, where the desire to not have children needs to be defended. It is also a world in which a woman can be coerced into marriage and motherhood. It is important that this is recognized, and not dismissed as a character's immaturity or posttraumatic stress. Acknowledged for what they are, Katniss's "somewhat forced union" with Peeta⁸¹ and reluctant motherhood are thus disruptive and disturbing, but they may help readers to not only "understand how their own choices are driven by much larger, and often invisible forces"⁸², but also allow them to question the heteronormative scripts of marriage and parenthood. Just as the representation of Katniss's mother may allow readers to challenge their view of mothers, the representation of Katniss's ambivalence and conflicted emotions may allow readers to consider whether having children at all is something for them.

Conclusion

Young adult novels, particularly dystopian ones, may make it possible for young readers to interrogate and problematize their own societies from a number of angles, for example politics, environmental issues, identity and gender. As the wide-ranging critical work on the *Hunger Games* series indicates, these novels contain a number of issues for readers to consider. I argue that those issues include how motherhood can be figured and lived – what can be expected of a mother – as well as the question of whether one should become a mother at all. In the end, Katniss does have children, but readers are invited to consider whether that happens as a result of a considered and autonomous choice, or through coercion, and they are also invited to consider what effects this may have on Katniss in the future. It is unfortunate then, that critical work has tended to close down such considerations, dismissing Katniss's mother as weak and ineffectual, and Katniss herself as naive and misguided when she considers not having

⁸⁰ Donath, 359.

⁸¹ Jaques, 160.

⁸² Julia Pulliam, "Real or Not Real – Katniss Everdeen Loves Peeta Melark [sic]: The Lingering Effects of Discipline in the 'Hunger Games' Trilogy," in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, ed. Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Bartee and Amu L. Montz, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 184.

children.⁸³ I contend that the characters are more complex than that. In the end the novels do not provide easy answers; instead they invite their readers to raise questions.

⁸³ Particularly potentially damaging is the way in which Katniss's ambivalence is pathologized in a critical anthology aimed specifically at YA readers (Woolston).

CHAPTER TWO

“WHY SHOULD IT BE US WHO DIE FOR YOU?”: DYSTOPIAN REPRODUCTION IN *THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS*

ROGER DAVIS

1. Introduction

Colm McCarthy’s 2016 film *The Girl with All the Gifts* begins with the audio of a girl’s voice counting up from the number one. A shouting male voice interrupts her with a number of phrases, from commands of “transit,” “wakey, wakey,” and “rise and shine” to insults towards the children as “friggin’ abortions.”¹ As the light rises, we see the counting girl, Melanie (Sennia Nanua), in a cell, and she seats herself in a wheelchair. Soldiers enter the cell and proceed to strap Melanie into the chair at gunpoint. The soldiers roll Melanie down a concrete hallway and into a roomful of other similarly seated and strapped children. The soldiers leave through the only door, and a woman subsequently enters, taking a position at the front of the room and beginning a rigid and rote chemistry lesson about the periodic table.

Set in a military complex, the opening scene establishes some of the crucial themes for the film. The “transit” of the children represents how people move through their daily lives from one context to another, from prisoner to pupil. The commands to “rise and shine” show the habitual nature of our schedules, often measured down to the minute. While being told to “rise and shine,” the children are paradoxically dis-abled, confined to wheelchairs, and prevented from getting up. The harsh insult “friggin’ abortion” amplifies the dystopian tenor of the film. The term *abortion*

¹ *The Girl with All the Gifts*, directed by Colm McCarthy (2016; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2017), DVD.