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8. “I TRY TO REMEMBER WHO I AM AND WHO I AM NOT”

The Subjugation of Nature and Women in The Hunger Games

Several assumptions surround popular discourse about Suzanne Collins’s commercially successful Hunger Games series, including one that regards Katniss Everdeen, its protagonist, as offering young female readers access to a newly empowered subject position. In “Brave, Determined, and Strong: Books for Girls (and Sometimes Boys),” Ward and Young (2009) state:

When choosing a book for a girl, merely reaching for any old book with female characters isn’t enough. Care should be taken to find books that feature strong female literary role models, allowing girls to explore their own identities, claim their own voices, and gain confidence, particularly during the adolescent years. (p. 257)

The authors identify *The Hunger Games*, the first novel in Collins’s (2008) series, as a literary text that educators can utilize to help female readers toward these ends. In these terms, Collins is understood to present readers with a self-actualized female character that breaks down gender inequalities.

Gonick (2006) identifies two competing discourses that offer opposing views on femininity: what she calls “Reviving Ophelia,” which portrays “girls as vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile,” and “Girl Power,” which “represents a ‘new girl’: assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity” (p. 2). At first glance, Collins’s (2008) novel appears firmly ensconced in the latter category. Katniss is athletic, adventurous, skilled with weapons and brave, characteristics that are often drawn as masculine in popular culture texts. Moreover, she performs tasks that are associated with men, and, in doing so, she subverts—sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly—traditional female gender roles. Following her father’s death, Katniss provides for her family by hunting, and throughout much of the first novel she laments her inability to tend to the sick with the same degree of care and aptitude her mother and younger sister exhibit. Seen in this light, Collins (2008) does appear to open a greater number of subject positions to young women by portraying a strong female protagonist. At the same time, however, this reading overlooks the seemingly important fact that, at least in the first novel, Katniss *does* struggle to define herself in the face of patriarchal institutions that *do*, in fact, change her, even if only subtly. To survive in a society that is engineered by men to benefit men, Collins (2008) demonstrates that even a strong female like Katniss is forced to construct an alternative identity that enables her to create the

impression of having conformed to gender expectations that her society imposes on her. In this sense, she assumes a sort of double consciousness.

In *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*, Booker (1994) argues, “The modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems” (p. 20). A critical examination of *The Hunger Games* reveals that, by engaging in the kind of social criticism that Booker (1994) suggests is characteristic of dystopian fiction, Collins (2008) accomplishes something considerably more complex in her novel, and potentially even subversive, than is commonly assumed. Specifically, she demonstrates how the same oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework that motivates governments and corporations to exploit nature and degrade the environment, both symbols of the feminine, leads them to enact policies that subjugate and exploit disenfranchised groups, including women, minorities, and people in poverty. In this way, *The Hunger Games* shares an assumption that is characteristic of ecofeminist philosophy—namely, that “the specifics that both environmentalism and feminism separately oppose stems from the same sources: the patriarchal construction of modern Western civilization” (Murphy, 1995, p. 48).

Critics occasionally deride speculative fiction—an umbrella term used to refer to a range of genres, including science fiction (SF), fantasy, utopian and dystopian fiction—as *genre fiction* with the result being that they dismiss it as a form of superficial entertainment. The cultural expectations that have historically accompanied young adult literature—namely, that it must perform a didactic function—coupled with its status as a commodity, subject it to additional stigmas and mischaracterizations. Indeed, as Daniels (2006) argues, there remain critics in both secondary and higher education who insist that young adult literature does not warrant serious “attention because it doesn’t offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon” (p. 78). One might assume, then, that young adult dystopian fiction represents the low-person on the literary totem pole.

In this chapter, I advocate reading speculative fiction for adolescents—specifically, young adult dystopian fiction—from the standpoint of critical theory to make visible the genre’s potential complexity and to foreground the important political work it is capable of performing. To do so, I examine *The Hunger Games*, the first novel in Collins’s (2008) series, from the perspective of ecofeminist literary theory to demonstrate how, in the fictional world that Collins constructs, the patriarchal mindset of the Capitol leads it to treat marginalized groups of people, specifically females, as fodder to be remade and consumed by the powerful.

This reading is evident in Collins’s (2008) portrayal of Katniss, a teenage girl who, from the moment she volunteers to participate in the Hunger Games, a state-sponsored spectacle akin to reality television in which children of the poor murder one another for the entertainment of the elite, embarks on a journey that leads her to travel through a world dominated by powerful males. Ensnared in that world’s ideology, Katniss struggles to demonstrate to those in power, and also to herself, that they don’t control her in the same way that they do the material resources they extract from her community in District 12. At the same time, she discovers that her