

Welcome to the Arena:
Deconstructing the Female Character in Dystopian Literature
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At its most basic definition a(n) utopia can be defined as “an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect” (“utopia”). However, from the moment Thomas More coined the term in his 1516 work *Utopia*, the opposite of the utopian idea has also existed. This is the dystopia, “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible.”¹ Dystopias can be further defined as society characterized by human misery, squalor, oppression, disease, and overcrowding. Although many speculate that More intended his utopic work to be a commentary on the society of his time, in contemporary literature the best way to find political or social commentary is to browse through the vast amounts of dystopian literature available. This literature is a now familiar literary genre, containing famous novels such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, or well-known short stories such as Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron.” Dystopian literature has developed in many different ways, but the two most common forms of dystopia are the one that fits into the definition of human misery and one that paints itself as a thinly disguised utopia. Regardless of whether a dystopia is outright obvious or hiding in a thinly disguised veil of a utopia, what makes for a good story in dystopian literature are the heroes who elicit some sort of social change. These heroes are generally male, in a somewhat prominent position in society, and meet an end between different shades of success and failure—think Winston in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Guy Montag in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. It can even be said that the biblical Adam plays the hero role in a dystopic view of the Garden of Eden. These characters are the everyday man, who from the very start of the story generally question their society. The characters are written as such to show they have initiative, and it is with this initiative they usually elicit change. However, the other similarity between these male characters is a female character, usually written in to provide these male characters with initiative to affect a change in their dystopic surroundings. The female character does so by guiding or triggering the hero figure’s will to elicit change.

In Erika Gotteleib’s book *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trail*, she mentions the idea of this female character in her chapter “Nineteenth-Century Precursors of the Dystopian Vision.” The chapter primarily focuses on the Hungarian work *The Tragedy of Man*, and follows Adam’s journey away from paradise and back again. Throughout the work, however, Eve remains a present figure. She works as what Gotteleib terms as “the eternal feminine of the romantic cosmos,” which from this point on will be termed at the eternal feminine. This eternal feminine is a theory, one that lays out the parameters for how a female character is both viewed and written in dystopian literature, primarily as a character who is a mere “counterpoint to the protagonist’s dehumanized world of dystopia.” This theme of the eternal feminine, Gotteleib notes, is repeated in works by Orwell, Huxley, and many other dystopian authors.² The theory, as a whole, is written in a very mocking and perhaps satirical manner. It outlines the female character as nothing more than someone who assists the hero in whatever way he needs; this can include anything from an active partner in rebellion to a sexual partner. Regardless of how the female character assists the male character, the theme is always the same—she remains nothing more than a counterpoint in the story. Therefore, a question arises: can the often mocked and satirical idea of the eternal feminine be redefined in positive terms? The answer to this question is a definite yes. The role of the female character has changed

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “dystopia, n”

² Gottleib, 48.

quite a bit since Gotteib first coined the eternal feminine, and even further still since the works she examined were first published. This new role for the female character is one that does not find itself under the typical constraints of the eternal feminine of the romantic cosmos. The way the literature itself is being presented has changed as well. With new popularity and the integration of dystopia into the genre of young adult literature, the female character has transformed from a counterpoint for the protagonist, to the protagonist herself.

This research will focus primarily on the character Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne's Collin's *The Hunger Games Series*, and how she redefines the idea of the eternal feminine. The first novel of the series, *The Hunger Games*, is written from the first-person narrative of Katniss and tells the story of Panem, a near future totalitarian state divided into twelve districts whose resources work to provide for and sustain the controlling Capitol. As penance for rebellions of the past, each district must offer up one boy and one girl, known as tributes, to fight in an arena for the entertainment of the Capitol in an event called "The Hunger Games." Katniss Everdeen, sixteen years old and full of resentment for her government, volunteers to take her younger sister's place after she is chosen as tribute. As a foil to Katniss, Peeta Mellark is the chosen boy of the district, the male character who is not the hero, but instead provides a counterpoint for the female heroine. As the novel unfolds it is Peeta who cries in fear after being chosen as tribute, Peeta who professes his love for Katniss, and Peeta who is injured and needs to be saved. Peeta takes on the role typically found in the idea of the eternal feminine, while Katniss is the strong-willed survivalist, a role reserved for the male protagonist. However, at the end of the novel, when given the ultimatum of killing each other, Katniss is the one who offers the poisonous berries, intended for the double suicide, to Peeta. The gamemakers stop them, though, and Katniss and Peeta both leave the games alive. Despite the charade of victory, the act of offering the berries is seen as an act of rebellion by the Capitol, with Katniss as the prime instigator. When Katniss offered the berries, just as Eve offered the fruit to Adam in the Garden of Eden, she ignited a rebellion in the twelve districts. Through the offering of the berries, referred to here as the "trigger," is an act typical of the eternal feminine. The story that follows in the remaining two novels of the series rewrites Katniss as a hero, and into a new form of the eternal feminine of the romantic cosmos.

To understand Katniss, however, one must understand her predecessors. These predecessors generally fall into Gotteib's standards for the eternal feminine, however, it is from their plights that Katniss is able to develop. The first look of the eternal feminine is found in Eve in the Garden of Eden. The conventional view is that the Garden of Eden is the original utopia, a home for Adam and Eve to inhabit that is plentiful in both life and sustainability. The only rule, it seems, is that Adam and Eve never eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Despite the perception of the garden narrative as a utopia, many of its traits resemble that of the thinly disguised dystopia. Adam and Eve seem to live in paradise, but this paradise is defined by their ignorance—an ignorance that is indicative of their lack of knowledge of good and evil. The one thing that would cure this ignorance is also the one thing that God denies to them. In Dmitri M. Sliviniak's article, "The Garden of Double Messages: Deconstructing Hierarchal Opposition in the Garden Story," he notes that when Adam and Eve taste the fruit, they gain the knowledge the name of the tree suggests, and this knowledge "could not be neutral."³ From this moment on they have the knowledge to determine what is both good and evil themselves, rather

³ Sliviniak, 443.

than let God determine it for them. Sliviniak says that Adam and Eve “wanted to know what was good and bad and thus turned a good situation into a bad one.”⁴ In viewing the Garden narrative through a dystopic lens, this is the moment that Adam and Eve begin to see through the utopic veil. However, it cannot be forgotten that Eve is the one who first committed the act of eating the fruit and shared her sin with Adam. In this way, Eve is the original incarnation of the eternal feminine. God designed Eve to be a companion for Adam and “mother of all living.”⁵ Through her creation and existence, Eve fits into Gottlieb’s first criteria for the eternal feminine, by being a counterpoint to the male Adam. Her second job as the eternal feminine is to work as the “trigger,” which she does by allowing the snake to seduce her into taking the fruit and then offering the fruit to Adam. The blame for this transgression goes not to Adam for he “was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”⁶ Sliviniak states that Eve will always be responsible for original sin while Adam, “frees himself due to manipulation where the Woman and the Serpent take part, [and] begins to fulfill his true destination.”⁷ Eve performs her role as the trigger and gives Adam a new purpose and destiny, and then simply moves into the background. Her only destiny is become the bearer of Adam’s children. This theme, or tradition, of portraying the female character as merely a counterpoint and “trigger” is repeated throughout literature, most prominently in dystopian literature.

Another work that precedes *Katniss* and establishes boundaries for the female character through the eternal feminine is George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Orwell’s narrative takes place in the world of Oceania, a totalitarian super-state where the watchful eyes of Big Brother are always upon you. Every aspect of life is under near-constant surveillance and “thoughtcrime”—thoughts against Big Brother—are crimes punishable by death. Oceania is defined by the dystopic principles of “war is peace, slavery is freedom, and ignorance is strength.”⁸ The story is told through the third person narrative of Winston Smith, the everyday man and member of the secondary Outer Party. In the beginning of the novel, Winston already feels bitterness towards Big Brother and members of the Inner Party. This hatred is only magnified when Winston begins his affair with the female character, Julia. While the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is much harsher than the Garden narrative, Winston and Julia follow a story very reflective of Adam and Eve. When Julia slips him a note confessing her love, they meet in secret and begin a sexual relationship. Julia is intelligent and boisterous, unlike many of the females of the Outer Party. She entices Winston with tales of her small rebellious acts against Big Brother and tells him “I’m good at spotting people who don’t belong, as soon as I saw you I knew you were against them.”⁹

In Naomi Jacob’s work, “Dissent, Assent, and the Body in Nineteen Eighty-Four,” she says that from this point on Winston and Julia “follow a largely cliched romance as star-crossed lovers, who set up a monogamous love-nest complete with domestic trappings and quickly lose their sexual urgency.”¹⁰ It is from here that they begin their downfall, and while Winston is the ‘hero’ of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the ending is not a happy one. For a moment, Julia was

⁴ Sliviniak, 443.

⁵ *The King James Bible*, Gen. 3.20

⁶ *The King James Bible*, 1st Tim. 2.14

⁷ Sliviniak, 447-48.

⁸ Orwell, 4.

⁹ Orwell, 34.

¹⁰ Jacobs, 9.

significant to the narrative but after their first encounter she steps back and becomes merely a sexual object for Winston, in which every encounter fuels his hatred of Big Brother more. In their first encounter Julia is performing both duties of the eternal feminine, both triggering Winston to instigate more acts of rebellions while establishing herself as a counterpoint and sexual partner. Jacobs tells us that Julia's exploits were small acts, "a private rebellion with no ramifications beyond pleasure."¹¹ However, after being triggered by Julia, Winston begins a series of acts of rebellion that grow riskier and more intense, both by disregarding his duties on his job and taking ample risks to meet up with Julia. He is heroic only for a moment before being captured by the Inner Party spy, O'Brien. Both Winston and Julia are captured, tortured and released back into society, fully dedicated to Big Brother. They have a final interaction, one that is cold and distant, in which they both admit to betraying each other, before saying goodbye forever. Regardless of the hero's downfall that plays out in the narrative, this downfall only happens because of Julia's actions. Had Julia not initiated a relationship with Winston, he would not have begun actively rebelling against Big Brother. Because Julia demonstrated the criteria of Gottlieb's eternal feminine, the story did allow for Winston's hero journey, if but briefly.

The eternal feminine not only appears in characters such as Eve and Julia, who knowingly meet the criteria but also in characters who unknowingly fit into the criteria as well. It is a repetitive pattern in writing female characters, rather than a pattern of character actions for Katniss both unknowingly and knowingly works for and against the eternal feminine. However, she was preceded in this way by Clarisse in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Clarisse is the rather whimsical and short-lived character who triggers much of the main character's change in the novel. *Fahrenheit 451* takes place in a futuristic United States where books are outlawed and burned if found. The main character, Guy Montag, is a firefighter whose job is to burn contraband books. The society is dystopic in that it hides knowledge and discourages new learning. Clarisse, though quite young and presented as mentally unstable, sees through this dystopic rejection of education. Clarisse holds knowledge in the highest esteem and tells Guy, "it's a lot of funnels and a lot of water poured down the spout and out the bottom, and them telling us it's wine when it's not" when regarding education.¹² Despite thoughts such as this, Clarisse is not actively rebelling against the society she lives in. Instead, she is questioning out of mere curiosity and innocence, and this is when she unknowingly triggers Guy Montag. After his interaction with Clarisse he begins to question everyone around him and steals books in secret, rather than burning them. Soon after Guy is inspired by Clarisse, she is killed, or so he is told. Clarisse performs her role as the eternal feminine, to trigger Guy Montag into initiating change, and then she disappears. It is perhaps the most extreme example of the eternal feminine, for in this case Clarisse is not even allowed to be a counterpoint to Montag. The remainder of the narrative follows Montag and his hero's journey as he actively rebels against his society. However, Guy never would have had the initiative or thought about the flaws in his society had he not encountered Clarisse.

Despite Eve's story following exactly into the criteria of the eternal feminine, the theory was identified long after the Bible's origins. Gottlieb's theory works as an observance of what was happening most commonly with female characters in dystopian literature and is still a theme that is repeated and revived. The female character is contained and restricted when written as the

¹¹ Jacobs, 9.

¹² Bradbury, 27.

eternal feminine even though she is vital to the narrative without being a major positive influence in the novel. The female character is the trigger of events in that the entirety of the plot usually develops around the actions she encourages the male character to perform. However, it is too often that after she serves this purpose she is simply kept around to be a counterpoint to the male character, or completely disappears. This is why an examination of female characters in new forms of dystopian literature needs to be observed. Rather than using these characters to discredit Gotteleib's theory of the eternal feminine, they should instead be used to rewrite the theory into something that can be easily reshaped and allows for a more significant set of female characters. This is where Katniss Everdeen comes in, for while she has the traits of the eternal feminine she also has the potential to rewrite the theory that makes allowance for more contemporary characters. She does so in three distinct ways, by first being a trigger, then as a resistor, and finally as a hero, and all of these allow Katniss to take her own hero's journey.

In the first novel of the series, *The Hunger Games*, Katniss performs the role of the eternal feminine by triggering the events that set the premise for the series. She does so by attempting suicide in the arena rather than being a pawn in the games and killing Peeta. Although the suicide does not succeed, her choice to attempt it was the trigger that sets off rebellion in Panem. However, in *The Hunger Games* Katniss works as a trigger in two ways, and she does unknowingly both times; first as a nurturer and second as survivalist. The initial trigger of events is when Katniss takes Prim's place as tribute; she acted without thought, merely on the urge to protect her sister. In the introduction to the book, *Of Bread, Blood, and The Hunger Games*, Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark say that "Katniss has always lived in a space between ordinary and the extraordinary...she enters another level of hell when she chooses to take her sister's place in the Games."¹³ By doing so she triggers her own journey and forced, in this case, to follow through with the events she had caused. Even though her volunteering forced her into the games, and into the 'hero's' follow through, Katniss is not actively defying the criteria of the eternal feminine at this point. Her breaking of norms does not happen until she enters the arena and begins to show her survivalist skills. Katniss is joined by fellow tribute Peeta Mellark, who has the potential to become the hero of the story, which would allow Katniss to step back into the typical female role of counterpoint. In the events leading up to the games, Peeta is charismatic and clever while Katniss fumbles during interviews and is easily angered in practice. Once they enter the arena, however, Katniss begins to show her strengths. As said before, during the first novel is it Peeta who needs to be rescued and taken care of--and Katniss falls into the role of Peeta's hero easily enough. In this case Peeta works as a counterpoint to Katniss rather than her to him, and this is when Katniss begins to rewrite the eternal feminine. Then, at the end of the games, Katniss offers the berries to Peeta rather than kill him. This too, she does without thinking, acting on her survivalist's nature. This survival is not in living, but in the survival of self, for she would rather die than become the killer the Capitol intends her to be. By offering the berries, Katniss becomes a trigger again, and ignites a rebellion where she must rewrite the eternal feminine, and much like in the arena, she must follow through and become the hero because of her choices.

In the second novel of the series, *Catching Fire*, Katniss is immediately presented with the opportunity to become the hero but instead strays away from the repercussions of her actions. In this way Katniss works as a resistor, for she believes that because she did not intentionally

¹³ Clarke and Pharr, 12.

rebel against the Capitol then she should have no role in the rebellion. She wants only to keep her family and friends safe. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is threatened by both President Snow and outside forces; all around her the carefully knit world of Panem is falling apart because of the influences of her choices in the arena. When the next Hunger Games are announced, tributes are chosen from the pools of remaining victors, and Katniss and Peeta are thrown back into the games. Again, Katniss resists the hero's role, this time out of fear. Pharr and Clark note that "she is the classic reluctant hero from science fiction" because "Katniss was always more comfortable with the idea with her role as survivor rather than hero."¹⁴ Katniss spends much of *Catching Fire* in feeble attempts to show the general public she was a girl cross in love for Peeta, not a girl who intended rebellion against the Capitol.

In Valarie Frankel's work "Reflection in a Plastic Mirror" she says that these attempts become a charade for safety, one where Katniss lets everyone, besides her own self, determine who she is, "her romance with Peeta [and everything else] is owned and managed by the public."¹⁵ At the end of *Catching Fire* Katniss is rescued and taken to the secret District 13, and it is here that she once again lets others define her rather than herself. Much of the first half of the third novel of the series, *Mockingjay*, revolves around Katniss being remade again, this time into the fictional "Mockingjay, a television personality...[who] films on sound stage, a faux bloody bandage on her arm."¹⁶ District 13 is the opposite of the Capitol in every way, embracing everything utilitarian. They attempt to control Katniss just as carefully as they control everything else in their world. For a while Katniss lets them, playing the Mockingjay role just as she weakly as she attempted to play the star-crossed lover. By letting the Capitol, and then District 13, control her she gave up her agency and resisted the role of hero, and her ability to rewrite the eternal feminine. However, it seems to feed into the trope of a hero's journey, all the different masks Katniss was putting on for those around her, were merely buying time until she came into her true self.

Finally, Katniss begins to embrace the role of the hero and actively begins to shape her own self. In doing so she regains her agency and her ability of choice, while also beginning to rewrite the eternal feminine as someone who exercises her agency. The second half of *Mockingjay* revolves around Katniss striking a deal with District 13's leader, President Coin. The deal includes rescue of Peeta, who was captured by the Capitol at the end of *Catching Fire*, allowance for combat, and that she herself is allowed to kill President Snow. In return Katniss will act as the Mockingjay, but on her own terms. With this deal set, District 13 is able to deliver Mockingjay propaganda that incites more rebellion and turns the entirety of Panem into a warring zone against the Capitol. With clearance for combat, Katniss is fully involved in the war that is happening around her. It both horrifies her and ignites new hatred against the Capitol, her rebellion finally one that she does knowingly. She acts not as a nurturer or a survivalist, but instead with genuine emotion that she had determined and made for herself. As the events of *Mockingjay* continue, Peeta is returned to her, now a brainwashed object for the Capitol, and District 13 and the other rebelling districts eventually overthrow the Capitol's regime. However, there are many deaths during the war, including Prim. It is unclear whether Prim was killed because actions by the Capitol or District 13 and afterwards Katniss falls into a deep depression. Panem is in political shambles and Katniss is brought in to finish the deal and kill President

¹⁴ Clarke and Pharr, 12.

¹⁵ Frankel, 54.

¹⁶ Frankel, 57.

Snow. However, instead of killing Snow, Katniss kills President Coin instead. In Guy Risko's "Katniss Everdeen's Liminal Choices and the Foundations of Revolutionary Ethics," he says that from the moment Katniss made the choice to take Prim's place as tribute "she stood as a non-exceptional figure of law who could clearly see its failures and limits."¹⁷ This view of the

¹⁷ Risko, 83.

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law and its failures and limits continue throughout the series, and although Katniss plays a huge role in what happens politically in the world around her, she never actively makes a choice to change anything until she makes the choice to kill President Coin. It is in this way that Katniss rewrites the eternal feminine and finally follows through with the choices she made in the first novel, and it is in this way that Katniss becomes a hero.

The intention of this research was not to make the theory of the eternal feminine null but instead show that this idea, which is often seen as satire, can be rewritten in a positive light. As said before, Gottlieb's theory was an observance of what was happening with female characters in dystopian literature. However, since that time the state of the female character in dystopian literature has changed and the way the literature is presented has changed as well. Dystopian

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literature has now become a huge genre in the young adult market and female characters like Katniss are now becoming a recurring trend. The theory cannot last or be valid if its criteria for female characters is so limiting. The theory must change as the literature changes. The female character now has the ability to be both a trigger and a follow through. She also still has the ability to step back and let the male hero be the follow through. The rewriting of the eternal feminine of the romantic cosmos comes not from setting up new criteria but instead demonstrating that the eternal feminine can be defined as a female character in dystopian literature who has choice. The choices she makes and the plot of her story have no effect over her validity as the eternal feminine, for it is given to her with her choice. She is defined as the eternal feminine not by the world in which she exists, much less the male character(s)--she is defined only by herself. From the nature of dystopia it can be surmised that dystopian literature will continue to grow and be rewritten as the world changes, and the eternal feminine of the romantic cosmos, in being eternal, can be rewritten with it.

Notes