Construction Amid Deconstruction: Survival of the Kindest and the Ethos of Caring in the Hunger Games

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Construction Amid Deconstruction: Survival of the Kindest and the Ethos of Caring in *The Hunger Games*

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A Thesis in the Field of English Literature for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

Katniss Everdeen - the girl who was on fire, the Mockingjay, the iconic heroine of Suzanne Collins’ young adult series *The Hunger Games* - has captivated audiences worldwide since 2008, when she burst from the page as a resourceful, independent YA protagonist in sharp contrast with other popular YA characters of the time. Championed for her strength and self-sufficiency, Katniss is a feminist model for the young adult readers who have embraced her. However, the series’s most vital example of true rebellion comes not from Katniss, but from her male counterpoint, Peeta Mellark.

Peeta teaches Katniss that surviving for survival’s sake alone is meaningless, and that the vulnerability and connection she has avoided are actually what makes life worthwhile. What’s more, in their post-apocalyptic dictatorship, where they are among the poorest and most desperate citizens and pitted against each other, forging relationships with others is the most defiant act of all. Though she seemingly wins the Hunger Games thanks to her more traditionally masculine traits, it’s Katniss’s warmth, protectiveness, and trust in others that ultimately give her a reason to fight, and Peeta teachers her to recognize and value those traits. Through his selfless actions, unconditional love, and proxies like fellow tribute Finnick Odair, Peeta shows Katniss and her young adult readers the importance of caring for others in a world determined to isolate you.
Author Biography

Corina Rangel is an alumna of Boston University’s School of Education; she graduated cum laude in 2004 with a Bachelor of Science in English Education. In the years since, she has been a proud English teacher in the Boston Public Schools, first at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School and, since 2013, at Boston Green Academy.

In her capacity as an educator, Ms. Rangel is passionate about modern young adult literature that gives her students not only windows to experiences foreign to their own, but also mirrors to validate the truths of their own existences, which are so infrequently depicted in canonical literature.
Dedication

For all my students, past, present, and future,

who have helped me understand

that even the smallest, most ordinary stories

are of great import.
Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to Harvard’s outstanding English faculty - particularly John Stauffer, Jason Stevens, and Sue Weaver Schopf - for teaching me that thoughtful, scholarly discussion of entertaining literature is not only possible, but valuable to our discourse. Many thanks to Talaya Delaney for helping shape this thesis when it was in its most nascent form, and believing in its worth.

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There aren’t words to express my thanks and love for my mother and grandmother, who have never stopped giving me books; for Sarah and Leesa, whose friendship has shown me the power of witty, devoted, sustained correspondence; for my squad, whose support is vital to my very existence; and to Thomas, my still point, who encourages and inspires my words every day.
# Table of Contents

Author Biography........................................................................................................iv

Dedication.......................................................................................................................v

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................vi

I. Introduction................................................................................................................1

II. Peeta and the Ethos of Caring...............................................................................8

III. Finnick and the Power of Friendship.................................................................38

IV. Gale and the Value of Compassion..................................................................64

V. Conclusion: A Choice.............................................................................................70

Bibliography....................................................................................................................78
For the past decade, the publishing industry, once considered endangered or compromised by the rise of the internet, has been buoyed by something unexpected: young adult literature. YA, however, is somewhat of a misnomer: it indicates not the genre or subject, but only the age group of the novel’s protagonist, or the novel’s intended audience. Consumers are ignoring the latter; according to Nielsen, “the juvenile market has grown 40% in the last decade,” and 80% of all YA books are purchased by adults (Gilmore). Combined with the fact that other areas of publishing are in dire straits - in 2014, for example, adult book sales dropped by 3.3% while children and YA literature sales surged by 22.4% (Stampler) - it is not a stretch to imagine that in 2017, most literary adults have read a YA novel.

Some YA novels do not suffer much under the vague moniker. They tell universal stories of young people coming into their own, finding first love, or dealing with harsh truths and experiences. John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* and Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor and Park* are two bestselling examples. But even their popularity cannot compare to that of the three juggernauts that have brought previously overlooked genres into the spotlight: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (fantasy); Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (supernatural horror); and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series (post-apocalyptic science fiction).
The academic community has been quick to evaluate each of these in turn, as they became phenomena that transcended books and became integral to all forms of entertainment. For example, the sixteen films based on these three series are all among the 100 highest grossing films in history. Such levels of engagement demand examination. Some of the discussion has been rooted in close readings of the text; still more have sought to prove that YA novels can grapple with great ideas and themes as well as those from any other genre, and are perhaps better suited to do so. But larger questions have loomed over most of the research, seeking to justify its very existence: Why these novels? Why this protagonist? Why YA? What do readers of all ages find so appealing about these books? As Thomas J. Morrissey comments, “YA dystopias are fictive versions of the contemporary world that promote reflection and critique” — thereby asserting that analyzing YA’s popularity has implications for our own world, offering “ethical pathways to better futures than current behavioral paradigms are likely to produce” (Morrissey).

In the case of *The Hunger Games*, researchers’ answers to these questions are resoundingly similar: Katniss Everdeen. “As almost every critic of the trilogy has noted, it’s Katniss herself who first grabs a reader’s attention” (Pharr and Clark 12). Although she is not the first female protagonist of a dystopian or post-apocalyptic YA novel, Katniss and the unprecedented popularity of Collins’s novels that tell her story have spawned dozens of imitators, each with their own spin on the genre. Many scholars have commented on Katniss’s particular brand of feminism. Much conversation, academic and otherwise, has been devoted to the rise of this particular breed of heroine, and the more
masculine alternative to a traditionally feminine set of qualities and goals that she presents.

Because these post-apocalyptic societies operate under rules that do not apply to our contemporary one, the gender roles and stereotypical traits we associate with men and women are either completely different or entirely absent from these novels. Although there are several instances in these novels of what might, at first glance, be perceived as traditional gender roles and expectations, these expectations are linked to a struggle for survival, as opposed to expectations of female domesticity. In this thesis, I will argue that what contemporary audiences see as feminine traits are not only vital to the survival of these characters, but also to be celebrated, as they provide the protagonists with the only agency and power they have in an oppressive, violent world.

Much has been made of how YA heroines like Katniss buck gender conventions. While true in some sense, this view might be seen as perpetuating a dichotomy to young female readers: stereotypical femininity is weakness and breaking that mold and embracing more masculine traits is strength. But Katniss’s post-apocalyptic world has not simply reset certain roles; it has deconstructed them. In these settings with no rules, where violence is supreme, gender is no longer the driving force in identity construction. However, though gender expectations have fallen by the wayside, so have other things, such as the value of life. Traits that promote human connection and survival – physical prowess, mental agility, and the ability to take care not only of oneself but others – become valued traits for both genders, and lead to survival for both the individual and, in some sense, humanity itself.
In a post-apocalyptic world so focused on human connection as the chief means of survival, traits that lead to this survival — both kindness and the ability to build community, as well as physical prowess and agility - have the highest value, irrespective of whether they are stereotypically masculine or feminine. The characters of *The Hunger Games* have many traits a contemporary reader may view as gendered: a desire for domesticity; a primary role as hunter and forager; a budding romanticism. However, these traits all serve the common goal of forging strong connections with fellow humans. These qualities are not gendered in a negative or positive way because they all contribute to community and survival. Characters are more likely to survive when they form alliances, bonds, and families with others, and therefore human connection is prized most. People survive by working together and forging relationships, which goes beyond a traditional feminine/masculine divide. The *Hunger Games* trilogy releases these qualities from their stereotypical gender specificity and upholds them as simply human. There are no real “feminine” or “masculine” character traits - only those that are considered more effective and valuable.

Katniss resides in District 12, the most starved, impoverished region of Panem, a society left in ruins 75 years ago by nuclear civil war. Every year, the Capitol - the region that won the war, defeating the destroyed District 13 and the other twelve rebellious districts - demands recompense, choosing a young man and woman from each district to participate in the Hunger Games: a brutal fight to the death with awards and honors for the last child standing. Katniss, alongside her fellow District 12 citizen Peeta, wins the 74th Hunger Games, but in defiance of the Capitol, becomes a symbol of rebellion and
eventually leads the Districts to victory in renewed civil war, toppling the Capitol and the evil President Snow.

There are some aspects of Panem that conform to our society’s traditional gender roles. For example, throughout Katniss’s time as a tribute, she is repeatedly dolled up for the Capitol audience and instructed by her mentor, Haymitch, to soften her appearance and personality. However, Haymitch’s advice is based not on how Katniss should act as a “girl,” but rather, how she should act to win the hearts of Capitol viewers; indeed, Haymitch often insists she act more like Peeta, her congenial male counterpart. Panem is far from being as gender-restrictive as our contemporary society. All residents of the Capitol, male and female alike, indulge in outlandish dress and makeup; female tributes and soldiers are commonplace and just as feared and well-regarded for their fighting skills as their male counterparts; and there is no comment on the fact that the leader of the rebellion, President Coin, is female. These are but a few ways in which Panem does not conform to our gender expectations or prejudices, but most critical literature does not explore that difference when discussing Katniss’s character, nor does it discuss how Katniss’s post-apocalyptic environment is ideal for creating such a character. Specifically, what contemporary audiences may view as gendered traits are valued in so much as they are symbols of power and comfort. The costumes and makeup of Capitol residents are a luxury of those who do not have to fight for their lives every day. Katniss’s physical prowess and Peeta’s kindness are both valued as means of survival, and not limited to their genders (tribute Rue is just as sweet as Peeta, and tribute Cato is just as good a hunter as Katniss). Some literature acknowledges these distinctions, but not the underlying cause of such traits being released from gender expectations.
In her essay “She has no idea. The effect she can have: Katniss and the Politics of Gender,” Jessica Miller explores Panem’s gender politics, but does not explore the reasons they may exist. She establishes that Katniss is an “atypical” teenage girl, from her unassuming dress to her lack of interest in romantic partners or motherhood:

Many readers would associate qualities like breadwinning, physical and mental toughness, and fighting (literally) for survival with masculinity and manhood. But they describe Katniss through and through...The stereotype of the nurturing mother tends to be associated with warmth and kindness. In contrast, Katniss’s protectiveness requires actions more typically associated with masculinity...She may not be caring in the traditional sense associated with women, but she’s intensely loyal and will lie, steal, fight, and even kill to keep those she loves alive. (147)

Miller argues that this is no accident, given that Collins has stated that the trilogy was inspired by mythological figures Theseus and Spartacus, both common men who rose to challenge oppressive regimes.

Miller begins her analysis of The Hunger Games’ gender norms by pointing out that in Katniss’s sister, Prim, Collins has created an extremely traditional feminine character: “small, slender, and beautiful...Prim’s dominant traits are empathy and caring” (150). She then quotes Simone de Beauvoir’s theory that civilization both creates the “feminine” creature and positions her as inferior to men, but rejects the idea that women need to rebuke traditionally feminine traits and roles in order to pursue equality, given that the problem “isn’t femininity itself, but rather its devaluation in society...Katniss,” Miller points out, “violates those gender norms willy-nilly and for the most part, seems to suffer neither self-condemnation nor social condemnation for doing so” (151). This brings Miller to her chief assertion: that “gender is constructed differently in Panem than in our world” (159). To demonstrate these differences, Miller points out professional diversity (e.g. coal miners are male and female); ambiguous sexuality and male “sex
symbols”; beauty norms that rely more on wealth and class than on gender; a lack of
differentiation between “male” and “female” roles in District 12; and the fact that
President Coin, a female leader, is just as autocratic and pragmatic as President Snow, the
male leader of the Capitol. She also points out that the most androgynous character is
Peeta, whom the more traditionally masculine Katniss eventually embraces chiefly for his
traditionally feminine traits.
Chapter II
Peeta and the Ethos of Caring

Katniss is the heroine of the series - the Mockingjay of the third novel’s title, the face of the rebellion - but it is her male District 12 counterpart, Peeta Mellark, who most decisively pushes at the fabric of the Capitol. Everything Peeta does is counter to the values of the Capitol, which is an extremely capitalist, hierarchal, violent world, based on survival of the fittest. The Capitol functions by leaving people at the bottom; the districts suffer so that those in the Capitol may prosper. That runs contrary to everything Peeta stands for. The world of the Capitol, and by proxy, the Hunger Games themselves, is traditionally post-apocalyptic - survival of the fittest - but District 12 and the rest of Panem are much less so. It’s that kinder, more communal world that Peeta learned from and grew up in, and in his determination not to succumb to the dehumanizing Games and lose his identity, he finds ways to take the values of District 12 and impose them onto the Games. As Katniss realizes in *Mockingjay*, Peeta “understood it all before we’d even set foot in the arena” (215-6): he recognizes the power of the Games to strip the tributes of their humanity, and determines that he will stay himself - that the Capitol cannot take his values away from him in the service of their own crueler systems.

Through Katniss’s choices - both in the arena and outside it, before and after the rebellion - the series affirms and endorses Peeta’s value set, which is in some ways stereotypically feminine, and in all ways based on caring for others. Peeta’s traits embody the ideal way to survive, because they offer a path not simply to live, but to enjoy the life one has earned. When Katniss ultimately chooses Peeta to marry, long after the ending of
*Mockingjay*, she realizes, “What I need is… 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” (*Mockingjay* 388). In Katniss’s choice, she and the series affirm Peeta’s values - those that ensure not only your survival, but the hope for a better future. *The Hunger Games* represents not Katniss, but Peeta as the ideal way to live in a post-apocalyptic world, and throughout the series, he teaches Katniss the importance of his manner of survival.

Katniss, who has taken on the role of provider since her father’s passing, relies on stereotypically masculine traits to ensure the survival of both her family and herself. She is an accomplished hunter-gatherer, and brings into the Games a firm belief in its ethos: caring about other people will kill you. This is parallel to how Katniss has learned to function in District 12: she extends kindnesses when she can, but never at the expense of her family’s health and wellness. Peeta, also raised in District 12, seems to innately understand and be able to play into a key difference of the Capitol: affection and favoritism. By making the Capitol citizens fond of them and invested in their story, Peeta can ensure his and Katniss’s success. As the Games progress, Katniss learns from Peeta that an equitable exchange of feeling can lead to survivorship too.

Peeta, one point in the series’ love triangle, is notable in that his most emphasized and valued traits are those that readers would traditionally think of as feminine. He stands in sharp contrast to both Katniss, who often expresses worry at her own inability to express her emotions, and Gale, Peeta’s chief rival, who is defined largely by and ultimately dismissed by Katniss for his ruthless, militaristic tendencies. Peeta’s softer traits, however, are admired and sought out by not only Katniss, but also other characters.
in the series, and they are responsible for ensuring his survival. Katniss often confesses to envying Peeta’s easier way with attitudes she finds difficult to inhabit.

From the beginning of the trilogy, Peeta is framed as being softer than Katniss, more lovable and open to connection with others, but not necessarily weaker. The only moment of potential weakness is during the audience’s first glimpse of Peeta at the annual reaping; his name is called after Katniss has volunteered for her sister, and Katniss remarks, “His blue eyes show the alarm I’ve seen so often in prey” (*The Hunger Games* 26). This reflects Katniss’s state of mind: survival is a competition. Moreover, in their first interaction, Katniss refutes a reader’s expectations of gender interaction. In our heterosexual culture, men are the hunters and women are prey; Katniss’s initial assessment of Peeta is a standout reversal of that trope, reflecting her mindset as she considers the Games ahead. She sets up their relationship as adversarial, with herself as hunter and Peeta as the prey.

However, Katniss then recalls the story of how Peeta’s kindness saved her family from starvation at a key moment in her childhood. This moment, when Peeta tossed her several loaves of bread despite potential abuse at the hands of his mother, is intertwined for Katniss with the day after, when she spurred herself to action and figured out how she would keep her family alive. “To this day,” she comments, “I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me I was not doomed” (*The Hunger Games* 32). Peeta’s identity, for Katniss, is thereafter “the boy with the bread,” an epithet linked both with Katniss’s driving desire to provide for her family’s survival and Peeta’s inherent kindness. Katniss does not associate the bread directly with providing for her family - which would, by
proxy, make Peeta a more masculine presence, as being a provider is a typically male trait. Rather, the epithet rises to Katniss’s mind whenever she is experiencing a crisis of faith. Peeta’s bread, to Katniss, represents hope - it returns to the idea that Peeta symbolizes a future free of hardship and sorrow.

Peeta’s selflessness is confusing to Katniss, primarily because despite the fact that she connects her own survival with his kindness, she fails to see any benefit for Peeta in extending such niceties. Katniss spends much of the first novel figuring out how Peeta may be weaponizing his kindness, or contemplating how it could actually endanger her: “A kind Peeta Mellark is far more dangerous to me than an unkind one. Kind people have a way of working their way inside me and rooting there” (The Hunger Games 49).

Whether Peeta is merely feigning kindness or is sincere in his warmth, Katniss is in danger. As she points out here, she is perhaps more so if Peeta’s entreaties are genuine, as looking out for anyone’s well being other than her own in the arena could mean death. This sets up a contrast between the world of District 12, where Peeta’s kindness was lifesaving, and the world of the Hunger Games, where Peeta’s kindness could mean Katniss’s death. She still sees forming connections as endangering her survival rather than ensuring it.

This is an attitude not wholly formed by Katniss’s upbringing, but rather, sharply honed by the prospect of the Games. In District 12, there are certainly citizens more affluent than others - Peeta’s family, for one, is comfortable, if not wealthy - but overwhelmingly, most of the population is struggling. In the wake of her father’s death, Katniss found strength within herself, but connecting to the wider network of her fellow District 12 citizens is what enabled her family’s survival. She remembers meeting Gale,
and how he helped improve her hunting skills and offered her vital companionship. She brings her game to Greasy Sae and the rest of the Hob’s eclectic crew, trading her catches for items vital to her family. She procures a goat for her sister Prim through such trade - a goat that, as Katniss remembers, “has paid for itself several times over” (The Hunger Games 273). District 12 rewards connection, and the relationships Katniss has built since her father’s death have helped sustain her family. Katniss understands connecting with others has benefits for her in District 12, but cannot fathom how a similar connection with Peeta could benefit her in the arena:

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? (The Hunger Games 112)

Katniss’s assumes that emotionally connecting with Peeta inevitably leads to her demise - and therefore, that any connection Peeta attempts to make is suspect. However, she has not yet come to understand that even if it means his own death, Peeta refuses to sacrifice his values of kindness and friendship; moreover, that he is actively finding ways to make those qualities benefit him. The story of Prim’s goat lays bare the differences in how Katniss and Peeta see the world. What Peeta chooses to take from the story of Prim’s goat is not the tangible benefits of ownership, but rather, “the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping” (The Hunger Games 273). He frames the benefits of Prim’s goat not in terms of the milk and cheese it has given Katniss’s family, but rather, as evidence of how strongly Katniss feels connection to her loved ones, and the longevity of happiness the goat provides. This again exposes Peeta’s focus on the future rather than the present, and his insistence on living in the
present so that he may be happy with his future. Therefore, this selfless act of connection, in Peeta’s eyes, is one of Katniss’s greatest strengths rather than a weakness - and a strength she can use to ensure her survival in the arena, as well.

As the Games loom closer, Katniss begins to understand how Peeta’s unique set of skills - warmth, acts of kindness, even overt tears at the reaping ceremony - are useful in their new context of the Games. “I have misjudged him,” she thinks; “He hasn’t accepted his death. He is already fighting hard to stay alive” (The Hunger Games 60). She still believes him to be feigning his warmth, to an extent, but she has come to appreciate his tactics, because she understands how they will connect him to the Capitol audience - and potentially, to victory.

As Katniss begins to view the potential for connection beyond another individual, or the people of her district - as she begins to see the Capitol viewers as people with whom she needs to connect to survive - she starts to notice and see the value in Peeta’s performative warmth. Critics such as Jessica Miller have noted Katniss’s begrudging acceptance of playing the role of star-crossed lover: she acquiesces to stylist Cinna’s dresses and costumes, and twirls onstage to applause. Miller argues, “In a world where gender seems less fixed than in our own, Katniss and Peeta are able to use gender to garner power for themselves” (159). However, she argues that Katniss is consciously performing a more feminine gender to accomplish her goals: “Katniss subversively uses the tools of femininity to control how her story is interpreted” (159). Her analysis, while it does expose the uniqueness of Panem’s gender roles, nonetheless roots them in the context of our society’s more rigid expectations, by arguing that Katniss plays into the
star-crossed lovers narrative because it makes her seem more feminine - in order to survive.

In our society, we sort qualities into “masculine” and “feminine” traits - aggression and confidence, versus subtlety and emotiveness, for example. When set in opposition, Western culture values “male” traits more highly; male traits are commonly considered excellent for leadership, but when exhibited by women, these same traits are suddenly undesirable. In most situations, one set of traits is always less valuable than the other, and various genders cannot indiscriminately adopt gendered traits without reprisal. But in the world of *The Hunger Games*, there is neither a hierarchy of traits, nor an inability for either gender to take them on. Traits we think of as feminine are reframed in Panem as *more* valuable in some ways, and Peeta shows Katniss how they can be utilized to win these violent games. Gender is culturally constructed, and Panem’s culture has no rigid expectations for either gender. Any character can exhibit what we would consider gendered traits; they are not intrinsic to any specific gender. Therefore, Katniss is not taking on a *feminine* role; rather, as she and Peeta are figuring out how to present themselves, they enact certain roles that will be appealing to the mass audience. Yet, the reader knows that it’s performative.

Rather than simply playing into femininity - which implies that the more Katniss acts *womanly*, the more she is adored - Katniss plays into Peeta’s narrative of their love affair. The more she gives the Capitol audience a *connection* to root for, the more likely she is to survive. Katniss does not fundamentally change; rather, Peeta’s affection makes her existing traits desirable, and shows them to be valuable and relatable. By discussing this in terms of gendered traits rather than connection and survival, Miller ignores the fact
that Peeta is the first of the pair to play up their relationship and stress the importance of alliances with their fellow tributes. The costumes, grooming, and niceties that Katniss submits to would have occurred without Peeta’s invention, and are doing her no favors; Haymitch, their mentor, comments on their inefficacy, precisely because it is so obvious that Katniss does not feel at ease with them. He and stylist Cinna struggle to help Katniss find a comfort zone, and Katniss tries to become at ease with their suggestions, such as her “spirit. This is a new thought. I’m not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I’m a fighter. In a sort of brave way. It’s not as if I’m never friendly. Okay, maybe I don’t go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people” (The Hunger Games 121-122). Katniss’s train of thought takes her from her own self-identity - “fighter” - around to understanding how that same characteristic shows the propensity for connection Haymitch so desperately wants her to make with the Capitol audience. However, Katniss lacks the performative skills to demonstrate that care for others.

Therefore Peeta, on the advice and with the help of Haymitch, creates the narrative of their love affair, without Katniss’s knowledge. They do not request that Katniss continue to act more feminine or desirable; instead, with Peeta’s confession of love, they make Katniss’s existing, more traditionally masculine traits relatable, and help her forge the connection with the Capitol audience that she sorely needs. As Katniss struggles, believing Peeta’s actions made her look weak, Haymitch explains, “‘That boy gave you something you could never achieve on your own. ...He made you look desirable!’” (The Hunger Games 135).
Ironically, in a refute of criticism such as Miller’s, it is the male characters - Haymitch, Cinna, and Peeta - who have both demonstrated the power of connection to Katniss and enabled her to make one with the Capitol: “And there I am,” Katniss marvels, “made beautiful by Cinna’s hands, desirable by Peeta’s confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable” (The Hunger Games 139). They are not teaching her to be feminine, as in Panem, these traits are not assigned to only women. Rather, they are teaching her how to utilize intimacy - a skill both genders use indiscriminately.

Even as Katniss begins to understand the strategy behind feigning affection for Peeta, she finds herself questioning the veracity of both Peeta’s romantic overtures and her own feelings. Peeta’s actions in the Games mystify her - he seemingly joins the Careers in hunting her, then saves her from Cato’s attack when she has been incapacitated by tracker jackers. When the rule change is announced, and it becomes clear that both Katniss and Peeta can survive the Games, Katniss places even more stock in their love affair, while warily considering whether it is more than just strategy for them both. She unconsciously balances both of these considerations when she resolves that Peeta has been working for her survival all along: “Peeta, it turns out, has never been a danger to me. The thought makes me smile. I drop my hands and hold my face up to the moonlight so the cameras can be sure to catch it” (The Hunger Games 248).

Though she schemes to let the Capitol audience see her with her guard down, Peeta’s debilitating injury means that Katniss is naturally set in the role of rescuer and caretaker. These roles upend conventional gender roles: Peeta is helpless, desperately in need of Katniss’s expertise, and Katniss is strong, resourceful, cunning, and sometimes
cold, as when she drugs Peeta so that she can get him medicine despite his protests. Critic Katherine Broad, however, believes these to be ultimately “superficial” gender transformations - Katniss-the-savior and Peeta-the-damsel-in-distress. Broad instead asserts that Katniss is, to the end, passive and “associated with caretaking” (126). Much criticism has focused on this idea - that ultimately, Katniss subscribes to patriarchal values and is stripped of her agency as a result. This reading is based in the assumption that Katniss’s caretaking instinct is weak, or counter to her own survival.

Caretaking - particularly, caring for Peeta - has immediate benefits for Katniss. She realizes that life-saving gifts from Capitol sponsors follow her romantic gestures. Connecting the two, she muses, “If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance” (The Hunger Games 259). Kissing and overt affection, however, isn’t enough; “My instincts tell me Haymitch isn’t just looking for physical affection, he wants something more personal. ...I’m rotten at it, but Peeta’s not” (The Hunger Games 300). Katniss understands that the truest currency she has is intimacy - as natural and unforced as possible, and that her male companion is more equipped to deliver it.

As for the assumption that caring for each other is a weakness and will hurt their chances of survival, both Peeta and Katniss explain why survival is not enough - both are striving for a life actually worth living, post-Games. Peeta stresses to Katniss that were he to survive without her, he would have nothing to live for in District 12 but a cold, distant family. She makes survival worth it, for him. As for Katniss, after the rule change, she reasons that if she were to return to District 12 without Peeta, her fellow citizens would
never forgive her. However, as she later admits to herself, “...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” (*The Hunger Games* 296). For both Peeta and Katniss, the survival of the other person has now become inextricable from their own survival.

Katniss and Peeta have allowed themselves, however incrementally, to consider more than mere survival - to consider a rich future. For Broad, these romantic inklings are not proof of strength or hope. Rather, Broad asserts that these sentiments deprive Katniss of her agency. However, the contrary is true: affirming and acting on these feelings offer Katniss the *only* agency she has in the Games. This applies not only to Peeta, but to Rue, and in the second Games, to allies Finnick, Johanna, and Beetie. Ultimately, the truest means by which Katniss expresses agency is doing something selfless and loving for someone else. Such actions are paradoxes in the world of the Games; in the context of the war, they are outright rebellion. Connection and intimacy are the greatest threat to the Capitol, because dividing people against each other makes them less inclined to unite against the government.

In her first Games, however, Katniss is not initially inclined to rebel - only to survive. She understands the tactical dilemma of connecting with Peeta, but trusts herself: “...I’ve made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone,” Katniss thinks; “I’m just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one” (*The Hunger Games* 263). At multiple turns, Katniss is given the opportunity to sever these personal connections, to leave Peeta to fend for himself, and she does not – every time, coming out stronger for not having done so.
Even as Katniss is providing for Peeta in a very physical, traditionally masculine sense - food, safety, and knowledge of how to survive in the arena - Peeta provides Katniss with something she is not even aware she wanted: emotional comfort and security. In the cave as she cares for him, Katniss and Peeta begin their trilogy-long tradition of sleeping together platonically, with Katniss coming to rely on the reassurance provided by the ritual: “No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else’s arms have made me feel this safe” (*The Hunger Games* 299). By comparing the feeling Peeta gives her with the long-missing sense of parental comfort, Katniss connects Peeta to the role of a provider in a different way: one oriented around emotional rather than physical prowess.

As Katniss begins to recognize the value in what Peeta can provide, her acts of affection cease to be for the Capitol and become about Peeta, and gratitude for what he contributes to their partnership: “...I realized how much I don’t want him to die. ...I do not want to lose the boy with the bread” (*The Hunger Games* 296). Recalling the bread, the symbol of hope, means that through Peeta, Katniss has begun imagining a life beyond merely surviving the Games.

To get that far, however, she now understands requires both physical and emotional strength, the latter of which Peeta gives her: “...I’m so grateful that he’s still here...So glad that I don’t have to face Cato alone” (*The Hunger Games* 323). At this point in the novel, Peeta is useless to Katniss physically due to his injured leg. He could not assist her with defeating Cato in any practical sense. Katniss knows she will need mental fortitude both to face Cato and to reckon with the idea of having to kill the other
tribute, and here, she acknowledges for the first time that a source outside herself can provide and shore up that inner strength.

Katniss’s willingness to consider herself as half of a District 12 team, rather than as an individual, is inarguably facilitated by the Capitol’s unprecedented rule change. Desiring to further the popular love story, the Capitol announces that two tributes can be victors, so long as they are from the same district. “How do you sidestep,” Katniss earlier wondered, the knowledge that Peeta’s survival means her own death, and vice versa? In a bit of a cheat, Collins *does* sidestep this; though horrifying to contemplate the novel ending any other way, the choice also means that the Capitol, for even a short time, tacitly endorses Peeta’s cooperative value set. It encourages affection and teamwork in the interest of driving a love story, and when only Katniss and Peeta remain, the most compelling storyline then becomes the Capitol revoking their offer. In reverting to the previous ethos of the Games, however, the Capitol inadvertently provides Katniss and Peeta with an opportunity for the ultimate act of rebellion: to be so devoted to each other as to be willing to commit suicide rather than kill the other. In so doing, the Capitol and President Snow set up a dynamic wherein Peeta’s more feminine instinct for emotional cooperation is truly rebellious, and Katniss’s more masculine, innate tendency to respond with violence is a sign of conformity.

This undermines Katherine Broad’s argument that Katniss’s choices are driven by caring for her loved ones and not “calculated to inspire revolution”; Broad asserts that because her choice to eat the berries was emotionally, possibly romantically motivated, it cannot be considered bold or dangerous: “actions that are interpreted as revolutionary are anything but” (122). Broad’s interpretation of Katniss is not one of a powerful,
independent warrior against injustice, but rather, a weak girl whose agency is lost whenever she considers romance or emotional connection. However, if conforming to the Capitol’s ideals means doing its bidding in the winner-take-all arena, then Katniss’s only real agency comes from refusing to coldly murder her fellow tributes in the name of victory. Allowing herself to feel affection for Peeta, especially before the Capitol’s rule change, is the most rebellious thing Katniss can do; it enables her and gives her the courage to stand against the Capitol’s cruelty.

However, Katniss is not yet self-aware enough to fully embrace Peeta’s ethos - at least, not without the impetus of fighting for her immediate survival. Despite the progress made at the end of *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* begins in medias res, months after the Games, with Katniss taking several steps backward in her emotional development due to the fact that her life no longer seems in danger. She has withdrawn from both Peeta and Haymitch, and her relationship with Gale, previously clear and reliable, has become irreparably tense. Their days pass without any emotional intimacy passing between them as they fall back into gendered roles: “Peeta keeps all of us in fresh baked goods. I hunt. He bakes” (*Catching Fire* 15). It is as mundane a life as Katniss could have hoped for.

Even though she is not surrounded by an immediate physical threat such as the Games, Katniss now has a far more pervasive threat: the post-traumatic stress disorder she has experienced since escaping the arena alive. Against this enemy, who cannot be battled by Katniss’s usual means, she again finds refuge in Peeta’s more subtle ways: “As badly as I have hurt him...He’s still looking out for me” (*Catching Fire* 42). As they both recover from their physical wounds, Katniss relies on and wonders at Peeta’s emotional resiliency. He has not played the part of jilted lover, and acted out in more stereotypically
masculine ways, through anger and aggression. Rather, he has remained loyal and patient with her. Even in the face of Katniss’s seeming indifference and detachment, Peeta refuses to break up their partnership: “…I can feel the steadiness that Peeta brings to everything. And I know I’m not alone” (*Catching Fire* 42).

Their victory tour soon throws her world into upheaval once again - daily performance under Snow’s watchful, threatening eye. Throughout the remainder of their tour, and after they receive the news that they will be returning to the Games, Peeta continually demonstrates selflessness even as his own well-being is threatened. Katniss identifies the crux of the difference between them after they realize they are tributes for a second time: “While I was wallowing around on the floor of that cellar, thinking only of myself, he was here, thinking only of me” (*Catching Fire* 178). This reflects their separate instincts toward survival; though Katniss has come to see benefits to Peeta’s approach, it still does not come naturally to her.

Repeatedly, Katniss connects Peeta’s skill with language, and how he uses it to create bonds, with virtue: “Peeta’s the good one, the likeable one. He can make people believe anything” (*Catching Fire* 30). However, this odd description recalls Katniss’s initial distrust of Peeta’s friendliness; though she has come to see his warmth as valuable and vital, she seems to acknowledge here that it can also be a weapon. The power to “make people believe anything” has thus far served noble goals for Peeta, but it is also an apt description of President Snow’s elaborate propaganda machine.

Haymitch also alludes to this capacity for duplicity. Explaining why he did not let Peeta know about Snow’s threats against his family, Haymitch offers, “‘You’re always so reliably good, Peeta...So smart about how you present yourself before the cameras. I
didn’t want to disrupt that” (Catching Fire 66). Smart implies forethought - that Peeta is not relying on natural friendliness, but rather, making calculated decisions about his public persona.

This is not to say that his image is feigned; Peeta doesn’t have to fake sincerity and empathy. Instead, Peeta understands his own strengths and uses them accordingly. Every aspect of his personality and skills are rooted in his unique perspective of the world, prioritizing connection - be it through relationships or, increasingly, art. Just as Katniss’s hunter identity defies traditional gender roles, Peeta’s artistry bucks convention. When Katniss lightly mocks his “‘weakness for beautiful things,’” he replies that “‘Having an eye for beauty isn’t the same thing as a weakness’” (Catching Fire 211).

From the frosting skills he learned as a baker - itself a gender non-conforming role - Peeta branches out to painting in Catching Fire, using his art both as a means to connect and to deal with his own trauma.

His paintings of key moments and players from their games - Rue, for example - anger and upset Katniss rather than console her. She hates his paintings, however beautiful - ironically, because their realism re-immerses her in the violence of the Games. Instead, the moments that most endear Peeta to her are those where he is able to reconcile their pain through physically comforting her. This speaks to Katniss’s overall ease with corporeal means of expression rather than Peeta’s conversation or emotional connection. She knows Peeta helps her deal with their shared trauma - “We manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other’s arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment” (Catching Fire 72) - but associates his support with his tangible presence.
For a time after they know they must return to the arena, Peeta is cold and physically removed from Katniss, and she is resentful that he does not extend this reliable means of consolation: “I don’t know what I expected from my first meeting with Peeta after the announcement. A few hugs and kisses. A little comfort maybe. Not this” (Catching Fire 183). Katniss, still unable or unwilling to understand her own capacity for feeling and connection, allows herself to enjoy and indulge in the physical comfort Peeta provides, but still refrains from acknowledging her very real emotional attachment to him. When they resume their habit of sleeping platonically to ward off night terrors, she muses, “I didn’t realize until now how starved I’ve been for human closeness. For the feel of him beside me in the darkness” (Catching Fire 244). “Human” closeness, for Katniss, must still be tangible and not necessarily associated with a specific human. She can sever corporeal connections; emotional connections are much more difficult to evade or disentangle herself from, and, in her mind, put her at risk.

Katniss also must contend with the idea that falling for Peeta, and especially committing to a life with him, aligns not with her own wishes, but the Capitol’s. Prior to the Games, Katniss swears that she will never marry, primarily because Katniss associates it with having children. She does not consider the possibility of a lifelong romantic bond without envisioning inevitable children, and resolves to “never risk bringing a child into the world. ...My kids’ names would go right into the reaping balls with everyone else’s. And I swear I’ll never let that happen” (The Hunger Games 311). Her refusal to expose more children to the Games necessitates that she spurn Peeta’s affections: “... 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” (The Hunger Games 373).
Romance is inextricable from family for Katniss, which explains why she cannot see Peeta’s love as rebellion when to her, the only way to escape the Capitol’s clutches is to resign herself to loneliness. She cannot see how, even after experiencing the brutality of the Games, Peeta still insists on the importance of romantic bonds: “How can he after what we’ve just been through?” (*The Hunger Games* 373). The violence she has suffered completely negates any romantic hopes; Katniss is willing to forego potential happiness in the name of limiting her emotional connection to those who may someday be endangered.

The love triangle in the series has been the focal point for many critics, who see it as a distraction from Katniss’s story and ultimately undermining her character growth.

For example, Katherine Broad is skeptical of Katniss’s insistence that she has neither the time nor inclination to consider romance with either Peeta or Gale, given her developing feelings for Peeta; “the contradiction between Katniss’s professed disinterest and her nascent desires becomes a productive source of tension” (Broad 119). Katniss’s feelings for Peeta, Broad asserts, “undercut” the fact that she is “utilizing the conventions of romance for political leverage against the Capitol” (Broad 120); in other words, because her feelings for Peeta are genuine, they take agency away from any kind of strategy she might employ against the Capitol. However, this analysis places the power in the wrong place. Katniss has never consciously used her romance with Peeta as “leverage” against the Capitol; she has acted spontaneously where Peeta is concerned, and any strategy to speak of came from Peeta, not her. Her only source of power against the Capitol’s machinations is that she can choose to love *no one*, since loving Peeta - or convincingly seeming as if she does - is what the Capitol wants.
For Katniss, this resolve to remain alone represents the only agency she feels she has. Snow’s insistence that she project adoration for Peeta and eventually marry him robs her of this power. “One of the few freedoms we have in District 12 is the right to marry who we want or not marry at all. And now even that has been taken away from me” (Catching Fire 45). After Snow presents her with his ultimatum, she must necessarily wrap public, performative affection for Peeta up with the Capitol’s end game - and as such, giving in to their romance becomes synonymous with letting the Capitol win. “I wish that Peeta were here to hold me, until I remember I’m not supposed to wish that anymore. I have chosen Gale and the rebellion, and a future with Peeta is the Capitol’s design, not mine” (Catching Fire 129). Now that Peeta and Katniss are closer, Peeta gets the chance to defend the value set that Katniss observed from the outside throughout The Hunger Games, and show her that embracing it actually refutes rather than validates the Capitol’s values. Peeta argues through words and actions that forming emotional bonds is one of the most rebellious acts a citizen of Panem could undertake.

Katniss’s motivation is not rebellion, but rather, to protect her family and create a world safe enough to have her own family someday; this desire, from Broad’s perspective, will lead to a conventional ending that “risk[s] eclipsing the transformative potential of both adolescent rebellion and dystopian literature to imagine other worlds” (121). Like Broad, critic Lindsey Issow Averill believes Katniss’s most primary instinct - to protect - to manifest in a feminine way, archery skills notwithstanding. However, Averill believes that to be powerful rather than detracting from a feminist message. Katniss, argues Averill, makes “ethical choices [that] bespeak an intensely personal response to the needs of her loved ones and others who in various ways touch her
emotionally. She is *not* motivated by abstract principles of right and wrong” (163). Gender equality is not what motivates Katniss, but readers admire her anyway for her traits and actions that seem to put her on par with her male peers. Averill contends that this is a welcome subversion of gender politics: “…this care perspective has historically been unrecognized or devalued by male philosophers and psychologists because it was linked to women’s care-based responsibilities...women’s moral reasoning has put a premium on maintaining, nurturing, and protecting the relationships and bonds of affection that make this vital caregiving possible” (168). Even Katniss’s most violent actions - such as killing an opponent in the arena, or assassinating President Coin, for example - fall under the umbrella of care that Averill articulates, in that they are motivated not by such impulses as proving strength or getting vengeance, but rather, protecting the weak and innocent who cannot protect themselves.

As her world expands beyond her family and district and comes to encompass all of Panem, Katniss only finds more people worth protecting. “Katniss’s...moral compass becomes more fine-tuned and nuanced as she matures - but care always remains her polestar” (173). By Averill’s logic, Katniss’s greatest quality is not masculine, or even ambiguously gendered - it is unabashedly feminine, and should be celebrated as a consequence.

Like Averill, Broad notes that Katniss’s choices are driven by caring for her loved ones and not “calculated to inspire revolution”; unlike Averill, who argues that these types of actions develop and form the basis of Katniss’s ethical development, Broad asserts that Katniss’ tendency to care gives her far less agency: “actions that are interpreted as revolutionary are anything but” (122). Gendered traits aside, in the context
of the Capitol and the situation Katniss is trying to navigate, actually falling for Peeta, and allowing herself to care for others, flies in the face of the Capitol’s bidding.

The District 11 stop is first on Katniss and Peeta’s victory tour, and the place where Katniss must confront the consequence of her only other instance of emotional rebellion: the guilt remaining after she could not save the life of District 11 tribute Rue, the only other contestant with whom Katniss forged an emotional bond. Were she not to have forged a connection with Peeta that actively worked to ensure their survival, Katniss may have never embraced connection as a viable ethos, due to having lost Rue.

Peeta shows Katniss how to reconcile this sadness, and turn it into further protest against the Capitol, through actions of goodwill, love, and honor. During their speech in District 11, in defiance of the Capitol, he spontaneously offers Rue and Thresh’s families half of their winnings for the rest of their lives. His impulsive act reignites Katniss’s affection: “I look at Peeta and he gives me a sad smile. I hear Haymitch’s voice. ‘You could do a lot worse.’” At this moment it’s impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift...it is perfect. So when I rise up on tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn’t feel forced at all” (Catching Fire 59). The gesture forever connects him and Katniss with the mourning families in a manner that directly aids their survival; again, Peeta is providing literal sustenance and figurative hope. His support, tangible in the Games, extends to the new, cerebral horrors they both now face: “We manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other’s arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment” (Catching Fire 72). By keeping the “darkness” at bay, Peeta reminds Katniss of the potential for a viable, palatable future, again opening her mind to the possibility of a romantic bond.
This future will not exist unless the world substantially changes - which requires revolution. Katniss was much more confident in her skills in the arena; she repeatedly denigrates her power when it comes to war and revolution. She finds Peeta, on the other hand, uniquely skilled at the tasks required to move an entire people to rebel. As a whole, Katniss recognizes Peeta’s strengths much more consciously in *Catching Fire* - in particular, how his strengths can be utilized to not only ensure his survival, but also engender the fighting spirit of Panem citizens. “Words. I think of words and I think of Peeta. How people embrace everything he says. He could move a crowd to action, I bet, if he chose to. Would find the things to say” (*Catching Fire* 124). Katniss has begun to conceive of the fight against the Capitol in a broader sense, not just limited to the arena or day-to-day survival, and she believes that in the larger battle, Peeta’s skill set is far more useful than her own:

> And if I really could save Peeta...in terms of a revolution, this would be ideal. Because I will be more valuable dead. They can turn me into some kind of martyr for the cause and paint my face on banners, and it will do more to rally people than anything I could do if I was living. But Peeta would be more valuable alive, and tragic, because he will be able to turn his pain into words that will transform people. (*Catching Fire* 244)

This thought aligns Peeta’s way of doing things with “revolution”: connection, spirit, and love as the ultimate weapon against the Capitol, which would have people reduced to unfeeling automatons, concerned only with their own individual survival.

As her thoughts on Peeta’s strengths evolve, Katniss begins to let go of any worries that anything about him is not sincere. Instead, she roots his skills in that very sincerity:

> There is that quality of goodness that’s hard to overlook...He can use words...And maybe it’s because of that underlying goodness that he can move a crowd - no, a
country - to his side with the turn of a simple sentence. I remember thinking that was the gift the leader of our revolution should have. (Catching Fire 338)

At first, beginning to appreciate the merits of Peeta’s methods results in Katniss negating her own skills. She sees herself as fundamentally different from Peeta, and instead of considering her own similar strengths, she refuses to believe that she has the same capacity as Peeta for connection and positivity.

Peeta sees her very differently. In his language, Katniss’s qualities that she thinks are at odds with Peeta’s mindset - her practicality, her impulses to help and fix, her strength under pressure - are reframed as restorative. *Healing,* Peeta tells her repeatedly. The first time he asks her to use those skills to help an injured tribute, she is startled: “‘You stay with him. You’re the healer.’ *That’s a joke,* I think” (Catching Fire 306).

Katniss sees her meticulous care of Peeta’s serious injury during the first Games almost as a necessary evil - something that had to be done, and therefore she did it. Peeta thinks it was far more ingrained than that: “‘You’re good with this healing stuff,’ he says. ‘It’s in your blood.’ ‘No,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘I got my father’s blood.’ The kind that quickens during a hunt, not an epidemic” (Catching Fire 322). Peeta’s reclassifying of Katniss’s strengths as those of a healer, not just a hunter, points out ways in which Katniss can align herself with Peeta’s values without significantly changing. Caring, love, devotion - these qualities, Peeta points out, have been in Katniss all along.

They were in her father, as well. Although Katniss assigns only her skill as a hunter to him, her fond memories reveal a man who possessed many of the same traits Katniss cannot recognize in herself. Notably, these traits bear similarities to Peeta’s in that they are not gender normative, one way or the other. She also finds in Peeta things she lost when her father died; she remarks that “Gale gave me a sense of security I’d
lacked since my father’s death” (*The Hunger Games* 112), but that same feeling of security is what she first notes and loves in Peeta. Whenever she considers what she most values about “the boy with the bread,” she recalls “the strong arms that warded off nightmares on the train” (*Mockingjay* 195); Peeta’s mere presence wards off all manners of violence and trauma.

The connections between Peeta and her father are more numerous than a sense of surety. Katniss’s father taught her not only to hunt, but also to gather; he educated her about the numerous plants to be found in the wild, knowledge she uses in the Games when she offers Peeta fatal nightlock berries rather than give the Capitol their single victor. It bears significance that this act of defiance - love and connection, rather than violence and individualism - is only possible due to Katniss’s father having passed down this expertise.

He represents love in numerous ways, and his legacy lives on in not only her hunting skills, but also some of Katniss’s softer traits. Her impromptu performance of “The Hanging Tree,” a song around which District 13 constructs an entire propaganda campaign, was inspired by her father, who taught her the song when she was a child. Her memories of their singing together are painful to relive, so much that she typically dismisses music altogether: “…my own dismissal of music might not really be that I think it’s a waste of time. It might be because it reminds me too much of my father” (*The Hunger Games* 301). Only when confronted with even more painful memories - the destruction of her entire district - does Katniss instinctively seek haven in the song her father taught her: “Anything to stop those memories. …I have not sung ‘The Hanging
Tree’ out loud for ten years...but I remember every word. I begin softly, sweetly, as my father did” (*Mockingjay* 125).

The “soft,” “sweet” beginning her father employed with the song belies its words. Katniss expands on the meaning of the song, remarking that its violent content led to her mother’s forbidding it from their home. Somewhat prophetically, it dealt with the death of two lovers, seemingly condemned for the same crime. As a child, Katniss judged the already dead murderer narrating the song for his plea for his lover to join him so they’d “both be free,” but post-Games, she has a different understanding of the lyrics: “Maybe he thought the place he was leaving her was really worse than death. Didn't I want to kill Peeta with that syringe to save him from the Capitol?” (*Mockingjay* 127). The song, inextricably linked to the warm memory of her father, is newly illuminated now that she has experienced the emotion behind it, and now linked to Peeta as well.

Peeta also makes the connection between “The Hanging Tree” and Katniss’s father. After Peeta has been hijacked by the Capitol and is struggling to remember Katniss as an ally rather than foe, Haymitch reports on his progress:

"We showed him that clip of you singing 'The Hanging Tree.' ...He says he recognized the song." For a moment, my heart skips a beat. "He couldn't, Haymitch. He never heard me sing that song."

"Not you. Your father. He heard him singing it one day when he came to trade at the bakery. Peeta was small, probably six or seven, but he remembered it because he was specially listening to see if the birds stopped singing," says Haymitch. "Guess they did."

Six or seven. That would have been before my mother banned the song. Maybe even right around the time I was learning it. (*Mockingjay* 200)

In this memory, Katniss’s father - with whom she identifies so closely - offers the same healing comfort to Peeta that he professed Katniss did in the arena. At his most vulnerable, when his memories of Katniss have been turned against him, Peeta finds
security in the same song and person that gave Katniss the same refuge from her own trauma. “My father. He seems to be everywhere today. ...Singing his way into Peeta's muddled consciousness” (*Mockingjay* 200). The ghost of Katniss’s father, and the love he represents, is powerful enough to offer a respite from the Capitol’s torture for both Katniss and Peeta.

Her father’s death is the major formative event of Katniss’s life, effectively ending her childhood. Due to her mother’s ensuing depression, she becomes the provider, slipping into a very masculine definition of that role: hunting and gathering, and taking tessarae to protect her younger sister from the reaping. Since his death, Katniss has essentially operated as if she were parentless, with all the attending independence and autonomy; in District 13, her mother notes this: “‘Katniss, no one clears anything with me,’ she says. It’s true. Even I don’t. Not since my father died” (*Mockingjay* 102). Therefore, she struggles to adapt to the regimented way of life in District 13 - especially given the absence of Peeta, who has been kidnapped by the Capitol.

*Mockingjay* firmly establishes that Katniss’s tiny circle of people she cares about enough to risk her own survival - her family and Gale’s - has now been expanded by one: Peeta. What they endured in *Catching Fire*, and Katniss’s turn to all-out rebellion against the Capitol, has legitimized their bond and released it from any falsities or encumberments placed on it by President Snow. This means, however, that she feels responsible for him, and Katniss again relates this emotional attachment to weakness - to an inability to concentrate on her immediate safety: “I swear, now that my family and Gale’s are out of harm’s way, I could run away. Except for one piece of unfinished business. Peeta” (*Mockingjay* 13). But with the strengthening of their bond comes an
intriguing string of imagery: Katniss consistently ties Peeta’s well-being to corporeal images, likening his survival to her own, figuratively, now that the Games no longer literally tie the two.

When the Capitol broadcasts a seemingly conciliatory Peeta’s interview with Caesar Flickerman, Katniss revels in this first piece of evidence that Peeta survived the Games. She describes her happiness in physical terms, related to survival: “…I see that his guest is Peeta. A sound escapes me. The same combination of gasp and groan that comes from being submerged in water, deprived of oxygen to the point of pain” (Mockingjay 21). Likening Peeta here to oxygen, and the lack of knowledge over his safety as deprived of such, underscores the idea that for Katniss, her survival is now inextricably tied to Peeta’s. It is not just that keeping Peeta alive enhances her life; instead, it is that their lives are one and the same. Peeta-as-oxygen keeps her alive.

She continues this line of imagery, this time comparing Peeta to something keeping her not merely alive, but well: “I drink in his wholeness, the soundness of his body and mind. It runs through me like the morphling they give me in the hospital” (Mockingjay 22).

Ironically, even though she is free from the immediate physical dangers of the arena, Katniss’s acceptance of Peeta’s importance to her well-being means that President Snow can now affect her from afar. The prophetic thoughts Katniss had about forming an emotional attachment to Peeta before their first Games have now come to fruition: caring about Peeta, and giving in to Peeta’s philosophy of attachment and kindness, is now an exploitable vulnerability that threatens her autonomy. Prim, attempting to assuage Katniss’s fears about Peeta being murdered at the hands of the Capitol, lays out this new
dynamic: “Katniss, I don’t think President Snow will kill Peeta. ... If he does, he won’t have anyone left you want. He won’t have any way to hurt you” (Mockingjay 150). Allowing herself to feel warmth and affection for Peeta saved her from the immediate danger of the Games, but has now opened Katniss up to psychological warfare as Prim warns that Snow will do to Peeta “whatever it takes to break you” (Mockingjay 150).

Upon his return to her, the consequences of her emotional attachment to Peeta hurt Katniss in ways she steadfastly guarded against in the past - largely because, in the wake of his torture by the Capitol, Peeta has switched places with Katniss in their romance. Now, he is aggressive, wary, and even cruel, while she must be patient and warm and figure out how to reteach Peeta what he taught her in the past: the value of their emotional bond, especially as it factors into their survival and quality of life. “It’s only now that he’s been corrupted that I can fully appreciate the real Peeta,” she muses. “...The kindness, the steadiness, the warmth that had an unexpected heat behind it” (Mockingjay 195). Now that he no longer possesses these traits, Katniss must work to remind him of the importance of his own value set: steadfast kindness and passion.

Katniss describes the emotional pain at having been robbed of their bond as more harmful to her than any physical damage: “Not only does he hate me and want to kill me, he no longer believes I’m human. It was less painful being strangled” (Mockingjay 191). She makes an interesting distinction here between Peeta’s love for her and Peeta’s innate belief in her humanity. Katniss has never cared about love, per se; she has always equated romance with a future she never envisioned for herself. She values Peeta’s affection not for its external confirmation that she is worthy of being desired, but rather, that despite all that has happened to her and the things she has had to do to survive, she is still worthy of
being loved. The difference between being desired and being loved, for Katniss, is the difference between expectations of a life she does not want and acceptance of the life she already lives. Peeta provided her with the latter without making her feel pressured about the former. She laments the loss of this security: “Outside of Prim, my mother, and Gale, how many people in the world love me unconditionally? I think in my case, the answer may now be none” (Mockingjay 195). Gale’s inclusion in this list of those who love Katniss “unconditionally” is an indication that subconsciously, Katniss has already removed him from consideration as a romantic suitor; he is firmly in her “family” basket - those to whom she owes no obligation other than her care and survival.

At this point in the novels, Katniss still believes herself torn between Gale and Peeta - between, at its essence, their distinctive, contradictory value sets, though she does not yet see it as such. She perceives it as a pull between her past and her present: the difference between who she feels she is and the person others believe her to be. Gale is forever tied to her past - to the experience that has turned her into an adult: her father’s death and the need to provide for her family in his absence. For Katniss, Gale’s “companionship replaced the long solitary hours in the woods. ...He became my confidant, someone with whom I could share thoughts I could never voice inside the fence. In exchange, he trusted me with his. Being out in the woods with Gale...sometimes I was actually happy” (The Hunger Games 112). She associates Gale, and happiness, with outside “the fence” - in the wilderness outside District 12, where although she was acting to keep her family alive and well, she could reveal more of herself than she could at home. Gale meant a great deal to her because they were like-minded, with similar
responsibilities, skills, and temperaments, and they found refuge from the difficulty of everyday existence in each other’s company.
Chapter III

Finnick and the Power of Friendship

Having discussed Katniss and Peeta in terms of the gender norms, I will turn to the character of Finnick Odair, arguably the most gendered, sexual character in the series on a superficial level. Finnick is a respected warrior and merciless playboy, seemingly eschewing true emotional bonds even more than does Katniss. However, he has far more in common with Peeta than he does with Katniss, and reinforces Peeta’s ethos throughout the second and third novels. Through examining Finnick, we understand how unusual Katniss’s initial philosophy is, and the value of the one Peeta and Finnick espouse instead.

*Catching Fire* emphasizes and begins to explore the uniqueness of Katniss and Peeta’s bond as the only survivors of a war fought by no one else in their lives. It also introduces us to more characters naturally empathetic to Katniss - characters who, like Haymitch, can understand Katniss on a level very few can: fellow victors. Katniss feels an undeniable connection to these men and women who understand what it is like to kill at the Capitol’s behest, and for the reward to be a life lived under President Snow’s thumb. This grisly point of commonality ensures a trust and unspoken bond that Katniss otherwise finds extremely difficult to forge. Ironically, the Capitol creates the foundation for the relationship, second only to her love for Peeta, that is perhaps most fundamental to Katniss’s growth and rebellion: her friendship with Hunger Games victor Finnick Odair.
Were it a traditional Hunger Games and Katniss were visiting the Capitol as a mentor to a new tribute, her friendships with previous victors could have developed as did Haymitch’s: safe from immediate danger, bonding in the aftermath of their trauma. But due to the Capitol’s manipulation of the situation - the Quarter Quell calls for all contestants in the 75th Hunger Games to be past victors, and they are both selected - Katniss must see Finnick first and foremost as her competition. The reader’s introduction to Finnick is through Katniss’s eyes, as she watches the Reaping and surveys her competitors: “Finnick, the handsome bronze-haired guy from District 4 who was crowned ten years ago at the age of fourteen” (Catching Fire 191). Two qualities of Finnick’s are highlighted in Katniss’s first assessment that are vital to how she perceives him over the course of the story: his physical beauty, and his youthful innocence at the time of his Games - since corrupted in ways foreign even to Katniss’s experience. Both the beauty and corruption are central to Finnick’s character, and the ways he uses and subverts them play on the reader’s understanding of gender and reinforce to Katniss the importance of Peeta’s brand of survival: love and connection.

It is therefore not coincidental that Finnick’s first appearance in the novel is framed exactly the same way as Peeta’s: Katniss watching a Reaping, observing first a physical trait of her ostensible opponent, and second a glimpse of the connection prized by both Finnick and Peeta, which will prove that neither is Katniss’s opponent at all. Katniss notes both “handsome, bronze-haired” Finnick and Peeta’s fear-stricken “blue eyes” (The Hunger Games 26), but immediately afterward comes the evidence of love and selflessness in both young men that she will come to admire. For Peeta, it is related in Katniss’s memory of “the boy with the bread”; for Finnick, it is more obscure -
evidence of the two relationships most important in his life, neither of which Katniss yet understands: “A hysterical young woman with flowing brown hair is also called from 4, but she’s quickly replaced by a volunteer, an eighty-year-old woman who needs a cane to walk to the stage” (Catching Fire 191). Much later, the story reveals these women to be Annie, Finnick’s future wife, and Mags, his mentor during his Games and the closest thing to a mother he has. It takes nearly 150 pages for the magnitude of this scene to be revealed to Katniss: the two people Finnick loves most on this earth, one chosen for near-certain death and the other volunteering to take her place.

Katniss puzzles her way to this conclusion largely because Finnick’s public persona demands that she must; the debonair playboy he presents to the world, and the relative safety from the Capitol’s wrath that he enjoys as a result, depend on his hiding the depth of these emotional connections. Peeta, determined that the Games not take away his true self, figures out a way to navigate them using his skill for connection; like him, Finnick learns to weaponize his natural assets - in Finnick’s case, his innate charm and attractiveness. The combination of these qualities with his physical training is deadly: “Being from District 4, he was a Career, so the odds were already in his favor, but what no trainer could claim to have given him was his extraordinary beauty. Tall, athletic, with golden skin and bronze-colored hair and those incredible eyes” (Catching Fire 208).

Katniss’s memory gives us this image, which is significant as Finnick’s games were a decade before. Katniss was merely six or seven when Finnick won, but she recalls his “extraordinary beauty” clearly. Even for a girl who most values her talent with a bow, Finnick’s primary asset is his appearance.
Katniss’s recollection of Finnick’s performance in his games is more generous than her recollection of his physical beauty, in that it gives credit to his cunning and physical prowess:

While other tributes that year were hard-pressed to get a handful of grain or some matches for a gift, Finnick never wanted for anything, not food or medicine or weapons. It took about a week for his competitors to realize that he was the one to kill, but it was too late. He was already a good fighter with the spears and knives he had found in the Cornucopia. When he received a silver parachute with a trident - which may be the most expensive gift I’ve ever seen given in the arena - it was all over. District 4’s industry is fishing. He’d been on boats his whole life. The trident was a natural, deadly extension of his arm. He wove a net out of some kind of vine he found, used it to entangle his opponents so he could spear them with the trident and within a matter of days the crown was his. The citizens of the Capitol have been drooling over him ever since. (Catching Fire 209)

Katniss’s greatest struggle in her first Games was figuring out how to play Peeta’s style and manipulate the viewers to receive vital necessities. Finnick displays no such uncertainty; he is able to stay alive off the generosity of Capitol citizens, and ultimately uses it to the tune of the most useful possible gift: the weapon truest to his upbringing, with which he feels most confident. Though Katniss did acquire a bow in her Games, she did not employ it with the gusto she describes in Finnick, who went on the offensive once receiving his trident and killed other tributes without hesitation. He wins his Games with a unique blend of gendered traits: playing off his beauty to curry favor, and utilizing his formidable skill as a warrior to kill.

Finnick’s overwhelming popularity as a 14-year-old killer also highlights the perversity of the Capitol viewers. Katniss remembers him, and he was therefore presented, even at 14, as a desirable heartthrob. He is, however, the youngest winner of the Hunger Games ever - games designed specifically for children. Katniss’s description makes it easy to forget that Finnick was a child when Capitol adults were buying him
expensive gifts and clamoring for time with him. The inappropriateness of the situation does not seem to register with Katniss; if anything, she seems to place much of the onus for the situation on Finnick, for being so desirable, rather than on Capitol viewers for their predatory lust.

Post-Games, Katniss floundered in an environment where she could not use her bow - only whatever talent she had to sell her love affair with Peeta could keep her in Snow’s good graces, and she struggled with the gestures that came naturally to Peeta during their tour of Panem. Her memory of Finnick reveals the opposite: a young man extremely comfortable with his physical beauty, and willing and able to employ it:

Because of his youth, they couldn’t really touch him for the first year or two. But ever since he turned sixteen, he’s spent his time at the Games being dogged by those desperately in love with him. No one retains his favor for long. He can go through four or five in his annual visit. Old or young, lovely or plain, rich or very rich, he’ll keep them company and take their extravagant gifts, but he never stays, and once he’s gone he never comes back. (Catching Fire 209)

There is strange tone to this description, unlike that which Katniss uses to describe other people. It is vaguely judgmental - “rich or very rich,” she snipes about Finnick’s preferred partners - and more frankly sexual than Katniss has thus far revealed herself to be. It’s oddly knowing of these types of transactional relationships, coming from a young woman who allows herself no thought of indulgent love affairs and who has thus far done nothing more than kiss Peeta and Gale, either under duress or in an attempt to manipulate the Capitol.

Finnick’s overt sexuality seems to both shock and offend Katniss. Peeta speculates that Katniss feels this way because she is too “pure,” but her musings on Finnick offer a different explanation: “I can’t argue that Finnick isn’t one of the most stunning, sensuous people on the planet. But I can honestly say he’s never been attractive
to me. Maybe he’s too pretty, or maybe he’s too easy to get, or maybe it’s really that he’d just be too easy to lose” (Catching Fire 209). Katniss is not too innocent to be aware of Finnick’s beauty, or even too prudish to contemplate giving herself over to him. Instead, she associates his looks with disloyalty - with the inevitable loss of his affections. This seems an odd concern for a girl so determined to keep her circle of loved ones narrow, and it reveals that Katniss is more open to long-term connection than she has thus far let on, even to herself.

Katniss’s knowing description of Finnick’s sexuality - and his actual behavior - seems shocking, especially in The Hunger Games’ context as an ostensible young adult novel. However, his overtures and potentially threatening virility do not touch Katniss in any way, both because she is not his actual target and she does not make herself available to him. The reader never entertains the idea of an actual liaison between the two of them; instead, he is presented more as an object of affection for the readers themselves. His removal from Katniss means that her emotions aren’t threatened, and therefore, neither are the reader’s. This leaves a young adult reader open to Finnick’s ultimate message, which, like Peeta’s, has everything to do with love and nothing to do with sex - despite his initial presentation.

When the Quarter Quell begins, Katniss finally meets Finnick, and the audience sees how he skillfully breezes through the same ceremonies that gave Katniss such difficulty in her Games: the primping, the chariot presentation, the interview. In each, Finnick utilizes a more stereotypical feminine strategy, playing on his beauty repeatedly, confidently. He understands and has no qualms playing to his strengths: “He’s draped in a golden net that’s strategically knotted at his groin so he can’t technically be called
naked...I’m sure his stylist thinks the more of Finnick the audience sees, the better” (Catching Fire 209). In her Games, Katniss and Haymitch could not figure out a way to make Capitol citizens root for her; such presentation does not come naturally to her. It took Peeta, and his effortless knack for setting emotional stakes, to make her desirable. Finnick needs no such crutch. He understands his beauty to be an asset, and uses it accordingly, seemingly with no qualms.

Playing on his beauty to manipulate others is not the only stereotypically feminine strategy Finnick utilizes. He openly confesses to Katniss that his preferred currency is not money, but rumors and gossip: “‘I haven’t dealt in anything as common as money for years,’ says Finnick. ‘Then how do they pay you for the pleasure of your company?’ I ask. ‘With secrets,’ he says softly” (Catching Fire 210). In the context of their conversation, Katniss interprets this as flirting, and brushes him off. It is not until much later that she bears witness to the power of the secrets Finnick has been collecting over the years, and the toll they have taken on him, despite the frivolity he brandishes here. Peeta remarks that without each other, they may have become “part of the freak show” of victors (Catching Fire 211), pointing out that he and Katniss ground each other - protecting each other from the corrupting influence of the Capitol. She perceives Finnick as lacking this connection with another victor, and views Finnick’s many liaisons as trivial, or even tawdry, much as she would any of the Capitol’s excesses.

Katniss’s focus on Finnick’s appearance and flirtations blinds her to his more subtle strategy: displaying his more practical skills in an effort to become her ally. She brushes him off at the training center, even as he finishes “the complicated knot I’ve been sweating over...[he] seems to have spent his childhood doing nothing but wielding
tridents and manipulating ropes into fancy knots for nets” (*Catching Fire* 224). She is even unable to appreciate him utilizing Peeta’s strategy of connection; in their next interaction, he introduces her to Mags, with whom Katniss immediately bonds: “I remember how she volunteered to replace the young, hysterical woman in her district...just like I volunteered last year to save Prim. And I decide I want her on my team” (*Catching Fire* 232). Ultimately, she trades skill for skill, Finnick’s trident tutelage for her archery instruction. But she still cannot bring herself to truly trust anyone: “...the more I come to know these people, the worse it is. Because, on the whole, I don’t hate them. And some I like. ...But all of them must die if I’m to save Peeta” (*Catching Fire* 234). Unable to yet see herself as part of a larger team, Katniss views every new connection she makes as threatening her primary one to Peeta.

As the victors convene for the final interviews before the Quarter Quell, each plays off their strengths and style to make a personal plea to Capitol viewers. Katniss and Peeta play into the story of their love affair; Finnick plays on the multiple seedlings he has planted in Capitol hearts over the years: “Finnick recites a poem he wrote to his one true love in the Capitol, and about a hundred people faint because they’re sure he means them” (*Catching Fire* 251). Katniss again uses a judgmental tone, wielding hyperbole to communicate her disdain for Finnick’s tactics, and reducing him once more to a philanderer rather than a skilled player using his assets.

In the arena, Katniss continues to objectify Finnick. It is a strange reversal of conventional gender roles; rather than a hostile male gaze reducing a female body to an object of desire, it is Katniss whose perspective repeatedly diminishes Finnick. Even as he uses his fighting skills to save both himself and Katniss, her descriptions cannot help
but focus on his physicality: “Finnick, glistening and gorgeous, stands a few yards away, with a trident poised to attack. ...He’s smiling a little, but the muscles in his upper body are rigid with anticipation” (*Catching Fire* 269).

Despite her resistance to truly connecting with him, Finnick breaks down Katniss’s barriers to trusting others via her only strong connection: Peeta. From their first moments in the arena, Finnick’s actions connect him in a vital way to Peeta, reminding Katniss of Peeta’s values: teamwork, trust, and allyship based on belief in an ideal rather than quid-pro-quo. He does so by literally saving Peeta’s life, on multiple occasions, at great risk to his own: saving him from the water, giving him CPR after he is shocked, carrying him out of the poison fog. However, although his actions connect him with Peeta, Katniss sees Finnick with her, outside of Peeta’s values: “Finnick knows then what Haymitch and I know. About Peeta. Being truly, deep-down better than the rest of us. ...Finnick’s right. I’m right. The people in this arena weren’t crowned for their compassion” (*Catching Fire* 277). This is important because Katniss has always thought of Peeta’s innate goodness as being alien, at odds with the violence and coldness she sees inside herself. Finnick symbolizes a means by which Katniss can live by Peeta’s ethos: he is selflessly protecting their trio, much as Peeta would, but Finnick’s lethal skill, ruthlessness, and warrior instincts make him a truer match for Katniss. He is the first real-world example of how Katniss can embrace Peeta’s ethos.

Moreover, when Finnick flashes Katniss a familiar golden bangle, she understands that the partnership was arranged by the person Katniss has entrusted with her plan to save Peeta’s life: “...Peeta and I had ruled out allies. Now Haymitch has chosen one on his own” (*Catching Fire* 270). When she understands that Finnick has
been sent by one of the only people she trusts to help her save the other person she trusts, she grants him the benefit of the doubt and lets down some of her guard. She is rewarded for it in the same way Haymitch rewarded her for warming to Peeta in their first Games: “I’m thinking that maybe Finnick Odair is all right. At least not as vain or self-important as I’d thought. Not so bad at all, really. And just as I’ve come to this conclusion, a parachute lands….Be friends with Finnick. You’ll get food” (Catching Fire 317). Not coincidentally, the parachutes that land time and again to reward her connection to Finnick contain bread. “Finnick counts them, turning each one over in his hands before he sets it in a neat configuration. I don’t know what it is with Finnick and bread, but he seems obsessed with handling it” (Catching Fire 349). The salty bread is unique to Finnick’s district, further blending him and Peeta, Katniss’s “boy with the bread.”

The situation also roughly parallels Katniss’s time in the arena with Peeta during their first Games, in that she is flummoxed by Finnick’s altruism and convinced it could not possibly be in her best interests. His gestures confuse Katniss much the same as Peeta’s initial friendliness did. Although she cannot understand Finnick’s motives, she believes that his actions have indebted her to him, creating the same fear that Peeta’s kindness induced in their Games: “All I wanted was to keep Peeta alive, and I couldn’t and Finnick could, and I should be nothing but grateful. And I am. But I am also furious because it means that I will never stop owing Finnick Odair. Ever. So how can I kill him in his sleep?” (Catching Fire 282). As their time in the arena continues, and sacrifice after sacrifice endears Finnick to her, Katniss begins to see their partnership as based more on trust and less on necessity, even though she cannot yet fathom why Finnick has forged it: “…yesterday morning, Finnick was on my kill list, and now I’m willing to sleep
with him as my guard. He saved Peeta and let Mags die and I don’t know why. Only that I can never settle the balance owed between us. All I can do at the moment is go to sleep and let him grieve in peace. And so I do” (Catching Fire 315). In this moment, Katniss not only understands that she has come to trust Finnick, but also begins to see and treat him as a person with depths beyond his beauty and his skill with a trident.

After their trio finds Johanna, Beetee, and Wiress, these depths to Finnick are gradually revealed. He is delighted to see Johanna, and at this point his trust of her means Katniss trusts her too: “Finnick...repeatedly dunks her while she screams a lot of really insulting things at me. But I don’t shoot. Because she’s with Finnick” (Catching Fire 320). Finnick and Johanna’s friendship, forged before these Games, shows sides of Finnick Katniss cannot yet see. When Johanna tells them how one of her companions died, it is Finnick who understands the gravity of this rather than Katniss: “‘I’m sorry, Johanna,’ says Finnick. It takes a moment to place Blight. I think he was Johanna’s male counterpart from District 7, but I hardly remember seeing him” (Catching Fire 320). Finnick knows Johanna well enough to extend his sympathies, despite her front of nonchalance; she, in turn, knows him well enough to get across to Katniss exactly how much Finnick has sacrificed for her sake: “‘How’d you lose Mags?... She was Finnick’s mentor, you know,’ Johanna says accusingly. ‘No, I didn’t,’ I say. ‘She was half his family,’ she says a few moments later, but there’s less venom behind it” (Catching Fire 323).

The other “half” of Finnick’s family is revealed later, when he and Katniss together endure the torture of the jabberjays. When Finnick rushes to her rescue after she plunges into the jungle, the jabberjays turn on him, and Katniss sees his confident facade
“The piercing shriek cuts me off...maybe a young woman’s. I don’t recognize it. But the effect on Finnick is instantaneous. The color vanishes from his face and I can actually see his pupils dilate in fear” (Catching Fire 341). Together, they try to combat the mutts, trading moments of strength - Katniss kills Finnick’s torturing bird, while he drags her toward the beach and away from one imitating Gale. When they realize they are trapped, Katniss focuses on Peeta - “I just stare at his face, doing my best to hang on to my sanity” - but lacking his own anchor in a storm, Finnick falls apart.

As the two of them recover, Finnick in the sea and Katniss in Peeta’s arms, it is Peeta who illustrates the significance of the experience Katniss just shared with Finnick. Until now, Finnick has been an unflappable presence in the Games, sacrificing his seemingly only emotional connection - to Mags - for Peeta and Katniss’s sake. Peeta is aware enough both to break through Katniss’s pain and ask about Finnick, and clarify the emotional stakes at hand for their ally: “Annie Cresta. She was the girl Mags volunteered for” (Catching Fire 347). It is the first piece of information that belies Finnick’s cool exterior, and reveals his true self - someone more akin to Peeta, with his vulnerability and openness to love, than Katniss, with her reluctance to make connections that could weaken her.

In that sense, his relationship with Annie is almost a purer form of attachment than Katniss’s with Peeta: she offers him no strategic benefit in return for his affection. “So that’s who Finnick loves, I think. Not his string of fancy lovers in the Capitol. But a poor, mad girl back home” (Catching Fire 348). In her madness, Annie is completely at the mercy of the Capitol, and unable to help Finnick in any way; an alliance with her does not offer Finnick safety or leverage in the way Katniss and Peeta’s does. In fact,
acknowledging his love for her would weaken what little power he has over his own fate, since it would ruin his appeal to the Capitol elite.

However important she is to him, Finnick seems willing to - and does - risk his own happiness with Annie for the good of the cause, repeatedly. In another parallel to Peeta, he seems his devotion as rebellion against the Capitol rather than a weakness to be exploited by it. This is not a distinction Katniss is able to make for some time, if ever; Peeta is first and foremost for her, and if his safety conflicts with the goals of the rebellion, it is Peeta who will win out. Both of their philosophies are tested after the Quarter Quell ends in chaos, Katniss and Finnick are spirited away to District 13, and both Annie and Peeta are captured. Finnick’s attempts to explain what happened fall on deaf ears, and they both despair now that their loved ones are no longer safe: “Finnick Odair’s good intentions mean less than nothing… ‘I wish she was dead,’ he says. ‘I wish they were all dead and we were, too. It would be best’ (Catching Fire 389).

Once in District 13, it takes Katniss some time to adjust to this new order of things - Finnick’s confidence as a front, and his true self more like herself and Peeta than she knew. Yet even as she continues thinking of him as the superficial sexpot she once believed him to be, she ascribes to him a power that she felt herself incapable of exercising: “Then there’s Finnick Odair, the sex symbol from the fishing district, who kept Peeta alive in the arena when I couldn’t” (Mockingjay 11). Eventually, this gratitude breaks down her resistance to connection. She once worried that she would “never stop owing Finnick Odair,” and imagined the price she’d have to repay would cost her in the arena. Instead, it costs her guardedness and her stubborn resistance to connection.
Outside of immediate danger, Finnick becomes a true ally to her in a way she never allowed herself to think of him in the Games.

It is not truly his saving Peeta that encourages Katniss to trust Finnick; rather, it is a quality that he shares with no one in her life other than Peeta - the harrowing experiences of their Games. As such, she lets go of her grudge against him: “…I had to forgive Finnick for his role in the conspiracy that landed me here. He, at least, has some idea of what I’m going through. And it takes too much energy to stay angry with someone who cries so much” (Mockingjay 12). There has been somewhat of a reversal in their roles; the confident, cocksure Finnick is now unraveled, and Katniss, previously held together by Peeta, is both a source of comfort for him and the recipient of his experience.

Though their common experience in the arena is what initially binds them, they also share their present circumstances: frustrating impotence as the person who means the most to them is potentially tortured miles away. “I know that Finnick can’t focus on anything in 13 because he’s trying so hard to see what’s happening in the Capitol to Annie, the mad girl from his district who’s the only person on earth he loves” (Mockingjay 12). Similarly, Katniss is unable to truly be the Mockingjay; she knows that every act of rebellion she commits will be felt by Peeta, at the hands of President Snow.

Previously, when Katniss’s formidable physical strength was no match for the emotional pain she carried inside, it was Peeta who offered her a tangible remedy: his steadfast embrace, which warded off her worst dreams. In Peeta’s absence, Finnick gives her another palpable solution: “Finnick stands among them, looking dazed but gorgeous. In his hands he holds a piece of thin rope…His fingers move rapidly, automatically tying
and unraveling various knots as he gazes about. Probably part of his therapy” (Mockingjay 56). She soon adopts this strategy, which Finnick offers to her in the depths of 13 as it’s under attack, when they are the only ones awake and fretting: “I carefully extricate myself from the blanket and tiptoe through the cavern until I find Finnick, feeling for some unspecified reason that he will understand. He sits under the safety light in his space, knotting his rope, not even pretending to rest” (Mockingjay 154). The knot symbolically invokes emotional bonds that tie Katniss and Finnick to both each other and their partners in distress; they can physically control the rope, untying it at will, even though they are long past the point of extricating themselves from their connections to Annie and Peeta. She implicitly trusts Finnick’s advice about how to handle their mutual pain: “‘Better not to give in to it. It takes ten times as long to put yourself back together as it does to fall apart.’ Well, he must know. I take a deep breath, forcing myself back into one piece” (Mockingjay 156). Appealing to her logical nature, Finnick both acknowledges the depth of her feelings for Peeta and helps Katniss feel strong when Peeta’s absence makes her feel untethered.

Finnick also shows her how to use her own strengths to achieve something like agency in a time when they feel their most powerless. Katniss may see Finnick as completely broken down, but those who have known him longer disabuse her of that notion, and emphasize how much strength he possesses and draws upon to stay not only functioning, but effective. Beetee asks Katniss how Finnick is doing, and reveals the depths of Finnick’s suffering and strength: “I don’t want to say he had a complete mental meltdown. ‘If you knew what Finnick’s been through the last few years, you’d know how remarkable it is he’s still with us at all’” (Mockingjay 67). This is not an observation
Katniss is capable of making. Since her father’s death, and especially since she volunteered as tribute, her entire focus has been around herself and the very few people she loves. She would not dare to feel the empathy required to acknowledge Finnick’s pain, or expend the energy to see beneath his cocky facade; she sees such things as luxuries that she cannot afford, that would open her and her loved ones up to danger and death. But Peeta, Finnick, and the other victors prize these very things. It is only at the Quarter Quell, in front of his fellow victors, that Haymitch can relax and enjoy the company of friends, and it is only Beetee and Johanna who can illustrate Finnick’s true capacity for connection. As the only other people in the world who have endured what Katniss has, the victors - personified by Finnick - show her the value and beauty of Peeta’s ethos: connection and empathy above self-centeredness and isolation.

His reliance on his bonds with his fellow victors and his belief in the cause bring Finnick back from the abyss. As Katniss begins to embrace her role as the Mockingjay, Finnick comes alive again, showing off the charm that was always innately his, but that he used to his benefit under the Capitol’s watchful eye. Away from Capitol control, he takes these qualities back for his own - beginning with his warrior instincts: “At the word *trident*, it’s as if the old Finnick surfaces” (*Mockingjay* 79). Beetee’s gift reminds Finnick that he still has something to fight for, that all is not lost, and he begins to open up again, utilizing first the primary characteristic of his public persona - his frank sexuality:

He looks down at his legs as if noticing his outfit for the first time. Then he whips off his hospital gown, leaving him in just his underwear. “Why? Do you find this” - he strikes a ridiculously provocative pose - “distracting?” I can’t help laughing because it’s funny...and I’m happy because Finnick actually sounds like the guy I met at the Quarter Quell. “I’m only human, Odair.” (*Mockingjay* 79)
Katniss’s laughter and relief to Finnick’s lewd jokes stand in stark contrast to her aversion and prudishness prior to the Quarter Quell. His sexuality is simply a part of the Finnick she has come to care for and trust, and it is this Finnick, in Peeta’s absence, who shows her how to weaponize connection and relationships against the Capitol.

Their bond is further cemented after Katniss’s first “propo” - the commercial-like spot, produced by 13, that features Katniss’s spontaneous reaction to the Capitol’s bombing of a hospital. Finnick’s own series of propos - “called We Remember. In each one, we would feature one of the dead tributes. ...The idea being that we could target each district with a very personal piece” (Mockingjay 109) - utilizes his and Finnick’s ethos of caring to inflict maximum impact: “‘Finnick’s absolutely marvelous.’ ‘It’s painful to watch, actually,’ says Cressida. ‘He knew so many of them personally.’ ‘That’s what makes it so effective,’ says Plutarch. ‘Straight from the heart’” (Mockingjay 119).

Katniss’s propo also uses her similar impulse to care and connect, but its effectiveness stems from a moment of impulsive emotion, after she witnessed the brutal deaths of scores of District 8 citizens. Unlike everyone else in 13 - even Haymitch - Finnick does not offer Katniss cheer or congratulations over 13’s successful manipulation of an incident she found traumatic rather than inspirational: “At least Finnick doesn’t applaud or act all happy when it’s done. He just says, ‘People should know that happened. And now they do’” (Mockingjay 112). He offers Katniss a way to be proud of her role as the Mockingjay that doesn’t make her feel jaded to the pain of others. Minutes later, after a visibly rattled Peeta appears on their screen, Finnick becomes Katniss’s ally against not only the Capitol, but everyone in 13 who does not understand them or would use them for their own purposes: “Finnick grips me hard by the arms. ‘We didn’t see it.
...We didn’t see Peeta. Only the propo on Eight. Then we turned the set off because the images upset you. Got it?’ he asks. I nod. ‘Finish your dinner’” (Mockingjay 114). His quick thinking enables Katniss to keep this knowledge to herself, giving her leverage and a sense of agency she feels herself lacking.

It also moves her further away from Gale, who has allied himself with 13’s goals and style, and closer to Peeta - for whom Finnick is a clear proxy. “‘I haven’t heard one word about [Peeta’s appearance on television]. No one’s told you anything?’ Finnick says. I shake my head. He pauses before he asks, ‘Not even Gale?’” (Mockingjay 115). With this gentle question, Finnick points out that Gale has become far more aligned with 13’s interests than with Katniss’s - especially where Peeta is concerned. When Peeta again appears on their screens, this time in extreme distress, it is not Gale but Finnick who immediately reaches out to console her: “‘He’s worse,’ I whisper. Finnick grabs my hand, to give me an anchor, and I try to hang on” (Mockingjay 132). In the ensuing battle for control of the airwaves, Katniss realizes that the only two people in the room for whom Peeta is also the main priority are her fellow victors: “...most everybody is cheering Beetee on, but Finnick remains still and speechless beside me. I meet Haymitch’s eyes from across the room and see my own dread mirrored back. The recognition that with every cheer, Peeta slips even farther from our grasp” (Mockingjay 133).

Katniss’s bond with Finnick not only begins to unravel her lifelong bond with Gale, but also reaffirms the genuineness of her love for Peeta, and reminds her of Peeta’s unconditional love for her. Finnick does so by quietly affirming to be truth what Katniss only suspects or is unwilling to admit is in her own heart: “...it wasn’t until Peeta hit the
forcefield and nearly died that I - ...That I knew I’d misjudged you. That you do love him. I’m not saying in what way. Maybe you don’t know yourself. But anyone paying attention could see how much you care about him,’ he says gently” (*Mockingjay* 156).

These simple words give Katniss both the language she needs to describe her feelings for Peeta, and the affirmation that what she feels for him is real and to be honored.

Respect for language, and the power to wield it to influential ends, is another trait that Finnick and Peeta have in common. When 13 desperately needs a distraction from their attempted rescue of the captured tributes - “What we need is something so riveting that even President Snow won’t be able to tear himself away” (*Mockingjay* 168) - Finnick and Katniss both volunteer their honesty. But what Finnick has to reveal is far more painful than Katniss’s remembrances of Peeta - painful enough, even, for Haymitch to offer him a way out: “‘You don’t have to do this.’ ‘Yes, I do. If it will help her.’ Finnick balls up his rope in his hand’” (*Mockingjay* 169). For the next ten minutes, Finnick draws on his love for Annie and the physical symbol of their connection for the strength to reveal the source of his pain: President Snow has essentially made him a sex slave.

This scene is one of the clearest examples of Katniss’s expectations being turned on their head - an experience that previously, only Peeta has catalyzed in her. In both cases, her perception of someone else’s motivations and persona are significantly changed, and she feels almost naive as a result, realizing that she was mistaken due to that person’s skill with a game she doesn’t know how to play. In Peeta’s instance, the friendliness she perceived as a trick to gain her trust turned out to be legitimate, and his words of love heartfelt; he “won” the Games by staying true to himself. Finnick’s case is extremely similar; his charm and way with words are genuine, but he has found a way to
use them against the Capitol for self-preservation. Katniss is immediately contrite: “I want to interrupt the taping and beg Finnick’s forgiveness for every false thought I’ve ever had about him. But we have a job to do, and I sense Finnick’s role will be far more effective than mine” (Mockingjay 170). She credits Finnick with a talent with words that she has ascribed to Peeta on more than one occasion - a talent she believes far more vital than her own to the revolution’s cause.

Finnick has weaponized his beauty and charm in the way a traditional femme fatale might - feigning interest and gaining trust that he later exploits. In this way, he upends the gender expectations of the reader: the character most adept at using and manipulating sexuality is a man rather than a woman. He uses his abusers’ guilt against them: “To make themselves feel better, my patrons would make presents of money or jewelry, but I found a much more valuable form of payment...Secrets” (Mockingjay 170). He counts as his most valuable asset not wealth, but “secrets” - a play on both Katniss’s estimation of his skill with words, and the reader’s gender biases around those who gossip and tell those secrets. Katniss reflects on Finnick’s predicament: “Finnick was someone bought and sold. A district slave. A handsome one, certainly, but in reality, harmless. Who would he tell? And who would believe him if he did?” (Mockingjay 171).

Although he employs what power he can in his situation, Finnick is still at the mercy of the Capitol; he can use his sexuality to gain some measure of control, but it ironically works against him when it comes to exercising actual agency.

Unable to prevent the abuse of his body, Finnick takes control of the one thing that remained his: his true affections. Just as Peeta shows Katniss that their love is a truly rebellious act, Finnick’s love for Annie is in defiance of the Capitol. He describes the
beginning of his love affair with Annie to Katniss, describing a relationship trajectory very similar to hers with Peeta: “‘Did you love Annie right away, Finnick?’ I ask. ‘No.’ A long time passes before he adds, ‘She crept up on me’” (*Mockingjay* 174). Katniss and Finnick, both warriors, self-sufficient in the arena and surviving on their own physical skills, have ended up falling for someone who does not immediately offer them any asset that could help ensure their survival. Although both Katniss and Finnick do see worthwhile qualities in Peeta and Annie, the relationships are not strategic; they were born of time, not circumstance, and make the circumstances *worth* surviving.

Upon Peeta and Annie’s arrival at 13, Katniss finds herself isolated and alone now that Finnick has his partner back, but Peeta has been hijacked and sees her as an enemy. Adrift from Peeta, Katniss comes to truly understand the value and depth of the connection she had taken for granted - largely through observing Finnick and Annie.

...suddenly, it’s as if there’s no one in the world but these two, crashing through space to reach each other. They collide, enfold, lose their balance, and slam against a wall, where they stay. Clinging into one being. Indivisible. A pang of jealousy hits me. Not for either Finnick or Annie but for their certainty. No one seeing them could doubt their love. (*Mockingjay* 176)

This is the most *romantic* depiction yet seen from Katniss’s point of view. Her narrative style is not lacking in description, but is typically rather literal. Here, by using the phrases “crashing through space,” “clinging into one being,” and “indivisible” to describe Finnick and Annie’s physical connection, Katniss is also describing their figurative connection.

Their wedding would seem to be the perfect moment for Katniss to make direct parallels to her own life and her determination never to marry, but instead, she brushes aside the uncertain fate of all in attendance: “It doesn’t matter because nothing can compete with the beauty of the couple. ...Who can look past the radiant faces of two
people for whom this day was once a virtual impossibility? ...No, I don’t have to pretend to be happy for them” (*Mockingjay* 226). Katniss has long refused to marry because of what *could* happen; Finnick and Annie have insisted on marrying for the same reason. It is a philosophy more akin to Peeta’s - that a life without love is not actually worth living - and it is no coincidence that their wedding offers Katniss her first sign that Peeta is on his way back to her: “The boy I last saw, screaming his head off, trying to tear free of his restraints, could never have made [this wedding cake]. Never have had the focus, kept his hands steady, designed something so perfect for Finnick and Annie” (*Mockingjay* 228).

Their love inspires Peeta’s first real path through his paranoia and back to Katniss. It’s the same effect Finnick has on Annie herself: “She’s lost in some daze of happiness. There are still moments when you can tell something slips in her brain and another world blinds her to us. But a few words from Finnick call her back” (*Mockingjay* 240).

Their love is not only healing for Annie, but also restorative for Finnick.

It’s something to see Finnick’s transformation since his marriage. His earlier incarnations - the decadent Capitol heartthrob I met before the Quell, the enigmatic ally in the arena, the broken young man who tried to help me hold it together - these have been replaced by someone who radiates life. Finnick’s real charms of self-effacing humor and an easygoing nature are on display for the first time. (*Mockingjay* 240)

Humor and a laid-back disposition would have been apt descriptors for any of the previous “incarnations” of Finnick that Katniss remembers, but secure in his love for Annie, it is as if Finnick has taken these qualities back for himself. Yet this new euphoria does not make him inclined to run away from the fight; instead, it seems to push him even further. For Katniss, who thinks Peeta nearly lost to her, there is a reckless abandon in her determination to go back into the fight: she wants only to kill Snow and end
everything, and does not allow herself any thoughts of what could come after their victory.

However, once the three of them are back in the city, Finnick reminds Katniss that such a future could still be possible - that Peeta isn’t lost to her at all. On one of their first nights with their squad, Katniss notices Peeta employing a familiar strategy to try to keep calm: “...he sits...clumsily trying to make knots in a short length of rope. I know it well. It’s the one Finnick lent me... Seeing it in his hands, it’s like Finnick’s echoing what Haymitch just said, that I’ve cast off Peeta. Now might be a good time to remedy that” (Mockingjay 270). Connecting them through the knot both literally and figuratively, Finnick reminds her that she is still very much attached to Peeta. He continues to offer help to Peeta as Peeta attempts to wade through his troubled thoughts, a further parallel him to Annie: “‘The problem is, I can’t tell what’s real anymore, and what’s made up.’ … Finnick’s voice rises from a bundle in the darkness. ‘Then you should ask, Peeta. That’s what Annie does’” (Mockingjay 270). This strategy offers Katniss a way to be strong for Peeta, and to help remind them both of how much they mean to each other.

The group of battle-scarred would-be soldiers resolutely make their way through the Capitol toward Snow’s mansion until, after a horrifically violent event in the sewers, most of them are killed. Throughout the chaos, an odd transformation starts to happen: Peeta finds strength to keep them moving, while Finnick and Katniss begin feeling overwhelmed. The death of teammate Messalla, caught in one of Snow’s traps, “happens silently. I would miss it entirely if Finnick didn’t pull me to a stop. ‘Katniss!’... ‘Can’t help him!’ Peeta starts shoving people forward. ‘Can’t!’ Amazingly, he’s the only one still functional enough to get us moving” (Mockingjay 308). As Peeta begins to come
back to himself in this moment of need, it is almost as if Finnick, Peeta’s surrogate throughout *Mockingjay*, is no longer needed. Having re-taught and reinforced to Katniss all of Peeta’s lessons about love and the importance of connection, Finnick dies just as she gets Peeta back fully; her strong connection with Finnick is severed just as her connection with Peeta is reborn.

Finnick’s death scene comes quickly and unceremoniously, almost a footnote in a relentless barrage of carnage. The suddenness of Finnick’s death paradoxically reinforces his importance to Katniss; he is so integral to her at this point that she is not fully conscious of him at her side throughout the fight - she simply trusts that he is there. When she turns back just as she escapes the sewers, Katniss witnesses the moment of his passing. Finnick’s death, in the midst of chaotic violence, is oddly serene. Katniss looks down at his last seconds:

Far below, I can just make out Finnick, struggling to hang on as three mutts tear at him. As one yanks back his head to take the death bite, something bizarre happens. It’s as if I’m Finnick, watching images of my life flash by. The mast of a boat, a silver parachute, Mags laughing, a pink sky, Beetee’s trident, Annie in her wedding dress, waves breaking over rocks. Then it’s over. (*Mockingjay* 313)

If Peeta parallels Annie, then Katniss has always paralleled Finnick, with their warrior instincts and self-assurance. The reader can imagine a similar montage for Katniss - they may even share a few images, like the parachute, sky, and weapon tailor-made by Beetee. Notably, Katniss imagines Annie being central to Finnick’s last moments, just as central as any of the rest of his life-changing experiences. Loving her has not shortened or cheapened Finnick’s life; Katniss imagines instead that their love has shaped Finnick’s very being.
For the remainder of the narrative, Katniss does not dwell on Finnick’s death, either in guilt or grief. At one point, she acknowledges to herself why she is actively avoiding the thought: “Surely...Finnick will come bounding down the steps in a minute. ....To believe them dead is to accept I killed them. ...the others lost their lives defending me” (Mockingjay 323). Yet even this admission highlights the ethos that Finnick and Peeta share: a life lost in service of love and friendship is more meaningful than a long life with neither of those things. Small reminders of Finnick appear throughout the remainder of the narrative, at times where Katniss remembers or needs reminding of this lesson - that love enhances life and brings it meaning. A memory of Finnick pulls Katniss back at the moment she is closest to death, after the bomb hits the Capitol center:

“Finally, my wings begin to falter, I lose height, and gravity pulls me into a foamy sea the color of Finnick’s eyes” (Mockingjay 348). Later on, when she and Peeta are feeling each other out and trying to build a life post-war, Finnick becomes a central part of the shared project they create to try and honor what they have been through - a sort of album of the dead and lost.

I got the idea from our family’s plant book. The place where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory. The page begins with the person’s picture. A photo if we can find it. If not, a sketch or painting by Peeta. Then, in my most careful handwriting, come all the details it would be a crime to forget. ...The color of Finnick’s eyes. (Mockingjay 387)

Creating the color is Peeta’s responsibility; Finnick has once again given him an anchor through a creative pursuit - finding beauty in a celebration of love.

Katniss describes their additions to the book over the years, one in particular:

“So strange bits of happiness, like the photo of Finnick and Annie’s newborn son” (Mockingjay 387). The thought of children has always been terrifying to Katniss, who
cannot contemplate bringing them into a world with so much violence and terror. But Finnick’s son - born to a grieving mother and dead father - is nonetheless a “bit of happiness.” Even in death, Finnick is showing Katniss the beauty in choosing love.
Chapter IV

Gale and the Value of Compassion

Ironically, Katniss had to go through the Games - and the pain of becoming close to, then losing, people like Cinna and Finnick - to learn to be open to loving. Through this game of killing, she learns to love. It is not a lesson quickly learned; she needs to hear this message repeatedly, via different teachers, of whom Finnick is one of the most important. Katniss has long thought that the only good people in the world are Prim and Peeta, but Finnick shows her that there exists the potential for a meaningful bond beyond family and partner; he is actually her first real friend. He widens the scope of her world, showing her the good that exists in most people, if she is willing to be open to it. Finnick is the start of Katniss’s realization that it’s okay to care about a lot of people, and that there are many who will do whatever they need to win the games and survive, but who are still fundamentally decent. The one person for whom she cannot seem to make this concession is Gale, especially as Katniss fully embraces Peeta’s ethos and rejects survivalism for its own sake.

Despite the ugly circumstances that brought them all together, Peeta and Finnick both help Katniss envision a future beyond day-to-day survival she ekes out in District 12. Even amidst the immediate violence of the arena, as Katniss begins to respect and adopt Peeta’s value set, she moves away from identifying with Gale. During her short time back in District 12 between the 74th and 75th Games, Gale speaks cynically of her connection to Peeta, offering peevish commentary and making Katniss aware of his
displeasure at the affection she shows Peeta in public. In a startling, contrary display, Peeta asks that his solitary token for the games be a locket that he intends to give to Katniss - with pictures of her family and Gale inside. Katniss, who has been trying to appease Gale and unable to receive comfort from him due to his jealousy over Peeta, is shocked by the gesture, and the selflessness involved: “So Peeta’s giving me his life and Gale at the same time. To let me know I shouldn’t ever have doubts about it. Everything. That’s what Peeta wants me to take from him” (Catching Fire 351-2). This makes the main difference between Gale and Peeta immediately clear: an instinct for self-preservation versus an instinct to care for others, respectively. Katniss’s journey throughout the series is one from isolation to connection - from Gale’s mindset to Peeta’s - and informs the choice she makes in the end.

Gale mishandles Katniss’s newfound respect for Peeta’s value set, though he correctly identifies the emotion driving her: caring deeply for other people. The guilt and confusion Katniss feels over moving on from Gale - and therefore, the self she always thought she was - manifests in a few furtive gestures of affection, as she tries to give Gale what she thinks will make him happy. Gale pouts, “‘I knew you’d kiss me.’ ‘How?’ I say. Because I didn’t know myself. ‘Because I’m in pain,’ he says. ‘That’s the only way I get your attention’” (Mockingjay 130). Gale is implying that Katniss thinks of him as weak, and needing to be healed - and deserving of that attention merely for being hurt, and not for being Gale. It is a subtle difference, but it means that he believes Katniss pays him attention as she would any wounded thing, when in actuality, she is forming full-fledged bonds of love and care. He brings it up again later, explaining why he thinks Katniss will ultimately choose Peeta: “‘...I’ll never compete with that. No matter how
much pain I’m in. ...I don’t stand a chance if he doesn’t get better. You’ll never be able to let him go. You’ll always feel wrong about being with me” (Mockingjay 197). His framing of Katniss’s nascent feelings for Peeta later becomes something she rebels against. It robs her of agency, and makes it seem as if it is a matter of which young man needs her to give him more attention, rather than which gives her validation and acceptance.

Gale seems to understand that when speaking with Peeta, later: “…you won her over. Gave up everything for her. Maybe that’s the only way to convince her you love her” (Mockingjay 329). The flaw in this perception, however, is that Peeta would have done so for personal gain - to prove something to Katniss, and win her affection in return. Instead, Peeta’s actions affirmed his own values and gave Katniss peace of mind, expecting nothing in return. He muses that he should have volunteered to take Peeta’s place in the first Games, and been the one to protect her instead of Peeta, and Peeta shows that he understands Katniss far better than Gale does: “You had to take care of her family. They matter more to her than her life” (Mockingjay 329). Peeta names Katniss’s instinct to care for and protect others, above caring for herself.

It is in that same conversation, when she overhears Gale and Peeta discussing her probable romantic choice, that Katniss bristles at Gale’s suggestion of who she will choose and why - despite the fact that it completely aligns with who Gale thinks she is, and who she has always thought herself to be. Gale muses that she will choose “whoever she thinks she can’t survive without,” reducing Katniss’s choice to a simple matter: life or death. Which pairing will do the most to ensure Katniss’s survival? In considering it, Katniss becomes indignant:
Am I really that cold and calculating? Gale didn't say, "Katniss will pick whoever it will break her heart to give up," or even "whoever she can't live without." Those would have implied I was motivated by a kind of passion. But my best friend predicts I will choose the person who I think I ‘can’t survive without.’ There’s not the least indication that love, or desire, or even compatibility will sway me. I’ll just conduct an unfeeling assessment of what my potential mates can offer me. As if in the end, it will be the question of whether a baker or a hunter will extend my longevity the most. It’s a horrible thing for Gale to say... (Mockingjay 330)

In this moment, Katniss is angry and hurt that Gale would think she would base such a choice on practicality - even though, throughout all three novels, she has debated questions of allyship in similar terms. This moment marks an important self-realization for Katniss. In The Hunger Games, she balked at making any allies, agonizing over whether to work with Peeta, but felt drawn to Rue anyway - the youngest tribute and least obvious choice for a fighting partner, but to whom she felt a powerful emotional connection. Catching Fire marked a difference in her decision-making; affected by Peeta, she consciously sought allies to whom she connected on a personal level, rather than those she admired for their practical skill sets. Now, she realizes that not only are feelings of warmth and affection necessary to her thought process and her happiness, but also that she is actually hurt when someone who supposedly knows her well insinuates that she wouldn’t rely on them to make a crucial decision.

This newfound awareness of what drives her, and Peeta’s influence on those motivations, helps Katniss see beyond a survivalist mentality in ways Gale still cannot. Because of the callousness he has developed in response to his upbringing, along with an inability to adapt, or attempt to see Katniss’s new point of view, Gale begins to drift away from her. The life experiences Katniss shares with Gale have taught them pragmatism. Lacking the experience of the Games, Gale gets along in the regimented District 13 much better than Katniss does; in giving them credit for surviving, she names many of the
qualities that appeal to Gale: “Maybe they are militaristic, overly programmed, and somewhat lacking in a sense of humor. They’re here” (Mockingjay 29). While she bucks against any role in the revolution, military or otherwise, Gale revels in the opportunity, and seems to blossom during his time with the District 13 commanders. Katniss muses on their shared experience and their diverging paths: “There’s no District 12 to escape from now, no Peacekeepers to trick, no hungry mouths to feed...The glue of mutual need that bonded us so tightly together for all those years is melting away” (Mockingjay 127). It is the second time in the novels that Katniss has defined her bond with Gale as one of “mutual need”; here, she articulates that need - the very basics of survival. Peeta, on the other hand, serves needs in Katniss that she had no idea she had until she could see beyond day-to-day survival. Now that she has hope for the future, Katniss is finding that the “glue” between her and Gale is losing its strength, as it is so rooted in the present.

Katniss seems to understand just how far apart they have become when facing the question of how best to access an enemy military facility. Gale’s solution would sacrifice both enemy lives and potential spies on the revolution’s side - an outcome that gives Katniss pause, and Gale insists he would prefer, were he a spy himself. “That Gale would sacrifice his life in this way for the cause - no one doubts it. Perhaps we’d all do the same...I guess I would. But it’s a coldhearted decision to make for other people and those who love them” (Mockingjay 205). Katniss’s value set is openly more aligned with Peeta’s than with Gale’s at this point: consider others, as opposed to winning at all costs. The war and the decision-making it entails involve far more people than the Games, in which Katniss had to worry about only herself. Consequently, she openly questions
Gale’s judgment and cannot understand his myopic focus on winning when it comes at the cost of other lives - even if it means they keep their own.
Chapter V

Conclusion: A Choice

The epilogue to the series, wherein Katniss heals in the company of and chooses to build a life with Peeta, is a focal point of rare criticism. It resolves the love triangle, a plot point some of Katniss’s staunchest defenders believe detracts from her independence, and does so in a way that some believe takes away from her feminist image. Katherine Broad, for example, argues that holding Katniss up as a feminist icon is dangerous largely because of the romantic plot that weaves through all three Hunger Games books. In her essay “‘The Dandelion in the Spring’: Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games Trilogy,” Broad argues that the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale undermines any themes of rebellion, injustice, or equality.

Broad takes many of Katniss’s characteristics that other critics find laudable in that they refute contemporary gender norms, and argues that they instead help perpetuate her disappointing, heteronormative role in the triangle. Broad’s interpretation of Katniss is not one of a powerful, independent warrior against injustice, but rather, “a docile subject manipulated by both sides of the war,” who agrees to participate in the rebellion solely in service of her budding romance with Peeta. It’s Gale, argues Broad, who is the true revolutionary.

Broad pushes back against the notion that Katniss is “entirely unsentimental,” another characteristic often named in the discussion of Katniss as more traditionally masculine than feminine. Katniss’s assertion that Gale knows her best and allows her to
be herself leads to her choosing Peeta, which according to Broad “suggests...that proper heterosexual relationships cannot be between people who are too similar. She must balance the temperaments of the sexes to form a union suitable for fertility and growth” (124). Yet even this choice is not really a choice: Broad points out that Gale takes a job in District 2, while Peeta follows Katniss back to District 12, thus ensuring that the men, not Katniss, have resolved the love triangle for her.

In contrast to Broad, Abigail E. Myers lauds Katniss’s most stereotypically feminine traits: her desire for love. In her essay “Why Katniss Chooses Peeta: Looking at Love through a Stoic Lens,” Myers argues that there is nothing flimsy or ill-considered about Katniss’s ultimate romantic choice. She interprets Katniss’s initial reluctance to engage romantically with any suitor not as stereotypical teenage waffling or posturing, but as careful consideration, given that “the only kind of romantic love that Katniss can imagine is one that allows her to stay true to herself” (143). Myers argues that Katniss’s decision to marry Peeta is an extremely conscious choice rather than a natural consequence and out of her control. The constant tragedy of Katniss’s life means that she “lives with a much fuller appreciation of the shortness of life than most teenage girls...It’s perhaps living in the shadow of death that allows Katniss to take pleasure in the small moments of joy in her pre-Hunger Games life” (141). This presents a different lens for Katniss’s ultimate choice to be a wife and mother: it is not the only path to happiness or fulfillment for women, but instead, a very particular, individual path for Katniss, who has endured such trauma. Her epilogue with Peeta is not a consolation prize, but rather, the ultimate reward: a worry-free survival, rooted in human connection.
In addition, Katniss cannot aspire to or settle for the traditional roles of wife and mother, as neither truly exist in her worldview. The only example she has of such a woman is the mayor’s wife in Panem, who lived a luxurious life of which Katniss can barely conceive. Every other powerful woman she encounters, throughout the trilogy, is neither a wife nor a mother, making it therefore difficult to argue that these outcomes are inherently gendered for Katniss. Her closest example of “wife” and “mother” is her own mother, with whom Katniss has always associated weakness; she has wanted to avoid having a family precisely to avoid the kind of emotional devastation visited on her mother since her father’s death.

In another departure from Broad’s critique, Rodney M. DeaVault, in his essay “The Masks of Femininity: Perceptions of the Feminine in The Hunger Games and Podkayne of Mars,” acknowledges that this ending may seem problematic but that Katniss “maintains her autonomy and identity” (197). Rather than sentencing Katniss to a lifetime of domestic subservience, her domestic life, DeaVault argues, is “almost a reward for her hard work and sacrifice, a way for her to find peace” (197). He emphasizes that Katniss chooses motherhood over a more central role in the developing government post-revolution, and that in that choice is power and independence. This argument is more aligned with my own, examining Katniss’s outcomes through the lenses of power and survival rather than gender expectations.

For many critics, the idea that domesticity is how Katniss achieves happiness is still problematic. The epilogue to the trilogy, in which Katniss, retired warrior, watches Peeta play with their children from afar, represents “an epic heroine defaulting to a safe, stable, and highly insular heterosexual reproductive union - a union so much like the
social and sexual status quo of our own world” (Broad 125). This resolution moves away from the role of politics in Katniss’s story, especially given that it gives readers no glimpses of life in a post-Capitol society. She draws parallels to Collins’s ending and “what Deborah O’Keefe terms ‘the cop-out pattern,’” quoting critics Annis Pratt, Lorna Ellis, and Elaine O’Quinn to argue that there is nothing revolutionary in an ending that “redirects the energies of the narrative from social upheaval to the maintenance of a reproductive status quo and ensures that Katniss’s rebellion serves to keep her an appropriately gendered, reproductive, and ultimately docile subject” (125).

I am intrigued by Broad’s argument and those of others who find Katniss’s romantic choices similarly discomforting. I agree that Katniss’s most celebrated traits are more rooted in the traditionally feminine than in the stereotypically masculine, and that the choice she makes in the epilogue of the novels is her ultimate affirmation of those values. However, I disagree with the notion that this makes these novels regressive or even harmful to young readers. Ultimately, Broad argues that we should “push back against popular interpretations of characters like Katniss as feminist agents and icons for young women and call out YA dystopian novels that hinge on gender stereotypes that flatten female characters into passive roles as mothers and wives” (127); her chief thesis is that so long as YA novels push their heroines into traditional, predictable romantic plots, it does not matter how revolutionary or non-gender-normative they may act. The heteronormative romance plot is Broad’s “blood will out”: so long as it exists, it undermines any other development in the novel that would suggest the heroine has agency, or truly bucks any gender conventions.
This argues in essence that romantic entanglement – one of the most basic, and *human*, forms of connection – inherently weakens its female participant, and negates any powerful actions she may have taken in the past. I disagree; while in our contemporary society, one could argue that domesticity takes away a woman’s agency, the opposite has the potential to be true in these novels, due to the fact that forging connections with others results in strength and protection – no matter your gender. Relationships are a currency in Panem, and domestic happiness a luxury once unimaginable for Katniss that eventually becomes the hope at the end of her suffering.

Neither are these outcomes solely desired by Katniss, the female protagonists; they are pursued and happily achieved by male characters as well, primarily Finnick and Peeta. It is Finnick, through his longing for Annie and the happiness of their union, who first shows Katniss a marriage she can understand and in which she can see value; it is Peeta, at the end of the novel, whose desire for a complete family and strong belief in a loving future convinces Katniss to have children. “It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly. ….Peeta says it will be okay. We have each other. And the book. We can make them understand” (*Mockingjay* 390). Their children are the embodiment of the hope Peeta has shown Katniss is vital to survival; rather than doom Katniss to disempowering motherhood, they are living refutations of the fear the Capitol instilled in the citizens of the districts. In creating her children - the ultimate, unbreakable connection, between parent and child - Katniss has asserted her agency over her traumatic past. She hints at this early on before the second Games, when Peeta falsely tells the Capitol audience that she is pregnant: “It was a big leap to take without my okay, but I’m just as glad I didn’t know, didn’t have time to second-guess him, to...detract from
how I really feel about what Peeta did. Which is empowered” (*Catching Fire* 258).

Choosing the vulnerability of motherhood over the certainty and relative ease of worrying about only herself and Peeta is a gutsy act - and one that shows, more than anything else, that Katniss fully understands and believes in Peeta’s ethos of caring and love.

These plots and resolutions are so problematic for many critics because they are viewed through a contemporary lens. If *The Hunger Games* were operating within our contemporary gender norms and presenting marriage and children as the ultimate goal for its heroine, this criticism makes sense, in that women have been limited to that goal for some time in contemporary society. The message seems less insidious from a post-apocalyptic perspective, particularly the world in which Katniss has raised herself; in that context, such values may be presented as paramount, but not at the cost of any power or agency the heroine may possess. Instead, they are emblematic of prizing human connection above all else - above even, ultimately, the potential loss of that connection - and their pursuit brings out the best qualities in these characters rather than subverting them. It is a mark of strength that Katniss dares to love Peeta, not weakness. She is choosing hope in what she cannot be sure of rather than reliance on only herself and the present moment.

Peeta and I grow back together. ...I know this would have happened anyway. That 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. (*Mockingjay* 388)

In choosing Peeta, she chooses the future; Katniss chooses hope. She chooses to believe in a power stronger than those which have wreaked havoc on her young life: love.
Although it mentions *The Hunger Games* only briefly, as an exemplar of YA that encourages its readers to “question social and cultural impositions and discern the rhetoric of corruption,” Rocio G. Davis’s essay “Writing the Erasure of Emotions in Young Adult Fiction” explores this idea: emotions, particularly love and desire, empower characters. Davis explores how dystopias are uniquely suited to take “YA writing a step further and ask us to think about the political potential of feelings as catalysts for social change” (52).

Davis describes *The Giver* and *Delirium* as *bildungsromans* that “locate their protagonists’ personal development within a political context...articulating the *bildung* as a political, rather than merely personal, attainment of maturity” (60-61). This description applies to Katniss, as she is motivated by her emotions and desires to rebel against political oppression. Second, the protagonists Davis has chosen “have to engage the reality and power of emotions as their path to this new political maturity” (61). She associates the limitations on emotions in these novels with the removal of other freedoms, such as the power to choose one’s profession or partner. Davis’s ultimate argument is that by “harnessing emotions, the protagonists are able to effect change: first, within themselves and, later, for their worlds” (62). This is true of Katniss, who by the trilogy’s end understands that allowing herself to feel connection to others brings her more power than she thought possible.

Despite its popularity with adults, *The Hunger Games* was written as a young adult novel - for developing humans struggling to figure out their roles and identities in an unfriendly world. There are many who posit Katniss and her admirable strength and resourcefulness as game-changing for young women, who may see in Katniss an
independent, tenacious young woman who is valued for the very traits they may think the world denies in them. This opinion is not invalid, but it does discount the valuable lessons taught to Katniss by Finnick and Peeta - male characters more stereotypically feminine than she is in many ways, who teach Katniss to trust her feelings and embrace caring for others, even if it exposes her to danger. The potential for death in the Games may be a far more tangible consequence for Katniss than potential heartbreak may be for her readers, but the message is the same: Emotional risk is necessary and valuable. Vulnerability is not weakness; instead, it enables us to achieve far more than we could on our own, and gives meaning to our pain and hardship. In our own world as well as Panem, those who care are the strongest of all.
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