Katniss Everdeen: Feminist Fighter or Teen Bride?

It is extremely difficult to argue that the character Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*, is not a strong female character and a representation of the Third Wave of Feminism. She is practical, the provider of her family, and an eventual figurehead of a rebellion against corruption. In fact, she has become a measuring stick for strong female characters that have appeared after her. It’s even argued that she has taken the place of the stereotypical male hero while her cohort, Peeta Mellark, is actually playing the stereotypical female role. However, in spite of all of the things that she is and all that she accomplishes during her time within the dueling ring, the main debate amongst teenagers—for whom the book was written—is who will Katniss Everdeen, goddess of the hunt and champion of the rebellion against the Capitol and President Snow, pick as her boyfriend. Instead of being seen by teenagers as the powerhouse of a woman that she is, she is still a victim of the misogynistic view that a woman is truly defined by the man she chooses to marry. And she’s only 16 years old.

*The Hunger Games*, written by Suzanne Collins and published in 2008 has been sold in 56 territories in 51 languages and in 2012, Lionsgate released the film adaptation (suzannecollinsbooks.com). *The Hunger Games* is about a young girl in a corrupt society trying to survive. Every year, she and other children from other Districts in the land of Panem face the fear of being forced to fight to the death on television for entertainment. She volunteers as one of the tributes for her district in place of her younger sister. We later discover that Peeta, the other tribute from her district, has been in love with Katniss since they were young, however Katniss is not interested. The other man in Katniss’s life is her best friend Gale with whom she illegally hunts on the outskirts of the district to help their families survive. When the idea of whether or not she and Gale are an item, Katniss expresses her disinterest in Gale as a romantic partner. She
states, “You can tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him. It makes me jealous but not for the reason people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to find” (Collins 10). Of course the situation of having a best friend back home and a young man the same age traveling with Katniss is a perfect set up for a love triangle. However, the main focus of the book is not romantic love, but instead the struggle of Katniss to stay alive and in the meantime, keep her humanity.

While looking at Katniss strictly from a romantic viewpoint, it’s easy to lose sight of her strength and what her character means for future females in literature. Katniss, as stated before, has become somewhat of a figurehead for the Third Wave of Feminism. Third Wave Feminism is not just equal rights for women, but all people including people of color, and the homosexual community (Head). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines feminism as: “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities” (Merriam-Webster). While Katniss may not begin fighting for equal rights, eventually she does start realizing the toll that the Capitol has upon other people and not just her immediate family and friends. While it may not be directly stated in the book, she does become an advocate for women and different races than her own.

An example of when Katniss fights for women and people of color is when she befriends a tribute from District 11, Rue. Rue was described as having “dark brown skin and eyes” (Collins 45) and Collins herself confirmed that Rue and Thresh were African-American (Stewart). After being attacked by tracker jacksers, Katniss falls into a poisoned stupor but when she wakes up, finds herself wrapped with healing herbs and leaves. Rue, at the risk of her own safety, has nursed Katniss back to health. They develop a friendship and orchestrate a way to defeat the other tributes that are hoarding food. Unfortunately, Rue is caught in a net and then is slain by another tribute. After Katniss disposes of Rue’s murderer, she comforts Rue by singing until Rue
dies. She then does her first real act of rebellion towards the Capitol by covering Rue with flowers and then touches the three middle fingers of her left hand and holds it up to the cameras that are filming her grief for the entertainment of others. This sign was a gesture from her district “occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love” (Collins 24). She does this to show that the Capitol does not control her, that they have not taken her humanity, and that she recognizes another life that has been taken.

This act represents the desire that all people should have the same opportunities as others around them. Collins has created a world where the lighter skinned people are wealthier than those with dark skin. Most of the people in her district “straight black hair, olive skin” (Collins 8). There are a few outliers such as her mother and Peeta (Collins 25), but they came from merchant or wealthier classes within the district. Her sister, Primrose has inherited the mother’s fair looks: “my mother and Prim, with their light hair and blue eyes, always looks out of place. They are.” (Collins 8)

As for equal rights for all people, men and women, Katniss and Peeta both commit rebellion against the Capitol when they decide to commit a duel suicide. While the viewers of the Hunger Games interpret this as a gesture of undying love, it is actually an act of defiance. The point of the Games of is to show that the Capitol is in power over all of the districts. Therefore, if you outsmart the Games, you outsmart the Capitol. Just before they consume the berries, the Capitol announces that they both have won the Hunger Games and will be named as victors for their district. This act done by Katniss and Peeta can be seen as a symbol of both sexes fighting against one major oppression. It is when both sexes, all people in their variety of colors, and the variety of social classes come together to fight for the greater good.
But the question is, what sex is Katniss actually representing? Because she illustrates mostly male attributes throughout the novel, she continues to be a figurehead for Third Wave Feminism because of her fluidity with gender. Even though she is female, she exhibits attributes that are very stereotypically male. Many of her actions, hobbies, personality traits, and idiosyncrasies of speech are historically masculine. This argument may come to the disappointment of several teenagers because of their insistence upon putting Katniss in a box wherein she is simply a romantic character. The masculine attributes given to Katniss and the feminine attributes given to some of the men help further the idea that men and women are equal. Their attributes allow for fluidity with gender and create a much more open world where women can be seen as stronger and men can be seen as more emotional without shame.

Because of this view of Katniss, it can be argued that Katniss is taking the place of the male hero within the novel. Gale and Peeta on the other hand, are taking the place of the women. Gale is the girl back home, and Peeta is the girl at present.

Gale is Katniss’s love struck best friend who wants to run away with her. While Gale is highly masculine in that he is a hunter and a provider for his family, he is the one who is love struck and he is the one who mentions wanting to have children in the future (Collins 9). He is also the one who introduces the idea that they should run away together (Collins 9).

While Gale may be harder to pin down as a female character, Peeta is a stereotypical archetype of a female character. He openly weeps (Collins 40-41), is in love with Katniss from afar, he is a baker, and is known for creating beautiful flowers on the cakes that he sells at his family’s bakery. He even physically matches the more feminine characters in Katniss’s life: Primrose and her mother. All three of them are fair-haired, fair skinned, and are much more sensitive than Katniss. While he may be physically strong, he is unprepared for life in the deadly
field of the Hunger Games themselves. He becomes injured and is saved by Katniss instead of the other way around.

Sady Doyle in her article “In Defense of Peeta Mellark: Teen Girls Have Unruly, Selfish Desires, and That’s Okay” astutely observes that while the trope of extremely dedicated male love interest in books and movies for teenage girls isn’t new—“there have been multiple versions of him in teen-girl cinema for decades” (Doyle)—and that “for every Katniss Everdeen, there’s a James Bond; for every Peeta, a forlorn elf-maiden who’s willing to forsake both family and immortality just for a shot at Aragorn” (Doyle). However, what she doesn’t understand is that while yes, Peeta may not be an anomaly of the teenage-romance style, usually the female involved is also delicate and just as dedicated as the boy. Therefore because the female in this particular human relationship does not reciprocate these feelings and is so obviously much more stereotypically male, Peeta Mellark is clearly the female.

As a matter of fact, Katniss Everdeen is a prime example of the Byronic Hero. Classic Byronic heroes would be Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Predjudice*, and Mr. Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. While she may not parallel these men in these books completely, she does contain several attributes. She is aloof, unpleasant, and very uninterested in the opposite sex for some time until suddenly she realizes that she does have some romantic feelings.

In addition, she is like the Byronic Heroes from war literature and war history. In his book *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, Peter L. Thorsleve, Jr. outlines several different types of the Byronic Hero found in literature and history. Katniss Everdeen falls into the Romantic Byronic Hero. He states that this type of hero was “in some small degree rebels and outsiders . . . they were moral outcasts or wanderers like Cain or Ahasuerus; or finally they were rebels against society and even against God himself, like Prometheus or Lucifer” (Thorsleve 17-
18). Katniss is a born rebel, partly out of necessity, but partly out of personality. She hunts illegally and deals within the black market. In addition, she qualifies in the way of physical appearance: “dark, handsome, but with a cool reserve or even austerity of manner; in the sense of mystery and frequently of destiny which surrounds their every appearance; in the frequent flashes of a guilty conscience” (Thorsleve 22).

While the Romantic Byronic Hero usually comes from a place of wealth and high society, Katniss still qualifies for this label because of her ability to “invariably appeal to the reader’s sympathies against the unjust restriction of the social, moral, or even religious codes of the worlds in which [she] finds [herself]” (Thorsleve 22). Not only does she find sympathies with the reader, but while on the field, she finds herself receiving sympathies from those within the Capitol and within all of Panem. Her “love story” with Peeta brings to the attention that these children who fight are people with feelings, hopes, dreams, and who have people that care about them. Her sponsors, or the wealthy that take pity upon her and Peeta’s plight, are the first ones to see or at least somewhat comprehend the unfairness of the Hunger Games.

In addition to sympathies, looks, and her push for rebellion, she is a living hero. Thorsleve speaks of several men who qualified as Legends and myths while they were still living:

“Willington, von Blücher, or Lord Nelson; and, of course, above all, Napoleon, who left his shadow across Europe not only in his lifetime, but through the entire nineteenth century, and whom every hero-worshiper from Beethoven to Nietzsche has at one time or another taken for a god” (Thorsleve 17).

Katniss from her very humble beginning was a hero. She provided for her sister, mother, and several others within her district through her illegal hunting, she volunteered as a tribute to save
her sister, she fought beside another tribute and gave her a proper burial, and she saved another tribute from certain death. All of her feats were watched, admired, and immortalized within her society.

However, some argue that instead of Katniss being a feminist character, or being fluid with gender, her character is instead being forced into a male figurehead and therefore doesn’t actually help with the forward march of feminism and equal rights. There is some merit in this point of view because the language that Collins utilizes is traditionally masculine. Katniss is “head of the household” (Collins 27) and, when her father was alive, had a very father-and-son-esque relationship. One critic pointed out that “To allow an audience to empathize with the protagonist, male orientated language and themes like arson, violence, and gore must be employed to the point that if Katniss were male, the basic story line would not be that much different” (“Feminist Analysis of The Hunger Games”).

This same critic points out “that it is our sexuality that is directly tied to how we communicate in society. Katniss’ manner of speaking is more consistent with a conversation between husband and wife [when] she is telling her mother to look after Primrose” (“Feminist Analysis of The Hunger Games”). This is very true. When Katniss is speaking to her mother about Prim, she sounds very much like a father leaving his family for war. “Listen to me. Are you listening to me? . . . There’s no me now to keep you both alive. It doesn’t matter what happens. Whatever you see on that screen. You have to promise me you’ll fight through it!” (Collins 35).

However, in spite of her hero-esque abilities and recognition, and the idea that she could potentially be more of a male character, she is still hindered by her female gender because her love life is of much more importance than her achievements. Because she is a female and the
book uses female pronouns, she becomes, within her own society and our current one within the
bonds of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Bella from Twilight. In action or fantasy novels with
male protagonists, the women in the story are either sidekicks, girls back at home, or completely
invisible. There may be romantic interaction because that is a part of the human experience, but
it is not the center of the story and the men are not defined by which woman they pick. They are
instead defined by their choices and their accomplishments.

For a modern example: Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling. Harry Potter’s real romance with
Ginny did not come until the sixth installment and the ever-present female character of Hermione
was his friend. While Ginny and Hermione were strong and smart women within their own
rights, they were not a main focus of the story. Their romantic relationship may have been
somewhat discussed amongst readers, but it wasn’t the main discussion. Instead, discussion was
around the characters, the development of Harry, how Harry was going to defeat Voldemort, and
if Snape was evil. Instead of following the discussion model set by Harry Potter and other such
novels, the discussion of The Hunger Games followed the discussion pattern set by the Twilight
saga. During the explosion of the Twilight books and movies, there was a movement amongst
teens to root for which boy Bella Swan should choose as her ultimate lover. Teens were seen
with shirts that said “Team Edward” or “Team Jacob”. This celebration of the love triangle led
the way for the same type of behavior observed amongst teenage girls. Unfortunately, I was one
of them.

A YouTube video hosted by Fine Brothers Entertainment observed teenagers reacting to
The Hunger Games movie trailer. Generally, the teens were extremely excited about the
upcoming movie. The questions following them watching the trailer consisted of whether or not
they had read the books, if they were excited about the movie, and what they thought of Katniss
as a character. The teenagers who were familiar with the books stated that Katniss was a “strong female character” and “a strong powerful woman”. However, when asked for their opinions on the Gale vs Peeta debate, most of them had immediate answers for their choice. Out of twelve teenagers, polled, only one refused to state which one she chose because she believed that this was not about “team this or team this” (“Teens React to *The Hunger Games*”).

The debate of “Team Gale” or “Team Peeta” has dominated several conversations and in some ways it still does. Perhaps the discussion of boys is much more important to teens because at that time in their life, the exploration and adoration of the opposite (or same) sex, is a large part of their lives. The discussion of death, horrors of children being forced to fight each other, the strength of Katniss, or the social commentary found in the book are far less interesting. While this may be understandable, it is not acceptable.

Teenagers need to understand that while yes, finding a potential mate is important, the ideas presented in *The Hunger Games* by Collins are far more important. Teenagers are the upcoming adults who will have to face larger problems than which boy to say yes to for prom or marriage. But, the popular media does not encourage the exploration of these other themes. Instead the focus is on trying to decide which boy a 16 year old girl should marry after she’s finished killing other children. Keep in mind, Katniss at the beginning of the book does not hold any romantic feelings for either of them and at the end holds unsure feelings for both. It is not a main part of the plot. While Katniss and Peeta did survive by playing into the thrill of a romance on the field, for Katniss it was not real until the end.

As stated before, the media did not and does not encourage the study of the main themes of the books, but instead encourages the focus of the love triangle. Several magazines, online and print, published articles concerning the “Team Gale” vs “Team Peeta” debate. Popcrush.com
needed to know your vote for “Team Gale” vs “Team Peeta” because they were “stressed out about it”. They just had to know. Teen Vogue did slide show and that included pictures of the actors for *The Hunger Games* movie. Yalsa: The Hub, an online “hub” for teenagers to write about popular books for young adults had a teen blogger write about the pros and cons for each “Team”. She ultimately chose Gale but claimed, “Any girl would be lucky to get either guy!” (Caitlyn L.). Hollywire.com, The Huffington Post, Vulture.com, Teen.com, and Teenreads.com all published articles about this debate.

Quora.com did an article called “What, If Anything, Does Being Team Peeta or Team Gale Say About Someone”. At first glance, this article looked like it would be a commentary about what buying into this craze actually said about those who participated and would perhaps give an alternate discussion. Instead, it is about how certain types of people are drawn to the different candidates for Katniss’s heart and that is why they choose their particular team.

Elle.com published an article named “The Ultimate ‘Hunger Games’ Face off: Liam Hemsworth vs Josh Hutcherson”. Instead of focusing upon the book, the themes, the violence, or the characters themselves, Elle.com, a publication that typically targets women, not teens, used the idea of children killing each other to create a duel between the two actors that portray these tortured characters in a dying world.

Even though Katniss Everdeen is a figurehead of Third Wave Feminism in that she represents the fluidity of gender and the strength of women, she is still hindered by being defined and valued not by her accomplishments and her strength, but by which man she chooses as a lover. But there is hope. The DailyBeast.com published an article by Kevin Fallon that wrote about how the love triangle was actually ruining this work for him. While he was commenting upon the newly released *Mockingjay-Part 1* movie based on Collin’s third and final installment...
of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, he makes a good argument for the unnecessary focus. He criticizes the movies for taking the romantic sub plot and placing it almost front and center. He also criticizes the way that each character is portrayed within the movies as hopeless romantics dedicated to Katniss and her love. He states that “This girl is kicking ass and taking names. No one [should care] whether one of those names is going to be Mrs. Mellark or Mrs. Hawthorne” (Fallon). Overall, our society still has something to learn about females and their strength, but we’re slowly, but surely, arriving there.

Bibliography


