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Katniss Everdeen—a New Dystopian Woman

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Katniss Everdeen—a New Dystopian Woman

Almost a decade ago, teenagers around the world were sunken in the young adult fiction fantasy of the forbidden love triangle between a mundane girl, a vampire, and a werewolf. The success of the *Twilight Saga* outshined so many film genres that the audience almost forget about films from other categories that once dominated global box offices, one of which is “dystopian films”. Renowned examples of dystopian films would be the *Star Wars* and the *Matrix* franchise. Despite the fact that these series were well-received and popular, the genre still could not escape the fate of a decline in box office. Nevertheless, in the past five years, due to the popularity of dystopian-themed young adult fictions, the genre has managed to make a comeback. Other than repeating plots on space adventures, dystopian films in the past five years feature the life under the reign of a totalitarian government. *The Giver*, the *Maze Runner* series, and *Ender’s Game* are all popular dystopian films that performed well in the theaters.

According to the *Oxford Dictionaries*, “dystopia” is the complete opposite of “utopia”, and is defined as “an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.” Under the main genre of science-fiction, dystopian films depict a society that is “ruled by group with a private agenda shrouded in euphemisms or outright lies” (Ferris 2). In such society, citizens are normally under surveillance and have no knowledge of the outside world. People in dystopian societies are often convinced that they are well-protected and that the system brings peace and order. Moreover, all inhabitants are expected to behave uniformly. In other words, personal liberties and individuality are restricted, and sometimes even prohibited. To elaborate, the most common plot pattern of a dystopian film is to have a person or group, usually the protagonists,

stand up against or question the hegemonic power. Dystopian protagonists take actions to uncover the injustice of the society and fight the dictating authorities.

Generally speaking, dystopian literature and films predominantly feature men as the heroes that save the day and women are often marginalized. In Mollie Hall's "I Can't Think about Kissing": Strong Female Protagonists and Romance in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction", she mentions that dystopian-themed literature and movies "in general have always been biased toward men in both character and audience" (14). Moreover, Hall also writes that "male characters have dominated not only in number, but also by taking the best or most heroic roles." Additionally, women in dystopian literature and films are often "pushed to the sidelines" and become "subservient to males." Most female characters in dystopian-themed context are stuck in the stereotype of being a "distraction to 'sensible' boys" or "figures of admiration" (15). Even though some female characters in dystopian films, such as Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* and Evey in *V for Vendetta*, have been characterized as the hero's sidekick and demonstrated courage to help save the day, they still could not escape being depicted in untrue stereotypes. However, in the last five years, dystopian fiction began featuring "unlikely heroic protagonists: girls." Instead of portraying the role of a damsel in distress, these female protagonists "act in ways dramatically affect their societies, shaking up the government-imposed structures and working to put a new system into place that fixes the downfalls of the previous administration" (Hall 4). Girls are starting to have the opportunity to "take on roles that were traditionally meant for young men" in dystopian fictions. Yet this does not mean that these female protagonists would go macho and lose their original gender qualities. The women in current dystopian films "infuse some femininity into their roles in order to become empowered" instead of limiting themselves to portraying strong masculine qualities (Hall 17).

Among the dystopian heroines that surfaced in the past five years, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) from the *Hunger Games* franchise and Tris Prior (Shailene Woodley)

from the *Divergent* film series are the two most successful character. In the *Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen is depicted as a teenager who has to take on the burden of supporting her family. She volunteers as tribute of the Hunger Games to protect her younger sister, Primrose. Katniss is not physically attractive and lacks confidence in her appearance. Additionally, she is not friendly and is often hostile toward strangers. Her sass brings her admirers, but turns Katniss into the Capitol's eyesore because of her defiance and disapproval of the government. On the other hand, Tris Prior, the primary protagonist of the *Divergent* series, is an Abnegation-born girl who later chooses Dauntless as her new faction. Tris is a timid girl who desires an answer to her true identity. Her root in Abnegation forbids her to pursue vanity, such as appearance and her attire. Thus, she is plain and bland, yet still curious about her looks and how others see her. She is revealed to be a Divergent during her simulation test. Divergents are not accepted by the society and they are often referred to as "dangerous" to the society. When she discovers Erudite's schemes, she wants to try her best to stop them from overthrowing her family in Abnegation. In the end, both Katniss and Tris not only save the day in their adventures, but also manage to win over the audience's hearts after the release of the films. The entire *Hunger Games* film series is the third highest grossing film adaptation based on young adult literature worldwide. On the other hand, the *Divergent* series, which the audience are still waiting for its last installment, *Ascendant*, came after the release of the *Hunger Games* franchise and received worldwide popularity as well.

The reason why people consider Katniss and Tris to be similar after watching the films is because both Katniss and Tris have braved through obstacles to accomplish something great. As individuals who do not have control over their lives due to the tyranny of a totalitarian society, the two female characters take on the role to fight for justice and convince the audience that women can be heroines just like men used to be the heroes in past dystopian films.

Even though most critics consider *Hunger Games*' heroine, Katniss Everdeen, to be

similar to Tris Prior in *Divergent*, this paper argues that Katniss stands out on her own as a new definition of a dystopian woman, bearing androgynous qualities. She no longer falls in the typical description of a dystopian female and transcends the boundaries of gender, unlike Tris, who still falls into the category of a traditional dystopian woman.

For many film critics, they deem Katniss and Tris to be true heroines and the same kind of dystopian woman. They believe that they are the new teenage heroines “shown in roles that are typically reserved for boys, actively fighting against a ‘governmental power’” (Bakkum 8). J.J.A.M. Blokker, the author of “Identity Formation in the Dystopias of the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*,” states in his conclusion that “both Katniss and Tris develop from fighting primarily for their own survival to rebelling against the system and actively fighting for a *different kind of life*,” indicating that they are both heroines that overcome obstacles to fight for what they believe in and turn over the stereotypical image of damsels in distress in dystopia. Blokker also thinks that both Katniss and Tris possess masculine and feminine qualities if they were to become successful dystopian heroine, they have to infuse femininity into the characters that are traditionally meant for men, corresponding to Mollie Hall’s descriptions of a modern-day female protagonist in dystopia. Moreover, in the anthology, *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, one of the authors, Miranda Green-Barteet, states that “...gender roles are more fluid in these [films], and such fluidity enables Katniss and Tris to act beyond the scope of typical, twenty-first century adolescent, female behavior. Thus, their status as young women in these dystopian worlds helps, rather than hinders, their refusal to conform”.

It is true that Katniss and Tris can be referred to as heroines. According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, a heroine is defined as “a woman admired for her courage, outstanding achievements, and noble qualities”. Katniss’s and Tris’s behaviors in the movies answer to the nature of a heroine.

First, on the subject of courage, Katniss, who demonstrates utmost bravery at the very

beginning of the first episode, volunteers as tribute for her sister, Primrose. Despite acknowledging that tributes barely survive the Hunger Games and recognizing the cruelty and brutality of the games, Katniss still utilizes her skills as a hunter and her knowledge of nature to remain in competition and win. What is more, when the tyranny of President Snow sparks the rebellion of various districts in Panem, it dawns on Katniss that it is her wild and intractable behaviors against the Capitol norms that become the inspiration and encouragement for people to overthrow the current government. She courageously takes on the position of the “Mockingjay”, the symbol and the leader of the revolution, and witnesses the lives lost and the sufferings under a totalitarian power. Even if she is the eyesore and target of Snow and his troops, Katniss braves the dangers and goes into the warzone in person to comfort the wounded and moves in on the Capitol for several attacks. Other than physical bravery, Katniss manages to face the trauma and memories of the Hunger Games and the revolution. The memories linger and continue to haunt her, yet she learns to embrace them and make them a lesson she wishes to pass on to her children.

On the other hand, Tris also exhibits multiple courageous deeds in *Divergent*. In the film, Tris often shows her uncertainty and insecurity over decision-making. Nevertheless, she still chooses Dauntless when her test results are inconclusive, demonstrating her courage to face challenges. As an initiate in Dauntless, Tris tries her best to overcome obstacles, transforming from being a laughingstock to the dark horse. She even stands up to the faction leader, Eric, when he bullies Al and Christina, Tris’s fellow initiates. During the climax of *Divergent*, Tris exposes Erudite’s scheme to take over the government to her old faction to ensure the safety of her family, leaving the thought of exposing her identity as a Divergent behind. In the end, Tris and Four become fugitives, with Erudite hunting them down. Tris, with the tendency of feeling insecure, accepts the challenge of not knowing what her next step in life.

A heroine most definitely has to accomplish certain outstanding achievements.

Throughout the *Hunger Games* franchise, Katniss has achieved greatly not only in the games

but also in the revolution. When she first becomes the tribute of District 12, she refuses to go with the flow and demonstrates sass in front of nationwide audience. It is her audacity that wins over the people's heart and indicates her later success as the leader of the revolution. As the Mockingjay, she inspires the wounded and leads the revolution until the people are finally free from the oppressive regime. At the end of the fourth film, when Snow is being tried in front of the Capitol, Katniss chooses to kill President Coin rather than Snow because she knows that Coin's inauguration does not free Panem from political monopoly. She leaves the decision to the people, letting them choose who the ideal leader should be.

Nonetheless, Tris also performs multiple stunning accomplishments in *Divergent*. All Dauntless initiates have to undergo a simulation test in the second phase of initiation, and Tris passes the simulation with flying colors every single time. Moreover, when Four is captured, Tris breaks into Erudite headquarters and rescues Four. During the process, Four tries to kill Tris because he is under simulation and deems Tris hostile. However, she gets Four out of simulation while members of Erudite surrounding her. Together, they stopped Erudite's scheme and prevented the faction massacre from worsening.

In addition to valiant deeds, a heroine should also be noble. Katniss's noble qualities include helping the weak and becoming their allies during the games. In the first episode, she helps Rue, a naïve little girl who reminds Katniss of her little sister. Later, in *Catching Fire*, Katniss reaches out to Mags, Beetee, and Wiress. The three are either old or lack combat abilities, so Katniss exchanges skills with them and offers protection to these tributes. What is more, since the beginning, Katniss has made several sacrifices. She sacrifices her youth and becomes the provider of the family. She sacrifices her safety for a greater cause, which is to help overthrow the person causing people pain and agony. This also shows that Katniss does not rebel out of a selfish cause, but a selfless one.

Howbeit, Tris, combining details in the second installment, *Insurgent*, demonstrates her noble qualities when she helps her friend when they are in trouble. Moreover, Tris is honest

about her doubts and feelings. Throughout the films, she is truthful in confessing that she does not know what to do. In *Insurgent*, when she is injected with the truth serum, she admits the guilt she felt when she had to kill Will, one of her friends. She chooses to take the overwhelming pain and blame instead of keeping it buried. Also, when Jeanine, head of Erudite, needs a Divergent to open the box, Tris sacrifices herself so that she could ensure Four's safety.

When Katniss and Tris are viewed by the qualities a heroine should possess, it is apparent that they are both certified heroines. Nevertheless, the gender roles Katniss and Tris display in the films are the keys to determining whether they have successfully integrate femininity into these roles that are traditionally meant for men. They are also the indicators of whether Katniss and Tris have step out of the stereotypes of dystopian women and become a new individual. In my opinion, Katniss does become a female protagonist who transcends to a new dystopian woman while Tris remains as the traditional "damsel in distress" figure.

Katniss's androgynous traits are discussed in Dane Moreaux's article, "Mythical Hero Versus the Modern Heroine: The Female Hero in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*." The author compares Katniss with Atalanta, a Greek god, and mentions that "Atalanta and Katniss both thrive in their androgynous dispositions" (Moreaux 1). What is more, in regard to Katniss's wardrobe choices, the author also states that "...one may describe her choice of attire as masculine (i.e., a pair of pants, shirt, and cap)—an indicator of Katniss's separation from gender norms and embrace of her inherent androgyny". According to Merriam Webster, "androgynous" is defined as "having both male and female characteristics or qualities." Usually, an androgynous person exhibits gender traits base on different circumstances. Throughout the entire film series, there are several examples to prove that Katniss is androgynous. In her family, Katniss is the provider (usually considered masculine) and the nurturer (usually considered feminine) because after her father's demise, someone had to support the family; but her mother is too much of a grievous widow to work or pay attention

to Katniss and Primrose. Therefore, Katniss has to take on the responsibility to support her mother and younger sister and give her sister the love her negligent mother does not offer. Her courage to volunteer as tribute and the aggression she shows in the game for survival demonstrate not only her nature to protect but also her masculine side. From her identity as a tribute to her image as the Mockingjay (female taking on a role traditionally meant for male), Katniss shows physical and mental strengths and guts (normally qualities a brave man owns), better shaping her masculinity in the four-episode franchise. At the same time, her compassion toward Rue, Mags, and Wiress during the games embodies her caring instinct for the weak and her feminine side. She is also depicted as a tragic lover when she and Peeta have to put on a “showmance” in order to get sponsors. In order to get what she needs to survive the games, she must live up to the identity of a “lover,” showing her feminine side.

On the other hand, “androgynous” would not be the word suitable for describing Tris. It is stated in *MacMillan Dictionary*, a “damsel in distress” is “a woman who is in trouble and needs help”. At the very beginning of *Divergent*, Tris is shown admiring the freedom of Dauntless and questioning her true belonging. She is in constant doubt over what to choose. When Tori (proctor of Tris’s aptitude test), tells her that her results are inconclusive, more precisely, the combination of Erudite, Dauntless, and Abnegation, she breaks down and tells Tori that “the tests are supposed to tell us what to choose”. On the choosing ceremony, when Tris is called upon, she is hesitant and struggles between choosing Abnegation or Dauntless. Tris’s inability to make choices and constant doubt show that she is in trouble because she is often in a dilemma. Four, also known as Tobias, plays a large part in Tris’s life. Ever since they first met, Tris is helped and saved by Four multiple times. During Dauntless initiation, it is Four who gives her instructions on combat skills and wounded her intentionally during a knife-throwing practice because if he does not do so, the other Dauntless leaders will not let Tris leave. Later in the film, Tris makes a tremendous leap on the ranking system, resulting in her fellow initiates trying to get rid of her for good. Four comes to Tris’s rescue just in time.

Spiritually, Tris feels safe and comfortable when she is with Four. He gives her the love and attention she did not receive in Abnegation. Other than Four, Tris's mother also provides help when Erudite compels Dauntless into prosecuting all Abnegation members. By looking at all the details provided in the film, Tris indeed is a woman who is in trouble and needs all the help she can get. She might have the courage to fight the villains, yet overall, her gender roles are predominantly feminine. Thus, unlike Katniss, she does not qualify as a new dystopian woman outside of stereotypical framework.

The *Hunger Games* franchise and the *Divergent* series are two dystopian installments that feature women as heroines who stand up against the injustice in their respective society. Even though there are different opinions on whether Katniss and Tris are true heroines, it is undeniable that the characteristics they demonstrate in the films do match the definition of a heroine. In my perspective, Katniss is more outstanding than Tris because her story revolves around a larger scope in the society, from family to a twisted social norm that sees killing as a recreation. Starting from trying to protect her family to ultimately lead a revolution to abolish a tyranny, Katniss's growth and maturity can be seen in details in the movies. When the franchise ended in 2015, the audience are in awe how Katniss has managed to go through all hardship. Girls around the world are empowered by Katniss's spunk and heroic deeds. They are given the chance to believe that girls do not necessarily have to be emotional and appearance is not the only measure of weighing a woman's value. On the contrary, the film adaptation of the *Divergent* series have strayed from the novels. The romance between Tris and Four seems to be the main point in the films and Tris's struggle, as well as her selfless sacrifice are sidelined and displayed roughly. Hopefully, in the last film, *Ascendant*, which is set to air 2017, can do Tris justice and amaze the audience by turning her into someone that does not fall into the stereotype of a damsel in distress, always relying on Four to come to her rescue.

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