

Survival of the Straightest: Reimagining Young Adult Literary Heroines

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For every girl waiting to see herself on the page

Abstract

Young adult (YA) fiction is the gateway to the literary world. Employing coming-of-age themes to welcome adolescent readers into its narratives, YA strives to be relatable, even when dystopian. However, the use of relatability as a tactic brings into question exactly who is being represented on the page-- whose feminism is given a platform and which voices are continuously and systematically excluded from YA narratives? This question is further complicated by dystopian fiction, which projects current political and social anxieties onto the future. In the realm of YA, dystopias serve as a warning for adolescent readers by depicting worlds that seem to look nothing like our own. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are products of a distinct era of bestseller YA dystopian fiction in the late 2000s. Known for their spunky heroines and captivating love stories, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* present mixed messages about heroism and femininity. As young women growing up in dystopian worlds, Katniss and Tris are forced to subscribe to certain societal expectations of femininity in order to survive. This manifests itself in straightness as a device for conforming under oppressive governments. As fierce competitors, Katniss and Tris exhibit various stereotypically masculine traits, but their performances of heteronormativity recuperate this gender deviance and keep them alive. These narratives depict dangerously exclusive and binary-affirming versions of femininity, teaching young readers that gender deviance is acceptable only if paired with straightness. This analysis complicates their reputations as feminist heroines, revealing the ways in which romance detracts from their individual power. Using implicit references to sexuality, I make the argument that subscription to straightness is circumstantial, revealing insecurities about body image, sexuality, and intimacy. This research takes the form of a multimodal analysis, employing a symptomatic analysis, a close reading for queer subtexts, and a reception analysis to explore how young readers react to Katniss and Tris. It speculates on the consequences of literary representation on adolescent readers who live beyond binaries and do not have the privilege of seeing themselves on the page.

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For Maddie: and the poignant memory of seeing *Divergent* in theaters together and struggling to pinpoint exactly *why* we loved Tris so much.

and for Hanna: my greatest queero

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Introduction

Having grown up in a literary climate defined by escapism to other worlds, whether it be that of Harry Potter, Bella Swan, Katniss Everdeen, or Tris Prior, I rarely took a step back to consider the implications of consuming fantasy, sci-fi, or dystopian narratives. These stories led lives far beyond the bindings of young adult literature bestsellers. Young readers wore, watched, and fully immersed themselves in images of their favorite literary heroes. The fangirl fad ran rampant through middle and high school culture, and mockingjay pins were just about as socially mandatory as having a clear stance on Team Edward versus Team Jacob. The night of *The Hunger Games* movie premiere, I stayed up till midnight with my friends decorating homemade fan t-shirts and mockingjay cupcakes. Few things have humiliated me more than getting picked up by my mom at midnight, not a minute later, while the others packed into a minivan to drive to the theater.

All this is to say that the genre of YA dystopian literature is personal. As a kid raised by two proud members of book clubs, I grew up being all too familiar with the book-sized gift under the Christmas tree that was destined to collect an impressive amount of dust on my bookshelf. There was something different about dystopian narratives, though, as I loved to envision worlds her parents wanted her to, I found myself deeply invested in and, more importantly, welcome in Katniss and *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are two of my earliest reading memories in which turning pages did not feel like a chore. I found role models in their heroines and can confidently say that they played a formative role in my development as a reader.

While I personally remember *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* as two of the most influential YA books of my childhood, industry giants like Scholastic and HarperCollins have

profited off of numerous YA dystopian fiction bestsellers throughout the 2000s. They produced a notable proliferation of these texts in the years following 9/11. This trend is deliberate, as certain marketing aims are met by publishers knowing what will sell and when. In my experience and in that of many of my peers, these tactics have succeeded, as YA dystopian literature represents an

literary hero is white and straight.² While Collins and Roth did challenge the norm of the dystopian male hero, their texts contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotype of the white, heterosexual figure as most desirable and capable. While this paper focuses on the intersection of gender and sexuality, whiteness is always at play in these books to further legitimize their heroines. In consuming *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, readers add yet another white face to their list of role models, for they are not given the opportunity to envision a queer hero or a hero of color in a survival situation. As the myth of the American hero--the patriotic, hard-working, glorified individualist--

create diverse and intersectional protagonists has considerable consequences for how we envision the contemporary American literary hero.³

Literature Review

Young readers are fascinated by other worlds, whether in fantasy, science fiction, or dystopian narratives. Consuming YA dystopian literature in a post 9/11 climate is loaded with social and political meaning, as adolescents turn to fiction as an outlet to envision themselves in futuristic, seemingly unrecognizable settings. As other-worldly as these futures seem, further research reveals that dystopian narratives are grounded in traumatic current and historical events. This literature review will provide context and definitions for YA literature and dystopian fiction, including the distinct environment that has allowed for the recent multiplication of dystopian narratives. This context is crucial for understanding the unique literary moment in which audiences celebrated the heroines of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* for challenging gender norms. Based on this literature, the texts themselves, and additional feminist and queer made acceptable through their adherence to heteronormativity, and explore what this indicates about the acceptable literary heroine in the U.S. today.

Young Adult Literature: Intentions and Reputations

YA literature is a largely misunderstood industry. Teachers often shy away from using YA books in their classrooms, dismissing them as undistinguished writing with little educational

Its range from wordless picture books to fairly sophisticated novels, and many

⁴ While he

argues that young adults range from grades seven to twelve, education scholar Karen Coats

⁷ In occupying

this liminal space, young readers are highly susceptible to literary influence, making YA books effective primer texts for denser future reading. Through its ability to reach the adolescent psyche in a distinctly different way than canonical adult literature, YA is worthy of scholarly attention.

Publishing Industry Perspective: Marketing YA Dystopian Fiction

Within the publishing community, professionals seem to take one of two stances regarding the boom of YA dystopian literature: skepticism towards the rapid growth of dark dystopian imagery and praise for the way it challenges readers to look to the future. While classics like *1984* and *Brave New World* have been long-standing staples in American curriculums, the recent consumption of dystopian books outside of the classroom, or for

Publishers Weekly, attributes this growth to word-of-mouth recommendations amongst

young readers for the privileged lives that they lead.⁸ Literary critic Michelle Dean is far more

of dystopian literature.⁹

content for profit is

problematic, for the genre has suffered a decrease in quality as a result of its exponential growth.

Despite these competing perspectives, the numbers speak for themselves: *The Hunger Games*

trilogy has sold over 65 million copies domestically as of 2014, while the *Divergent* trilogy sold

⁷ Coats, *Young Adult Literature*, 319.

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- *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2, 2014, 1.

When targeted towards a younger audience, dystopian narratives serve as warnings for the future by catering to the innocent adolescent psyche. Through themes such as loss of innocence or death of childhood, YA dystopian books often depict children being forced into a role of

exclusively male narratives.

fiction as inherently political due to its basis in current events. Though adolescent interest in the genre is logically indicative of a greater interest in the future, it is important to note that dystopian narratives can be consumed without politicizing readers.²¹ As the intended YA audience likely remembers the aftermath of 9/11 rather than the actual attacks, Ames correlates the impact of 9/11 with the strengthening of civic engagement and conscience of young adults.²² This national tragedy allowed for a popularization of dystopian imagery as well as subsequent civic action, demonstrating the political nature of imaging dystopian worlds and critiquing our current one.

Feminism in Dystopian Literature: Female Narration

Since dystopian narratives have historically told masculine stories, the market for feminist dystopias is a fairly recent one. Feminist scholar Dunja M. Mohr outlines the rise of

Swastika Night (1937) as the earliest female dystopia.²³ Mohr attributes a renewed interest in dystopian narratives to the political energy of the 1960s, during which authors were eager to challenge masculinity and femininity, as Suzanne Collins and Veronica Roth have been praised for doing. According to Mohr

but-- carrying patriarchy, technological advances, and the oppression of women to a logical extreme-- they refocus these to expose their interrelation with questions of gender hierarchy,

²¹ This brings into question authorial and genre intent-- should politicizing readers be the intention of dystopian fiction? If a dystopian narrative fails to spark action in a reader, has it failed? I consider YA dystopian narratives to be less inherently political than their adult counterparts because authors dilute content for younger readers. However, dystopian books catered toward adult audiences *should* be expected to contain political themes, politicize readers, and enact political action.

²² Melissa Am

The High School Journal 97 (2013): 5.

²³ Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 34.

Female narrators enter this convoluted literary world defined by mixed messages of

While there is extensive information available on the dystopian heroine and the record-

Methodology

In order to understand the intersections of gender and sexuality and the function of straightness in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, my research will take the form of a multimodal analysis. I will begin with a symptomatic analysis to examine the cultural era in which Collins and Roth published their books, followed by a close reading of how the authors depict gender deviance and heteronormative performances. I will weave a reception analysis into my discussion to highlight how young female audiences perceive Katniss and Tris. These methods combine to form a critical, multiperspectival analysis on survival and sexuality in these case studies.

of material on the cultural implications of 9/11 and the early 2000s as a whole. It is difficult to accurately summarize the culture of such a tumultuous time period without excluding certain events or cultural trends. I outline the moments that I believe are most relevant to the dystopian genre while also paying attention to the greater cultural and political environment of the 2000s.

Close reading analysis questions how texts construct images and express ideological positions. At times, this method manifests itself in careful attention to depictions of identity markers such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Theories such as gender performativity aid in feminist and queer readings of these case studies, as I will specifically take note of how authors describe and imply gender, sexuality, and intimacy in these texts to corroborate the dominance of heteronormative narratives.³⁰ Beyond the few moments of physical intimacy shared by Katniss and Tris and their boyfriends, there are few explicit references to sexuality in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Collins and Roth present Katniss assumptions about children in literature: that they are without sexuality, and that they are heterosexual. In this sense, queer children are doubly negated as sexual and non-heterosexual beings.³¹ Representations of young female sexuality face intensified repression based on the intersecting stigmas surrounding female desire and adolescent sexuality.³² Collins and Roth do

wrestle with their sexual desires. The subjective nature of queer subtexts means that these
 ngently as explicit depictions of
³⁸ The reliance on the identity of the reader
 is a limitation of the method, as their race, gender, class, and sexuality will influence which
 semiotic clues they find meaningful. My positionality as a white, queer woman and feminist
 places me in a position to criticize the heteronormative scripts in my case studies. In this sense, I
 am not an authority on the matter because of my positionality.

To complete the analysis of my case studies and highlight the power of the consumer, I
 will incorporate a reception analysis into my discussion. While symptomatic analyses examine
 this by exploring the subjectivity of reception based on consumer identity. This method considers
 the political implications of a text, exploring status and those who offer praise versus criticism.³⁹
 Distinguishing between critics and the average consumer offers a useful opportunity to address
 primary sources in my research, specifically forums like Goodreads and Common Sense Media.
 It also allows me to gather the opinions of certain demographics that I am unable to access
 through ethnographic research. I will use citations of book reviews written by young readers to
 offer a perspective beyond my own and that of scholars: actual consumers. The biggest limitation
 of this method is the lack of information available on Goodreads and Common Sense Media
 regarding the gender identity and sex of the reviewer. This will challenge me to include fan
 perspectives as anecdotes rather than opinions representative of the entire adolescent
 demographic.

³⁸ Kander,

³⁹

A Note on Feminist and Queer Theory

Prior to *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, some of the first well-received images of female fighter characters in the media emerged in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997). These revolutionary heroines embodied masculinity in their adeptness at shooting and killing, but costuming complicated their gender performance. While Xena and Buffy fought for themselves, they did so in bras and thongs. In this way, they carefully balanced switchbo
simultaneously empowering and contributing to the sexualization of women.⁴⁰ The depictions of

falls outside of the gender binary. Similarly, they present as straight with boyfriend counterparts while also expressing hesitancy to be physically intimate with them, complicating the authenticity of their heterosexual performances. Feminist theorist Judith Butler defines the relationship between gender hierarchy and heterosexual normativity. Butler insists that gender hierarchy is responsible for heterosexual normativity, rather than the other way around. The two binaries do not feed off of each other-- there is instead a cause and effect relationship at play between gender hierarchy and heterosexual normativity.⁴² Butler also explores the concept of gender performativity:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an essence through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures.⁴³

In other words, gender performativity is made up of external cues chosen by an individual to express how they internally perceive their gender. Whether through makeup, clothing, hair, or other forms of self expression, our gender is made physical by how we present our bodies. Gender performance is what makes our gender identity visible to others, and in many cases, attractive to others.

Katniss and Tris are both sexual and *sexualized*. Apart from the explicit depictions of sexuality and intimacy in my case studies that demonstrate how these heroines experience sexual feelings, masculine female characters are often sexualized and perceived as sexually attractive by male audiences. This fetishization is based in their deviant gender performance. Female characters who express stereotypically masculine traits like athleticism and capacity for violence are seen as attractive in the eyes of male consumers. This gender deviance in female characters is

⁴² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xii.

⁴³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

often paired with straightness, and this intersection serves as a reminder for men that these characters are still objects to be won and consumed. Cultural studies scholar Kelly Oliver

⁴⁴ referring to the contrast

between the sense of empowerment associated with surviving in the wild and the ways in which

opportunity killers are new feminist role models or patriarchal fantasies of phallic girls with guns

⁴⁵ While Katniss and Tris challenge traditional femininity through rigorous athleticism and other stereotypically masculine traits, this puts them at risk of being read as masculine b

Katniss: The Hunted Huntress

Katniss Everdeen is raised in the land that was once North America, though it looks nothing like it in *The Hunger Games*. Divided into twelve districts according to wealth, Panem functions as a well-oiled machine with the help of an oppressive government and the annual ritual of the Hunger Games. The governing Capitol selects one boy and one girl from each district to fight to the death in the Games, a televised event meant to entertain the elite and remind citizens of their inferiority. As a resident of the twelfth and poorest district, Katniss is well aware of her inferiority. After the death of her father, she becomes single-handedly responsible for feeding and supporting her mother and younger sister Prim, filling both parental roles at age eleven. Katniss identifies as a hunter and a survivor long before the Games begin.

no choice but to perform stereotypically masculine traits and prioritize supporting her family.

Katniss displays gender deviance through her hunting ability, her role as the breadwinner of her family, and her consistent emotional reticence prior to and during the Games. Her romance with her co-tr

heteronormativity reassures the Capitol of her femininity. She is only able to survive by his side, for he presents her with the opportunity to display feminine vulnerability. Despite her ability to successfully feign this affection for Peeta when needed, Collins provides fruitful evidence of

and her lack of physical attraction to Peeta. This complicates the probability of Katniss subscribing to straightness in any scenario but the Games, as the sole reason she remains

invested in the relationship is to keep herself alive. She survives alongside Peeta by promoting a feminine image of herself eligible for heteronormativity.

hunting that reflects the demands of her home environment. Certain feminine ideals are unattainable for Katniss amidst living in poverty and difficult familial conditions.⁴⁶ In this way, her gender deviance is seen as more acceptable in the context of her district since it is based on

inevitable according to her situation:

Katniss is an unusual female protagonist in the sense that her behavior, attitudes, temperament, and character seem to fit the norms of masculinity more than those of
ng down certain skills to their

and arrow, and forage in the woods for food and medicinal herbs-- the very skills that would be so crucial to her survival in the Hunger Games.⁴⁷

Rather than engaging in stereotypicalmmlmlJinine idee e.

of her lifelong friendship with her hunting partner, Gale.⁴⁹

one.⁵³ However, Katniss is adamant about not wanting to start a family of her own, rejecting one of the main aspects of womanhood.⁵⁴ Her mother is alive, but she struggles with mental health

dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had not only lost a father, but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. I had

⁵⁵ Katniss is conscious of filling both parental roles for Prim, balancing maternal care with paternal provision. Literary scholar Miranda A. Green-Barteet describes this caretaking

a role most often reserved for men:

⁵⁶ This reality does not allow for typical adolescent femininity.

Due to the loss of her father, Katniss has no choice but to behave in ways designated as masculine, growing up rapidly to support her family.

Considering this difficult childhood, Katniss enters the Capitol with a tough exterior, embodying the stereotype of the sensitive or emotional woman, she cultivates emotional control for Panem. This is one of the first things that her mentor, Haymitch, notices about her as he tries to figure out how to best market Katniss to the Capitol during the pre-Games ceremonies. He

⁵³ the representatives from the Capitol do not know how to proceed with protocol; Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 22. at

⁵⁴ Ellyn Lem and H -Genred
Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy, ed. Mary F. Pharr et al. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012), 126.

⁵⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 27.

⁵⁶ Green-

⁵⁷ This hostility

is a defense mechanism that she developed over time, often manifesting in anger-- a particularly masculine emotion. Life in District Twelve demands that Katniss conceals more feminine

⁵⁸ Katniss has been trained to not show weakness throughout her whole life, a habit that only intensifies as her success in the Games depends on how she is perceived on screen.⁵⁹ She deviates from the standard of an emotional woman through exercising control over the emotions she lets Panem see, presenting herself as tough, confident, and competent.

she is preparing for the pre-Games ceremonies and interviews at the Capitol. Her stylists and mentors seek to transform her into a glamorous, eye-catching tribute according to the beauty standards of the Capitol. They literally wash away her past and the way she previously presented herself. Katniss describes this humiliati

my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin,

plucked bird

⁶⁴ This construction dominates romance narratives within YA literature, for Katniss realizes that she will survive better with Peeta than she will on her own. Her role in this relationship reaffirms her femininity in the traditional sense,

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Peeta admits to having feelings for Katniss on live TV, the pair gain rapid -

⁶⁶ Katniss is hesitant of this fake partnership from the start,

⁶⁷ Still, the Capitol worships their performance as lovers, rewarding Katniss with material benefits like medicine and food for playing the part of devoted girlfriend. With this encouragement, Katniss consciously subscribes to Capitol standards for femininity and heterosexuality by feigning a romance with Peeta. These standards are demanded of her in order to survive.

clearly does not come naturally to her as her relationship with Peeta is devoid of romance. Writer

⁶⁸ In this

sense, McCord does not describe romance, but rather tactic, as Katniss subscribes to ideals of heteronormativity to help her survive. Literary scholar Jane Pulliam notes how this relationship

⁶⁴ Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 91.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.

⁶⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 135.

⁶⁷ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 135.

⁶⁸ Margaret Skinner and Kailyn McCord *The Hunger Games* 112.

Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche 6 (2012):

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relationship with Peeta is grounded in her unchanging first priority-- survival. This romance

her win praise from the Capitol that

she would otherwise be unable to attract on her own.

authentic. She has no real reaction to their first kiss other than that

⁷⁰ Katniss engages in

small acts of intimacy simply for material gain, frequently forgetting that she is even expected to

be affectionate with Peeta. She cynical

⁷¹ In

this way, her subscription to femininity and heteronormativity is disingenuous and unfamiliar,

survival is hugely dependent on how the two of them depict their relationship to the public. Her

helping her present as feminine, heterosexual, and therefore attractive to the public.⁷²

Tris: The Selfless Stiff

Beatrice Prior is raised to be selfless and modest. Her family instills these values in her according to the greater culture of the Abnegation faction. Defined by selflessness, Abnegation serves the community, leading modest and simple lives. In *Divergent*, factions are sorted by

⁸¹ With a distinctly less feminine name, Tris cuts ties with her birth name and faction. Athleticism, another key value of the Dauntless faction, presents challenges for Tris. Unlike Katniss, physicality does not come naturally to her, so strength is a learned masculine trait rather than an innate one. Tris develops a reputation of being a weak recruit, and fellow Dauntless mock her

⁸² Like Katniss, she refuses to let others see her pain, displaying an emotional control when teased that is deviant from traditional femininity.⁸³ She grows tougher both physically and emotionally, rapidly

attractive, Tris is sexually drawn to Four, frequently

⁹⁴ Her fear towards

Four manifests in a unique, graphic kind of sexual attraction. She is as explicit about this attraction as she is about her fear of sex, though.⁹⁵ Roth presents sex as something to be feared,

his *strong*

fingers and *firm* kiss.⁹⁶ Tris frequently makes references to his body, his appearance, and his embodiment of power that she finds so attractive. Their relationship is grounded in mutual sexual

to his ability to help Tris survive.

Once Tris commits to Four, her performance and rankings as a Dauntless are significantly affected. Her performance drops from a 12 to a 10, and her rankings drop from 487.9 to 500.576 (0003).

guaranteeing her a place in the faction. By subscribing to straightness, Tris is able to survive in a world in which every odd is against her as a Divergent woman.

Discussion

The Hunger Games and Divergent

survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important. Even narratives where authors pretend racial tensions have been eliminated in the future risk trivializing

¹⁰⁶ Specifically in the context of a dystopia,

a lack of representation of people of color is especially dangerous. It implies the superiority of the white race and the real probability of a world in which only white people exist. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* tell nearly exclusively white stories, excluding people of color from futuristic worlds.

Katniss and Tris operate in their dystopian worlds hand in hand with their boyfriends. This subscription to heteronormative scripts implies that they are incomplete without men.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, these case studies teach girls that women cannot survive without men. How does the romantic element of these books detract from the feminist power and independence of their heroines? Can we really call Katniss and Tris feminist icons if they cannot function without a man by their side? Katherine R. Broad criticizes the dominance of romance in *The Hunger*

Games *The Hunger Games* trilogy is, significantly, a

potential and, in turn, raises significant questions about her revered status as a feminist icon for

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sufficiency to her role as a girlfriend. Similarly, in *Divergent*, Tris comes to associate survival so closely with Four that she loses all independence and agency over her own experiences. Collins and Roth undermine the power of their protagonists with the characters of Peeta and Four. These

¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁷ Younger, *Learning Curves*, 91.

¹⁰⁸

Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers, ed. Balaka Basu et al. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 118.

romances reduce Katniss and Tris to objects of sexual and romantic desire rather than feminist role models.

In addition to disempowering Katniss and Tris as independent women, romance in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* functions to further perpetuate the perceived superiority of straightness. These heroines can only survive in relationships, but more specifically heterosexual relationships, responding to and contributing to straightness as a norm. Sara K. Day criticizes their subscription to heteronormativity as a missed opportunity for normalizing queerness in these texts:

Because these novels also

110 It is important to consider how YA

¹¹⁴ This eleven year old reader astutely comments on the performative romance in the text, acknowledging that any physical intimacy shared between Katniss and Peeta is disingenuous. *The Hunger Games* readers do not seem to role model specifically for girls.

Unlike those reviewers of *The Hunger Games*, young readers of *Divergent* do seem to be main character, is relatable in the sense that she struggles with fitting in and knowing where she belongs

¹¹⁵ This speaks to the infusion of coming-of-age themes in YA, Reviewers do not seem to lose respect for Tris based on her relationship with Four, but they do as particularly troubling:

A bit iffy on the relationship. The biggest problem with this book is with Tris and her fear of Four in the last simulator.¹¹⁶

Really iffy for 11 and under. Well, there were some sexual scenes around the middle and end of the book. The main character, Tris, had to face her fears in a simulation. One of her fears was intimacy, therefore the 18 year old she liked pressured her into having sex.

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¹¹⁴ Kid, 11 yeBT/F6 12 Tf1 0 0 1 108.05 239.33 Tm0 g0 G003- 122.3 TmvBDC qBT/F3 9 Tf1 0 0 1 84.72.025 175041p

that even tween and teen readers can see the problematic power relations that underlie this romance. Discomfort with the amount of graphic physical intimacy in the book dominates these likeability or respectability. This data speaks to the lack of authenticity in

By failing to explicitly explore the possibility that their protagonists could be queer, Collins and Roth feed the cycle of straight superiority. Despite this, young readers do not seem to share these same criticisms, instead associating Katniss and Tris with feminism, independence, and positive influences. This reveals how Katniss and Tris embody the acceptable contemporary literary heroine, demonstrating that readers are disinterested in going out of their comfort zones to imagine a hero that looks nothing like them. Katniss and Tris only express deviance in terms of gender performance-- to an extent. These representations of self-sufficient, athletic women are not nearly enough in the name of normalizing gender deviance. Katniss and Tris teach us that certain kinds of deviance are acceptable only if balanced by other subscriptions to societal norms-- Katniss and Tris are able to recuperate their gender deviance with straightness in order to survive. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* depict exclusive representations of femininity and female sexuality, limiting the diversification of the acceptable contemporary literary heroine.

Progress regarding queerness in YA literature would look something like this: books featuring protagonists *and* supporting characters who actively struggle with their queerness, whether through coming out or remaining closeted. Queerness itself would not be the protagonist. Characters with fluid sexualities would be accepted without readers questioning exactly what their sexuality is. This gray area would be celebrated, or at least made visible. Representations of homosexual relationships would not enforce gender binaries with one

character presenting feminine and the other presenting masculine.¹¹⁸ Depictions of gender deviance would challenge the post-feminist trope of embracing sexism in the name of earned equality.¹¹⁹

binaries.¹²⁰ Rather than simply representing masculine women or feminine men, non-binary folks would have room on the page in addition to queer folks of color. Subsequent scholarship on sexuality in YA would normalize female desire and queerness. Scholars would read for queer subtexts to investigate implicit references to sexuality as deeply as explicit ones. They would focus not only on how queerness operates in texts but also on how this representation serves readers. Looking beyond the text, scholars would survey young readers to better understand the gaps in YA according to the readership itself. This would promote a dialogue rather than the image of the publishing industry as a distant, untouchable force. Queerness in future YA books will be unapologetic.

children to have the experience of reading a story they feel welcome in, connected to, and moved by.

Readers should be skeptics and skeptics should be readers. Books should be read critically, carefully, and felt deeply. I urge readers that see themselves represented in their favorite books to sit with that privilege. Nauseatingly normative, exclusive feminine standards run rampant through American culture, and the publishing industry plays a large role in this. The issue of literary representation goes far beyond these case studies into a world in which I can easily imagine women wearing red capes.¹²² The need for redefined and diversified pop culture imagery of female heroism is long overdue. This paper is a step in this fight, arguing for the representation of young girls who exist outside of or somewhere in between the binaries that restrict gender and sexuality. Acknowledging the gray area that is queerness is imperative in making progress on the faces we associate with contemporary heroism. It is time for all young girls to have heroes that resemble them. Future heroines have a lot of work to do.

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