

Lost and Found: Young Female Protagonists' Search for Self-Identity in Dystopian Literature

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## Introduction:

Finding yourself is a difficult task when it seems that the ground has been ripped out from beneath you and the world is falling apart at the seams. Adolescents exist in just this type of limbo; the world of childhood innocence no longer accepts them, and they still remain uncertain of their role in the complicated adult world. In her book, *Reviving Ophelia*, psychologist Mary Pipher muses that:

adolescents are travelers, far from home with no native land, neither children nor adults. They are jet-setters who fly from one country to another with amazing speed. Sometimes they are four years old, an hour later they are twenty-five. They don't really fit anywhere. There's a yearning for place, a search for solid ground.<sup>1</sup>

As children, adolescents disapproved of adult rules and adult ways, but they are expected to join adulthood regardless. Dystopian novels for young adults (YA) place this inner conflict and journey at the center of their tales.

My goal in this paper is to delve into these popular YA novels and find the common characteristics that make these protagonists so attractive to readers. In analyzing Suzanne Weyn's *The Bar Code Tattoo* trilogy, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, I will trace the paths that lead the female protagonists from lost and conflicted young women to strong heroines. Just as adolescents must come to terms with their self-identity, I will suggest that it is not until these young women discover their self-identities that they can become the heroines their respective authors created them to be, as well as the heroines their dystopian societies need.

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<sup>1</sup> Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1994. eBook.

## The Allure of YA Dystopian Novels

I was first introduced to young adult dystopias through Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. I read it during a transitional period in my life—when I was graduating high school and getting ready to enter adulthood. An avid reader and book lover, I often delved into books searching for something. I searched for characters I could relate to, a world I wished I was a part of, or more often than not, an escape. Just before reading *The Hunger Games*, I had emerged from the latest young adult craze, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. As a 16-year-old girl, I enjoyed the book for what it was—a romance. It was not until I got to page 374 of *The Hunger Games* that I realized what I was missing from *Twilight*. The *Twilight* series offered romance, love triangles, super-natural creatures, and suspense, but *The Hunger Games* gave me a purpose. It gave me a purpose in the sense that it commented on societal issues, class structure, governmental tyranny and media consumption. Written for young adult audiences, this dystopian novel invites emotionally wayward teens like my former self into society's problems. In doing so, *The Hunger Games* and the genre itself gives readers enough credit to become a part of the discussion—to assess the challenges that they have grown into, and that they, as the rising generation, will now be charged to solve.

If including adolescent and young adult readers in societal problems is not enough, *The Hunger Games* and other young adult dystopian novels add another layer by making these chaotic imaginary worlds relatable to someone who is experiencing or has experienced adolescence—often through their use of protagonists. Countless successful authors in the past decade have portrayed young female protagonists as travelers in search of their true north—their self-identity.

Many argue that authors use female protagonists in dystopian novels to increase female readership in a commonly male dominated genre, or that the use of the female protagonist provides a way for the authors to input their own opinions on present gender norms. While all of this may be true, researchers and scholars cannot deny that the female protagonists' gender-bending roles—in which they often fight against their corrupt societal systems—have captivated audiences. According to Scholastic, “*The Hunger Games* has spent more than 260 consecutive weeks/more than five consecutive years to date on *The New York Times* bestseller list since September 2008 [...] *The Hunger Games* trilogy has been sold into 56 territories in 51 languages.”<sup>2</sup> In 2013, according to *Publishers Weekly*, “The three books in Veronica Roth’s dystopian trilogy sold a combined 6.7 million copies.”<sup>3</sup> Both trilogies have also been made into successful movie franchises. Even the earliest, and lesser known of the trilogies, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, was “named by the American Library Association (ALA) as [the] 2005 Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers [and] the German translation of *The Bar Code Tattoo* was short-listed for the prestigious [German Youth Literature Prize].”<sup>4</sup>

An article by Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel argues that these dystopian female protagonists have entranced the reading population because they step over the boundary of *boys’ books*. They note that, stereotypically, “boys’ books tend to have exotic locales fraught with danger, surprise, and adventure, sending boys messages that reinforce their agency and remind them of their self-sufficiency[...]boys were often encouraged to rebel and challenge authority”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “News Room: *The Hunger Games*.” *Scholastic Media Room*. Scholastic. n.d. Web. 21 September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Roback, Diane. “Facts & Figures 2013: For Children’s Books, *Divergent* Led the Pack.” *Publishers Weekly*. Publishers Weekly. 14 March 2014. Web. 21 September 2015.

<sup>4</sup> “Biography: Suzanne Weyn.” *Scholastic*. Scholastic. n.d. Web. 21 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Lem, Ellyn and Holly Hassel. ““Killer” Katniss and “Lover Boy” Peeta: Suzanne Collins’s Defiance of Gender-Genred Reading.” *Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy Volume 35: Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins’ Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012. 120. Print.

Elizabeth Segel cites *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a prime example of a boys' book, where young Huck attempts to "escape from domesticity" and fight against "the female domination of the domestic world."<sup>6</sup> Unlike their male counterparts, girls in traditional *girls' books* tend to learn the art of femininity, were "given fewer opportunities for rebellion[...]and often 'settled down' to a conforming complacency."<sup>7</sup> Generally and historically, the leads of female dominated books follow the straight and narrow path that leads to security and often marriage. As Valerie Estelle Frankel describes in her book *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend*, authors usually portray the heroine as "the 'goal' of the quest—the princess needing rescue. While the hero represent[s] the logical, powerful side of the personality, the feminine offer[s] him creativity, nurturing, and intuition."<sup>8</sup> In other words, in such adventure tales, the females have two choices: to "be the helpless princess sobbing for rescue" or to hide themselves and become "the knight, helmeted and closed off in a cubicle of steel, armored against the natural world, featureless behind a helmet."<sup>9</sup>

While Frankel argues that the heroine's feminine and supporting role should be applauded, the young female protagonists in dystopian novels choose different and more trying paths—those that cannot be easily labeled as masculine or feminine. While they encroach on the boys' world with their outspoken personalities and rebellious tendencies, they still possess passionate and nurturing qualities. Unlike their predecessors in *Little House on the Prairie*, *Anne of Green Gables* or *Little Women*, the female protagonists in young adult dystopian literature

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<sup>6</sup> Segel, Elizabeth. "As the Twig is Bent...": Gender and Childhood Reading." *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*. Ed. Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocínio Schweickhart. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986. 171. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Lem and Hassel, 120.

<sup>8</sup> Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010. eBook.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

cannot be easily placed into boxes. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher describes a young woman's struggle to remain an individual: "I'm a perfectly good carrot that everyone is trying to turn into a rose. As a carrot, I have good color and a nice leafy top. When I'm carved into a rose, I turn brown and wither."<sup>10</sup> In the three series on which I focused my research, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*, the female protagonists struggle with the aspects of themselves that do not fit nicely into society's mold or expectations. The dystopian females must find ways to embrace their eccentricities and use them to work against the status quo. These protagonists also differ from the female protagonists who have traditionally populated young adult romance novels, and who find solid ground in the form of a relationship. In dystopian novels, the young female often struggles independently on her journey. Granted, there are supporting characters and love interests, but the fate of the dystopian world lies squarely on her shoulders.

### **Search for Self-Identity**

When I first began researching and exploring female protagonists in young adult dystopian novels, I wanted to know what it was that set them apart from their dystopian counterparts. What led to them being chosen? Was it the same thing that connects them to readers? The female protagonists strike a particular chord with young female readers in the way they handle problems of self-identity. In her study of adolescent girls, Pipher compares a young female's experience during adolescence to the Bermuda Triangle:

Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle[...]They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious

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<sup>10</sup>Pipher, 1994.

and inclined to take risks. They [...] become more deferential, self-critical and depressed.<sup>11</sup>

Although these protagonists share identity struggles with most adolescent girls, these characters also provide hopeful examples of how young adolescent females can rise above their respective situations and struggles to locate their self-identities and their inner strength.

As mentioned earlier, I focused my research on three particular young adult series, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*. Because I cannot assume that my audience has read these series, I will provide a brief summary of each of the dystopian series, where three female protagonists struggle to find themselves while the world around them descends into chaos. Like the traveling adolescents Mary Pipher describes, the female protagonists in *The Bar Code Tattoo*, *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* all search for their identities—their true north—while attempting to avoid withering in their conformist societies. And only when they discover this can they become the heroines they were destined to be.

### **Locating Self-Identity by Embracing Disconnect in *The Bar Code Tattoo***

In *The Bar Code Tattoo* series, Suzanne Weyn tells of a not-so-distant future, where a private corporation, Global-1, controls everything. Global-1, and by extension, the United States' government, decide to mandate that every citizen age seventeen and older be tattooed with a bar code on his or her wrist. The bar code, advertised for its convenience, will include personal, banking and medical information. Like most adolescents who feel lost at school and at home, and who cannot find themselves amidst the latest craze and trends, 16-year old Kayla Reed feels out of place and disconnected. She questions the government's branding of its citizens and discovers the tattoo may have played a role in her parents' deaths; she struggles between

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

receiving the bar code tattoo in order to fit in or running away and living like a pariah. After deciding to take on the government, Kayla leaves the city and her old life behind and discovers allies in a group of barcode resisters and uncovers information about the government's illicit actions. When she finally embraces her disconnect from her dystopian society, she finds herself.

### **Locating Self-Identity by Accepting Divergence in *Divergent***

When transitioning from childhood to adulthood, adolescents struggle to become individuals while still maintaining the values that childhood instilled in them. In her series, *Divergent*, Veronica Roth creates a world that is battling suppressed external conflict, which becomes internalized in protagonist Tris Prior. In Roth's dystopian society, the government separates citizens into factions based on personality traits: Abnegation for the selfless, Candor for the honest, Dauntless for the brave, Amity for the caring and Erudite for the scholarly. At age 16, members of society must take an aptitude test that will tell them which faction they are meant to be part of. The test is not binding, and the 16-year-olds must decide whether to stay in the faction they were born into or leave it behind. When Tris Prior from Abnegation takes the test, the results are inconclusive. She has an affinity for Abnegation, Dauntless and Erudite. Her test proctor calls this rare result *divergence*, and informs Tris of its danger. She must not tell anyone. Tris enters Dauntless thinking no one will find her there, but Dauntless leaders and Erudite leaders are working together to expose those who are divergent. The government considers divergence a threat, because those who possess it do not fit into any mold; divergents are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Throughout the series, Tris has to come to terms with her divergence in order to fight those who abuse power while overcoming her own inner turmoil.

## **Locating Self-Identity by Recognizing the Power of Choice in *The Hunger Games***

In *The Hunger Games* series, Suzanne Collins comments on societal issues—including governmental oppression, class inequality and media consumption—through her creation of Panem. Panem is what remains of North America and consists of a ruling Capitol district and twelve outlying districts. The further the districts are from the Capitol, the more impoverished they become. Every year, the Capitol holds the Hunger Games, an annual event to remind the districts of the government’s absolute power and to scare them into complacency. Every year the Capitol holds a lottery to select a boy and a girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen—tributes—from each district to participate in a televised fight to the death. The districts closer to the Capitol have more resources and train their tributes in advance, producing more volunteers than victims, whereas the government manipulates children in the outlying districts to put their names in the lottery more than once in exchange for purchasing food to sustain their families. It is within this atmosphere that Katniss Everdeen, from District 12, volunteers to take her younger sister’s place as tribute in the Hunger Games. An average adolescent who typically follows the rules and does not ask any questions, Katniss previously kept her head down in order to protect her family from the cruelty of the Capitol. Now, Katniss has to recognize the power she holds as the first-ever District 12 volunteer in order to transition from the impoverished District 12 tribute to the “Mockingjay,” who will soon become the face of a rebellion.

## **Chapter One: Locating Self-Identity by Embracing Disconnect**

In *The Bar Code Tattoo* series, Suzanne Weyn writes about a society so obsessed with conformity and convenience that the government requires citizens seventeen and older to get bar codes tattooed on their wrists, which will include their personal identification, banking

information and medical records. In the midst of this environment, Kayla Reed, an average 16-year-old girl, contemplates whether the struggle to remain an individual is worth the sacrifice in a society where members brand themselves in order to belong. Typical of most adolescents, Kayla struggles to discover her identity separate from her classmates and her family. When Kayla's father and mother receive the tattoos and end up dying shortly after, Kayla often finds herself contemplating her tattoo-free wrist. Amidst her contemplation, a song her mother used to sing haunts her: "I'm like a bird, I only fly away" Weyn uses this song several times to emphasize Kayla's disconnect with her current environment, her innate connection to nature and the fact that just as birds were born free, to live without tracking tags, so too was Kayla.

Kayla overhears her mother singing this song for the first time on her seventeenth birthday, shortly after her father's suicide, the day when she must decide whether to officially join society by getting a bar code tattoo or trust her misgivings about the tattoo. With ninety percent of people telling her that her worries are misguided, Kayla struggles with which decision is right for her. As Kayla contemplates whether she is overthinking the bar code tattoo, something about the sadness of her mother's song awakens her desire to fit in. Her mother sings *I'm Like a Bird* by Nelly Furtado, and the chorus continues: "I don't know where my soul is, I don't know where my home is."<sup>12</sup> After hearing the song, Kayla becomes more determined than ever to get the bar code tattoo and fit in: "No sad songs for her. No suicide. No beatings in the school hall. She would fit in, go along, and be okay. Life was too difficult to do it any other way."<sup>13</sup> Kayla does not want to end up like her mother—depressed and despondent. Through the use of this song, Weyn introduces a conflict common to dystopian heroines that is described in

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<sup>12</sup> Nelly Furtado. *I'm Like a Bird*. Dreamworks, 2000. CD.

<sup>13</sup> Weyn, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, 54.

*Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, “the tensions between utopia and dystopia reinforce contradictory messages about identity formation: the adolescent protagonist aspires to break the strictures of dystopia, but she also longs to fit in.”<sup>14</sup> Kayla does not know where her home is, but she finds herself willing to buy into the governmental propaganda that the bar code tattoo will make her feel a part of something—regardless of the price.

In creating her heroine, Weyn writes Kayla into a role that many adolescent girls can identify with: the lost girl. She stations Kayla at a very transitional period in her life. At sixteen, almost seventeen, Kayla prepares to finish up high school and enter the adult world. An average high school student, Kayla wants to fit in and maybe find herself along the way. To add to this pressure, at seventeen Kayla becomes eligible to receive her bar code tattoo. While Kayla hesitates before making a decision regarding the tattoo, she still focuses too much on her own future and her own problems to contemplate seriously the consequences of getting the tattoo or joining a rebellion: “Kayla had never thought of herself as strong, or even particularly bright or brave. In her own eyes, she was just a girl, more average than anything else, doing her best to figure things out and keep going.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, even while Weyn creates Kayla Reed as an average teenage girl, she also gives Kayla all the potential to become a heroine as soon as she discovers a way to overcome her doubts.

Weyn further portrays Kayla’s disconnect through her daily interactions. During a meeting with her guidance counselor, Kayla finds it difficult to remain focused: “Outside, the

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<sup>14</sup> Basu, Balaka, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz. Introduction. *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 9. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Weyn, Suzanne. *The Bar Code Rebellion*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 2006. 163. Print.

rain drummed against the window. Across the metal desk, the guidance counselor talked. Talked and talked. The light in his office was way too bright.”<sup>16</sup> Like many adolescents, Kayla finds herself bored and annoyed when being lectured by authority, but Weyn contrasts the rhythmic rain against the metallic and artificially bright office to portray further Kayla’s discomfort with being confined. The scene continues to describe Kayla’s disconnect by describing her weak computer skills. She wants to attend an art school, but based on current criteria, she would not be accepted into any schools. She attempts to present her case to her counselor: “I would go outside and draw during computer class. No one cares if you can draw, I know. But still...it has more to do with art than computers do.”<sup>17</sup> Kayla’s interest in art comes from passion and natural talent, and the freedom of the outdoors fuels her passion, but neither her passion nor her natural talent matter in a technologically advanced world, where—in order to succeed—you have to be tattooed.

In addition to her passion for the outdoors and drawing, Kayla’s thoughts about the bar code tattoo portray her disconnect from society. When Kayla asks her counselor about his tattoo, he seems to reply verbatim from a government sponsored television advertisement: “All my banking and identification numbers are encoded right here. If I were rushed to the hospital, billing and medical information would be right at hand.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Kayla’s friend Amber responds with why the tattoo is convenient for younger generations: “It’s really great. My junior license is in here. If I get stopped I just have to show the cop my wrist. He runs his little handheld scanner over it, and off I go.”<sup>19</sup> But just as Kayla would prefer to hand-draw her art

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<sup>16</sup> Weyn, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

than have it computer generated, her natural inclination is not toward convenience: “How bizarre to be branded like a box of cereal. Didn’t people mind being counted as just one more product on a shelf? There has to be more to a person than that.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike her societal counterparts, Kayla is described by Weyn as a young girl who cannot be easily placed in a box. Where her mentors and peers see convenience, Kayla sees conformity and a lack of freedom. After her conversation with her counselor, “school feels like a cage,”<sup>21</sup> for Kayla, and after her mother broaches the link between the bar code tattoo and her father’s death, Kayla begins to feel claustrophobic: “Air. She needed air.”<sup>22</sup> While Kayla may want to fit in and be an average teenager, she was not created to conform—she was created to be free.

Weyn introduces the idea that Kayla was created for something more than conformity in one of the few supernatural aspects of the series: Kayla’s premonitions. Kayla has been having premonitions for as long as she can remember: “All her life she’d had little warnings, premonitions about what was to come. Sometimes the premonitions really came true. But other times, they didn’t. So, she’d learned not to pay too much attention to them.”<sup>23</sup> For Kayla, her premonitions represent something else that impedes her path to normalcy. When Kayla ultimately decides not to get the tattoo and escapes the city, she begins to better understand her premonitions with the help of Eutonah. A Cherokee and a leader of a rebellion, Eutonah explains Kayla’s gift in terms of energy:

The whole world is one, because even the plants and animals join us on one energy continuum. Some people are more conscious of this and can control the flow of their own

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.

energy. Those people have been called holy people, swamis, medicine people, healers, saints, shamans.<sup>24</sup>

Through her training with Eutonah, Kayla better understands her premonitions and expands her telepathic ability. The same qualities that made Kayla an outsider in a mechanistic and convenience-driven society paradoxically make her feel whole, accepted and useful in her new and natural surroundings. Kayla begins to become herself in the woods, feeling “more at one with her space than she’d ever felt in her old life.”<sup>25</sup> Her premonitions, which she once considered nuisances and an additional point of difference between her and everyone else, guide her on her path away from the bar code tattoo and toward a community where Kayla can finally embrace her natural instincts and not have to worry about fitting into what her society deems acceptable.

Along with her premonitions, Weyn sets her protagonist further set apart from society when Kayla learns that she is a product of a government experiment—a cloning and gene-splicing experiment. “In this case they were not trying to instill a certain trait. Instead, it was a way to discover what traits would emerge. The DNA of each cloned embryo would be injected with increased amounts of avian DNA from a sparrow.”<sup>26</sup> Kayla, as the first of six clones, was not injected with a high amount of sparrow DNA, unlike the sixth clone, who can communicate with birds. While Weyn’s introduction of gene-splicing further complicates Kayla’s history and future, it also explains many of Kayla’s actions—maybe her sparrow genes are what catalyzed her divergence from society. One thing is certain though, Kayla can relate to the song her mother

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>26</sup> Weyn, *The Bar Code Rebellion*, 205.

sang on a completely different level, as is seen when Kayla rescues her “sister,” the sixth clone, from a governmental compound: “We’re birds. We always fly away!”<sup>27</sup>

Weyn has Kayla truly come into her own when she removes her from society and its constraints. Kayla was not uncomfortable in her previous life; she was not in poverty or in danger of starving. Even after her parents’ deaths, she still could have received the bar code tattoo and lived more easily than she lives on the run or in the woods; however, she cannot truly be herself until she enters nature. In her new environment, she does not have to compromise. Kayla even starts drawing again,

How could she go back to the regular world? Here in the mountains she’d been able to start sketching again, using burned wood from their fires. She was doing drawings of the wildlife all around and her work was the best she’d ever done. *I’ve become myself here*, she realized. If she went back, would she be able to hold on to that true self?<sup>28</sup>

While Kayla was unable to find herself in the confines of a society that values conformity and convenience, she establishes deeper connections through her disconnect from society. Before she found her new community in the Adirondacks, Kayla contemplated giving up her rebellion against the government “*Why bother caring?*” she thought. Her parents were both dead [...] What was left for her to fight for?”<sup>29</sup> When it appears her life is coming apart at the seams, the reader can understand why Kayla wants to give up, but that same part of Kayla that was gifted with premonitions and wary of the tattoo leads her to continue fighting. “It didn’t matter if she couldn’t fight this, if it was hopeless [...] She moved now on simple survival instinct.”<sup>30</sup> It was this survival instinct that led Kayla to the woods, where she could fight against society’s values

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>28</sup> Weyn, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 146-147.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 151.

and practices and begin to truly find herself. The woods remind Kayla of the song her mother sings

The word *home* resonated inside her and she thought of the song her mother used to sing. *I'm like a bird, I only fly away...* Those words weren't true for her anymore. She found her power and her soul. And her home was inside her. There was no bar code on her wrist, and she felt proud of that.<sup>31</sup>

The reemergence of the song *I'm Like a Bird* embodies Kayla's journey. The first time that Kayla heard this song, she panicked and thought that happiness and stability could only be achieved through getting the bar code tattoo. This time, when she remembers the song, Kayla thinks about her journey and how far she has come.

Much of adolescence is spent being told how to act, how to dress, what is right and what is wrong—all while questioning whether it is okay to stand out when everyone else is trying to fit in. Throughout the novels, Kayla struggles with who she is, what her past is, and where her future lies. While Kayla may never know the answers to all of these questions, by denying the bar code tattoo and embracing her connection to nature and her disconnect from society she discovers her self-identity—she becomes free like a bird, a bird that no longer has to wander in search of her home or her soul.

## **Chapter Two: Locating Self-Identity by Accepting Divergence**

During adolescence, a choice must be made to join the adult world that you have spent your childhood rebelling against, or to continue to fight against it.<sup>32</sup> This conflict becomes more complicated in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. In this series, Roth creates a world divided by factions, and though her protagonist, Beatrice Prior, admires the faction she was raised in, she

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>32</sup> Hintz, Carrie, and Elaine Ostry, eds. *Utopian and Dystopian: Writing for Children and Young Adults*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 5-6. Print.

does not feel like she belongs in it. Raised in a community that values selflessness above all else, Beatrice feels like a pariah in a land of saints. She feels smothered by her restrictive environment, but when she looks at those in the Dauntless faction, she sees bravery—she sees freedom. Veronica Roth challenges her heroine by giving her the opportunity to abandon her Abnegation community and fully embrace the Dauntless lifestyle as Tris, but Tris cannot thrive until she accepts her affinity to both Abnegation and Dauntless—her divergence.

On her first day in Dauntless headquarters, leaders introduce Tris and the other Dauntless initiates to the chasm—a Dauntless teaching tool that indicates the “fine line between bravery and idiocy.”<sup>33</sup> Tris describes the deathly chasm: “The floor drops off at a sharp angle, and several stories below us is a river. Gushing water strikes the wall beneath me and sprays upward. To my left, the water is calmer, but to my right, it is white, battling with rock.”<sup>34</sup> For Roth, the chasm offers more than the potential for a gruesome death. Although Tris does not realize it right away, the chasm also resides within her. In her book *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine’s Journey through Myth and Legend*, Valerie Estelle Frankel describes the conflict of the chasm that all protagonists—and even adolescents—like Tris must face:

On her quest, the heroine will cross “the crack between worlds,” the entrance to a new geography and a new psychological landscape [...] without familiar referents, a place where a different type of awareness comes to prominence, where deeper archetypal energies can emerge.<sup>35</sup>

Tris’s inability to fully fit into Abnegation did not have to do with selfishness, just as her inability to fully fit into Dauntless does not have to do with her being cowardly. They are signs of her *divergence*, signs that she cannot be labeled generically—she cannot flourish on just one

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<sup>33</sup> Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2011. 65. Print.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 64-65.

<sup>35</sup> Frankel, 2010.

side of the chasm. The chasm and her new Dauntless environment force Tris to confront her identity issues, which allows her to consider the non-archetypal idea that maybe someone can belong in more than one faction. Eventually, with this understanding, Tris creates a bridge over the chasm in her understanding of selfishness and bravery in terms of self-sacrifice.

Beatrice was born into Abnegation and often finds her natural tendencies toward selfishness out of place. Unlike her peers in Abnegation, she wants to be able to look in the mirror, ask questions and speak her mind. She cannot uphold the standards that her parents and brother Caleb seem to easily adhere to:

When I look at the Abnegation lifestyle as an outsider, I think it's beautiful. When I watch my family move in harmony; when we go to dinner parties and everyone cleans together afterward without having to be asked; when I see Caleb help strangers carry their groceries, I fall in love with this life all over again. It's only when I try to live it myself that I have trouble. It never feels genuine.<sup>36</sup>

When Beatrice attempts to be wholly selfless, it does not feel genuine or natural. She finds it difficult to conform to her faction's norms. She respects them and sees the beauty of being selfless, but that realization makes it even more difficult for her when she has bouts of selfishness. While in Abnegation, it seems Beatrice can achieve selflessness only by putting on a façade of obedience and contentment in order to please her family. However, Beatrice cannot remove her mask and leave behind the idea of selflessness completely until her sixteenth birthday. When she does have the chance, Beatrice decides to leave her family in order to focus on herself. If she cannot be genuine or complete in Abnegation, maybe she can find herself in another faction. Beatrice leaps over her inner chasm and begins to embrace bravery instead of selflessness—she embraces Tris, her new name and new identity in Dauntless.

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<sup>36</sup> Roth, *Divergent*, 24.

Because Tris could not feel whole in her Abnegation society and constantly yearned to be free, Roth challenges Tris's status as a hero by putting her in an environment, the Dauntless compound, where initiates must compete against each other in order to be accepted into the faction, and where she should thrive if she leaves behind her selflessness completely. Within this competitive atmosphere, Tris makes many selfish decisions, decisions not typical of a hero, but Tris does not want to be a hero—she wants to be free. Where Tris faked selflessness in Abnegation, in Dauntless she attempts to disregard it completely. Tris believes she cannot achieve bravery by being selfless. It does not take long for Roth to show this change in her heroine. On the first night at Dauntless headquarters, Tris hears her fellow initiate, Al, crying. “I should comfort him—I should *want* to comfort him, because I was raised that way. Instead I feel disgust. Someone who looks so strong shouldn't act so weak. Why can't he just keep his crying quiet like the rest of us?”<sup>37</sup> On her first night away from home, Tris believes she can finally be herself—be selfish. She recognizes how disappointed her mother would be of her selfish and cruel honesty, but in the absence of an Abnegation household, Tris does not have to explain her selfishness. She does not have to hide her feelings or her genuine disgust with Al's weakness.

Similarly, when a Dauntless leader forces her friend and fellow initiate Christina to dangle over the chasm, Tris debates whether to help her.

If I help her, Eric would make my fate the same as hers. Will I let her fall to her death, or will I resign myself to being factionless? What's worse: to be idle while someone dies, or to be exiled and empty-handed? My parents would have no problem answering that question. But I am not my parents.<sup>38</sup>

Roth does not have Tris behave like a normal hero or protagonist, mainly because Tris is on a journey of self-discovery. She thought she was lost and out of place in Abnegation and that she

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

would find herself in Dauntless, but now that she is in Dauntless, she seems even more confused. Tris attempts to be brave by being selfish, but afterwards always feels guilty about her actions or wonders what her parents would think. She is unable to leave behind her Abnegation values—values that she thought were set too high for her to achieve. Tris can no longer differentiate what is right. Does she act by the standards of Abnegation, where she has to put others before herself? Does she act by the standards of Dauntless, with its survival of the fittest and bravest mentality?

Tris does not just lose sight of her selflessness when it comes to others, she also forgets to value her own life. Tris fully embraces the Dauntless lifestyle and puts herself in deadly situations. When she climbs a rickety ferris wheel, she finds exhilaration: “This is crazy, and I know it. A fraction of an inch of mistake, half a second of hesitation, and my life is over. Heat tears through my chest, and I smile as I grab the next bar.”<sup>39</sup> Tris’s death-defying stunts awaken her and make her feel more alive. For once, she makes decisions—no matter how ill-advised—for herself. But just as she recognizes the shortcomings of her decisions concerning Al and Christina, Tris also recognizes the foolishness of putting her life in danger. However, ever since she entered Dauntless, she has transformed and realized that “we live in a dangerous world, and I am not so attached to life that I will do anything to survive.”<sup>40</sup>

When Tris attempts to be fully selfless or fully brave, it seems that Roth has created a flawed heroine; however, Roth sets Tris apart and places her on a pedestal by making her divergent. Tris’s inability to feel wholly a part of Abnegation or wholly Dauntless is a result of her divergence—her affinity toward both factions. Tris is not content being a member of Abnegation if it means she can never be brave or express her displeasure. Likewise, Tris cannot

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>40</sup> Veronica Roth, *Insurgent*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2012. 289. Print.

be content in Dauntless, if being brave can only be accomplished at the cost of another person. As her love interest and mentor, Tobias, explains to her, “it’s when you’re acting selflessly that you are at your bravest.”<sup>41</sup> Trapped between the calm water of Abnegation and the tumultuous waves of Dauntless, Tris’s divergent instincts lead her to a middle ground, where she can be both selfless and brave.

After feeling guilty over her lack of concern for Al’s inner turmoil, Tris shows a different side of herself by taking Al’s place in front of a target while an instructor throws knives at him.

“Any idiot can stand in front of a target,” I say. “It doesn’t prove anything except that you’re bullying us. Which, as I recall, is a sign of *cowardice*[...]” The last thing I want to do is stand in front of that target, but I can’t back down now. I didn’t leave myself the option. I weave through the crowd of initiates<sup>42</sup>

Without thinking, Tris displays her divergence by acting both selflessly and bravely. In her attempts to be selfish and ignore Al’s cries, Tris immediately feels guilty; however, after bravely standing up for Al, Tris is at peace with her actions. She waves through the crowd and does not question what her parents would do in that situation. She begins to understand that bravery does not have to mean an absence of selflessness.

Despite Tris’s overwhelming desire to leave behind her Abnegation lifestyle, her divergence will not let her forget about it completely. Her love for her family, combined with her newfound bravery, results in her being fiercely protective. When the newspapers slander Tris’s father, an Abnegation leader, Tris stands up for him against some of the crueler Dauntless initiates “That’s my *father*! My father, you coward! [...] That’s my *family* they’re talking about, that’s my *faction*!”<sup>43</sup> Leaving behind her Abnegation roots is not as easy as Tris thought it would

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<sup>41</sup> Roth, *Divergent*, 311.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

be. However, if she were still in Abnegation she would never have the gall to voice her opinions. Tris's divergence means that unlike the other members of society, her mind cannot be easily conditioned or manipulated. Even though Will reminds Tris that Dauntless is her faction and her family now, it is not easy for Tris to relinquish her Abnegation family or values. Even in her new Dauntless environment, Tris's conflicted feelings of belonging have not disappeared. In fact, it took being in Dauntless for Tris to understand that maybe she was more selfless than she realized.

While Roth has Tris come to accept the roles Abnegation and Dauntless play in her life, this knowledge is not enough for Tris to achieve her potential as a heroine. While Tris bridges the chasm between her Abnegation values and her Dauntless lifestyle, she still feels conflicted over which factions' values she should adhere to the most. Roth compares Tris's internal confliction to war: "Sometimes [this internal war] keeps us alive. Sometimes it threatens to destroy us."<sup>44</sup> Tris begins to contemplate self-sacrifice. For Tris, self-sacrifice is the truest representation of selflessness and bravery. She upholds the Abnegation ideal of self-sacrifice: "My father says—used to say—that there is power in self-sacrifice."<sup>45</sup> Tris believes the only way she can honor her parents' deaths and any lives she took is by offering her own life. According to *The Question of Sacrifice*, sacrifice cannot be a calculated decision or else it can be "construed as self-serving [and], therefore not a genuine sacrifice."<sup>46</sup> Tris considers self-sacrifice, but in doing so also equates selflessness and bravery as a complete lack of regard for one's own life. Even recognizing her divergence, Tris seems more lost than ever. Tobias condemns her actions:

It's not brave, choosing the position you were in yesterday. It's beyond stupid—it's suicidal [...] You're more than Dauntless [...] But if you want to be just like them,

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<sup>44</sup> Roth, *Insurgent*, 242.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

<sup>46</sup> Keenan, Dennis King. *The Question of Sacrifice*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 1. Print.

hurling yourself into ridiculous situations for no reason and retaliating against your enemies without any regard for what's ethical, go right ahead. I thought you were better than that, but maybe I was wrong!<sup>47</sup>

The same faction that taught her that self-sacrifice was honorable also believed that suicide “is an act of selfishness. Someone who is truly selfless does not think of himself often enough to desire death.”<sup>48</sup> Tobias deems Tris’s actions suicidal in that she was selfish by not thinking of those around her when she put her life in danger. She begins to understand that her world is grayer than she has come to believe. While she recognizes a person can be more than selfless or brave, she also begins to understand that there are different types of selflessness and different types of bravery. There is also more to self-sacrifice than giving up one’s life.

To finally resolve Tris’s conflict, Roth puts her heroine in a situation where her divergence can shine—where she can be truly selfless and truly brave—in order to protect her brother. Earlier, Tris believed that if she put her life at risk for the sake of others, she was being both selfless and brave; however, the very fact that Tris did not value her own life transformed her actions from self-sacrifice to selfish. As a result, Roth transforms Tris into someone who begins to value her life and the time she spends with her loved ones—so much so that she goes into deadly situations realizing she has much to live for:

Every part of my body chants it in unison. *Live, live, live*. I thought that in order to give my life in exchange for Will’s, in exchange for my parents’, that I needed to die, but I was wrong; I need to live my life in the light of their deaths. I need to live.<sup>49</sup>

Tris’s new desire to live makes her eventual sacrifice more powerful. Tris explains how the Abnegation view self-sacrifice: “the Abnegation say you should only let someone sacrifice himself for you if it’s the ultimate way from them to show they love you.”<sup>50</sup> When Tris risks her

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>48</sup> Roth, *Divergent*, 307.

<sup>49</sup> Roth, *Insurgent*, 384.

<sup>50</sup> Roth, Veroinca. *Allegiant*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2013. 448. Print.

life in the second book in the series, *Insurgent*, she does not do it to show Tobias or her friends that she loves them. In fact, her attempt at sacrifice is more about her than them. However, when Tris has an opportunity in the last book to save her brother Caleb—her only remaining family member—Tobias, and her friends by killing the man who wants to kill them, she understands what her previous displays of selflessness and bravery were lacking:

[My mother] taught me all about real sacrifice. That it should be done from love, not misplaced disgust for another person's genetics. That it should be done from necessity, not without exhausting all other options. That it should be done for people who need your strength because they don't have enough of their own. That's why I need to stop you from 'sacrificing' all those people and their memories. Why I need to rid the world of you once and for all.<sup>51</sup>

Moments after coming to this realization—after fully coming into herself and properly balancing selflessness and bravery, Tris gives up her life for her loved ones. In her final moments, she embraces what it means to be Divergent by selflessly and bravely sacrificing herself for her loved ones, a life that she would prefer to live but gives up because she sees no other option. As bittersweet as it may be, Tris's journey could only be completed in death. In *From Girl to Goddess*, Frankel describes the death of heroines:

The heroine's death elevates her to greater power as a guardian of the living, a source of magic and blessing for those who remain [...] though these heroines leave behind the world of life and love, they gain divinity [...] with this the heroine truly masters both worlds [...] corporeal and spiritual, enlightened one and guardian of others. This is the truest apotheosis.<sup>52</sup>

In an interview with MTV, Roth agrees with Frankel's assertion that Tris's death is not equivalent to failure but instead a culmination of her journey and a measure of how far she has come,

In the third book, she learns what it actually means to sacrifice herself [...] It has to be necessary. It has to be about love. She says all those things. And to me, it felt like it was

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 473-474.

<sup>52</sup> Frankel, 2010.

her finally understanding what her parents were trying to teach her in Abnegation and finally understanding what it means to be an adult and make a grown-up decision because you have to, not because you particularly want to. So, to me, I was proud of her. I was so proud. It was like she finally became a grown-up [...] I thought about other options [...] But the more I thought about them, the more I felt like they weren't really doing justice to her story. This is a very intense transformation that she undergoes, and to have her just be like, "OK, well, we saved the day. Let's wander off into the sunset together," it just didn't feel right. She earned a more powerful ending to her story than that.<sup>53</sup>

Just as adolescents try to straddle the line between childhood and adulthood, throughout the series Tris constantly struggles with understanding selflessness and bravery. In Abnegation, Tris simultaneously admired and resented selflessness as an impediment of freedom; whereas in Dauntless, Tris admired the freedom and bravery of the faction, but disapproved of its seemingly selfish disregard of individuals. Tris proves the necessity of holding on to parts of your childhood while transitioning into adulthood. Tris can only find herself when she accepts the selflessness of her upbringing and the bravery of her time in Dauntless. Roth uses Tris's truest form of selflessness and bravery in order to complete her transition from Beatrice Prior—the Abnegation girl who desired to be free—to Tris—the Dauntless initiate who wanted to find herself—to Tris, the Divergent girl who accepted her divergence—her courage and selflessness—when she bridged the chasm by sacrificing her life for the ones she loved, and, as a result, discovered herself and freedom.

### **Chapter Three: Locating Self-Identity by Recognizing the Power of Choice**

In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins conceptualizes a dystopian society where the reigning regime, the Capitol, conditions citizens to live in a constant state of fear and helplessness. It is within this society that Katniss Everdeen, a poor girl from the impoverished District 12, becomes the face of a rebellion by volunteering to take her sister's place in the

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<sup>53</sup> Wilkinson Amy. "Veronica Roth Explains Why Shocking 'Allegiant' Death Had to Happen." *MTV News*. n.p. Web. 28 Oct. 2013.

annual Hunger Games, a televised fight to the death. Collins outlines Katniss's journey to become the crowd favorite "Girl on Fire," beginning with a display of self-sacrifice and expanding into a broader picture of just how life-altering Katniss's split-second decision is to her fellow citizens. Along the way, Collins provides insight into Katniss's character and her inability to grasp the power she holds as the first-ever volunteer from District 12. Just as all adolescents begin to realize they have a part to play in society, throughout the trilogy Katniss begins to recognize her power and shifts from merely surviving through instinct as the District 12 tribute, to willfully and thoughtfully finding her new identity as the "Mockingjay"—the face of a rebellion.

Volunteering for the Hunger Games is a pivotal moment within the series and in Katniss's development. In the strict Capitol-ruled society of Panem, *volunteering*—offering something of one's own accord—is a rarity; the citizens of Panem are paralyzed by fear, even in the face of the Hunger Games. As Katniss explains:

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do."<sup>54</sup>

In a society conditioned for compliance—for *non-action*—Katniss acts; the Capitol's intimidation tactics do not stand up to Katniss's love for her sister. During the reaping ceremony, when her sister Prim's name is called, Katniss instantly responds:

"Prim!" The strangled cry comes out of my throat, and my muscles begin to move again. "Prim!" I don't need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way immediately allowing me a straight path to the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me. "I volunteer!" I gasp. "I volunteer as tribute!"<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 2008. 18-19. Print.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The citizens who are controlled by fear and intimidation suddenly witness 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen offer herself of her own accord in order to save her sister. In *The Question of Sacrifice*, Dennis King Keenan states that sacrifice “involves selflessness, giving without reserve. Sacrifice has to be beyond calculation and hope of a reward.”<sup>56</sup> Katniss does not volunteer out of a calculated attempt for attention; she knows the only good thing that can come out of her volunteering is Prim’s survival. In other, wealthier districts, citizens volunteer for the games for glory, but in District 12, where “*tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*, [and] volunteers are all but extinct,”<sup>57</sup> Katniss’s actions allow District 12 to forget about the fear and hopelessness, and to come together to honor a girl who freely offers her life in the place of her sister’s. In a district where people rebel only enough to feed themselves and to survive unnoticed—a district where Katniss says “you can starve to death in safety”<sup>58</sup>—Katniss demonstrates to the Capitol and those watching the televised event that she is motivated by something beyond and above fear of repercussion. This self-sacrifice is uncommon, as Katniss notes when none of Peeta’s siblings volunteers for him: “...family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing.”<sup>59</sup> Her self-sacrifice lights a spark of recognition and admiration in District 12:

Then something unexpected happens. At least, I don’t expect it because I don’t think of District 12 as a place that cares about me. But a shift has occurred since I stepped up to take Prim’s place, and now it seems I have become someone precious. At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me.<sup>60</sup>

Despite Katniss’s simple intention to volunteer for Prim, her actions change not only how she is viewed in society but how others behave in society. In their moment of unity, the people of

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<sup>56</sup> Keenan, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

District 12 become more than an impoverished coal mining community—they rise from the coal dust and join Katniss as a symbol of hope and change.

While her dystopian counterparts immediately recognize Katniss’s volunteering as a sign of rebellion, Katniss is naïve to her own ability to influence change. She lives every day trying to help her family avoid starvation; the last thing on her mind is starting a rebellion. In fact, despite being the dystopian heroine, Collins has Katniss buy into much of the Capitol’s conditioning. At a young age, Katniss expressed her displeasure at her living situation, but her mother quickly introduced fear into the young girl:

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts.<sup>61</sup>

Katniss had been trained by her mother at a young age to hide her emotions and focus on survival. While Katniss’s mother instills fear into her daughter in order to guarantee her survival, Katniss’s father teaches her survival skills by illegally taking her out into the woods, beyond the fence of District 12, and teaching her how to hunt and gather food. Through the actions of her father, hunting and rebelling become part of Katniss’s very nature. She finds her identity beyond the boundaries of District 12:

I knelt down in the water, my fingers digging into the soft mud, and I pulled up handfuls of the roots. Small, bluish tubers that don’t look like much but boiled or baked are as good as any potato. “Katniss,” I said aloud. It’s the plant I was name for. And I heard my father’s voice joking, “As long as you can find yourself, you’ll never starve.”<sup>62</sup>

With her father’s influence and her new-found hunting skills, Katniss could have easily been trained to become a member of a rebellion, but Collins removes this influence from Katniss’s life in a coal mining accident that kills her father and leaves Katniss with fear and a bow and arrow.

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<sup>61</sup> Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

After her father's death, Katniss feels just as helpless as the rest of her district. She cannot change the Capitol. She cannot stop the Hunger Games from taking place. She cannot change the fact that she is poor and a member of the poorest district in Panem, but protecting her family and keeping them alive is something she can control. That is why, if anything could remove Katniss's emotionless mask, it would be if something happened to Prim, the one person that Katniss loves above all others. Before the reaping, Gale suggests that he and Katniss should run away together and live in the woods, but for Katniss, "the conversation feels all wrong. Leave? How could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I'm certain I love?"<sup>63</sup> In Katniss's dark and impoverished world, Prim is the one beacon, the one certainty. As soon as Prim's name is called, Katniss forgets about her mask of indifference, forgets to be afraid of the Capitol and unknowingly lets her rebellious tendencies show. But even in that action, Katniss must fight against her fear and her conditioning. Katniss releases Prim's name in a "strangled cry,"—a cry that would have remained silenced if it was in anyone else's throat.

Collins writes Katniss as a strong heroine, but one who is naïve. Because Katniss had so little opportunity to exercise agency and choice, she does not understand the power of this decision. While Katniss focuses on saving Prim's life, the rest of the district focuses on how one of their own has overcome the conditioning and strangulation of the Capitol, becoming an anomaly within the system. The citizens of District 12 pay respect to Katniss with their three-fingered salute and begin to join her on the road to rebellion. Despite the significance of her sacrifice, Katniss fails to fully understand the significance of the salute in this instance. "It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district," she says "occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love."<sup>64</sup> Katniss's inner

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 24.

monologue ends on a macabre note, she reads their message most significantly as a goodbye, but those using the salute understand the power of her actions enough to resort to an old, seemingly pre-Capitol salute to express their awe and respect.

Taking Prim's place is not the only time Katniss fails to recognize the consequences of her actions. At the conclusion of the Hunger Games, when only she and fellow District 12 tribute Peeta remain alive, Katniss tries to figure out a way to get herself and Peeta out of the arena alive.

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country. If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...<sup>65</sup>

Katniss thinks threatening a double-suicide will impact the Gamemakers' decisions, but she never considers that it might cause a rebellion. She gets both herself and Peeta out of the Hunger Games alive not because she wants to stick it to the Capitol, but because she wants them both to survive. Katniss again attempts to rationalize her actions: "All I was doing was trying to keep Peeta and myself alive. Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental. But when the Capitol decrees that only one tribute can live and you have the audacity to challenge it, I guess that's a rebellion in itself."<sup>66</sup>

As a result of being taken away from Prim and being placed in an arena, Collins replaces Prim with Peeta as someone who Katniss begins to depend on and care for. Just as Katniss prioritizes protecting her sister Prim, surviving the games without Peeta is not an option. Katniss rationalizes that because she did not intend to send a message to the Capitol, but rather to survive, she cannot possibly be held responsible for the assumptions of others. To her insistence that she did not mean to start a rebellion, President Snow alludes to Katniss's stylist Cinna, who

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>66</sup> Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2009. 18-19. Print.

transformed Katniss's wardrobe and persona for the Hunger Games from the impoverished District 12 tribute to the "Girl on Fire" with a flaming spectacle of a costume. Snow replies, "I believe you. It doesn't matter. Your stylist turned out to be prophetic in his wardrobe choice. Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem."<sup>67</sup> Cinna created the "Girl on Fire" image because he saw something in Katniss, something that Katniss did not see in herself.

Despite her non-rebellious intentions in saving Prim, Peeta, and her own morality, there is one incident where Katniss's hatred toward the Capitol drives her to make an impact, to consciously rebel. This occurs when the young District 11 tribute, Rue, who reminds her of Prim, is killed. Rue's death reminds Katniss of Gale's passion for rebellion:

Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us [...] I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do that there is a part of tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.<sup>68</sup>

While only one victor is supposed to emerge from the Games, it seems the Capitol is always the true victor. With this knowledge and with the grief from Rue's death, for the first time, Katniss intentionally and publicly chooses to challenge the Capitol by honoring Rue's life and decorating her body with flowers. While she hopes to shame the Capitol, she still does not believe that her actions will result in others following her lead. After retaliating against Rue's death, Katniss receives a gift.

This bread came from District 11. I cautiously lift the still warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of District 11 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Haymitch to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>68</sup> Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 236-237.

debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own.<sup>69</sup>

Even though she chooses to align herself with Rue and honor her life in a way that will upset the Capitol, Katniss still does not grasp the impact of her “Girl on Fire” persona. Katniss rationalizes that the bread could not have possibly been meant for her—or if it was, it was only to pay a debt. While she may be the “Girl on Fire,” through Collins’s use of inner monologues and conflict, she demonstrates that Katniss is still the simple girl from District 12 who cannot understand why anyone would look at her as a leader.

When deciding to save Prim and Peeta and to honor Rue, Katniss was focused on survival and doing the right thing; however, once she finds herself in the midst of the rebellion in the second and third installments of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, she begins to recognize the impact of her actions. When visiting a hospital run by the rebels,

I hear my name rippling through the hot air, spreading out into the hospital. “Katniss! Katniss Everdeen!” The sounds of pain and grief begin to recede, to be replaced by words of anticipation. From all sides, voices beckon me. I begin to move, clasping the hands extending to me, touching the sound parts of those unable to move their limbs, saying hello, how are you, good to meet you. Nothing of importance, no amazing words of inspiration. But it doesn’t matter. Boggs is right. It’s the sight of me, alive, that is the inspiration.<sup>70</sup>

In seeing how this group of people responds to her when they are injured and at their worst, Katniss realizes the importance of the hope she provides. In the past, she only witnessed how the rebellion impacted her life—causing chaos in the name of righteousness—but here, when she sees how her very presence can take away pain and suffering, she realizes the impact of all of her choices and the power she has gained as a result.

A new sensation begins to germinate inside me. But it takes until I am standing on a table, waving my final good-byes to the hoarse chanting of my name, to define it. Power.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>70</sup> Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010. 89-90. Print.

I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. Snow knew it, as soon as I held out those berries.”<sup>71</sup>

Katniss transforms from the “Girl on Fire”—the girl who sparked a rebellion—into the “Mockingjay”—the face of the rebellion. She finally sees what Peeta and Cinna saw in her—what caused the people of District 12 to salute her and the people of District 11 to send her bread. She sees why President Snow sees her as a threat. She volunteered for Prim because she did not have a choice—she did not think she would survive without Prim. She saved Peeta for the same reason. She honored Rue because she could not live with herself if she did not express her anger to the Capitol. In all of these incidences, Katniss makes decisions based on survival and her sense of morality, not on starting a rebellion, but after surviving two Games and experiencing a real taste of what the Capitol is capable of, she does not want to just survive—she wants to live.

Even though Suzanne Collins maintains that her trilogy is more about war than adolescence, stating, “I don’t write about adolescence. I write about war. For adolescents,”<sup>72</sup> there is no denying that Katniss Everdeen transforms from the beginning of the series to its end. The war consumes the majority of her adolescence. Throughout the trilogy, Katniss struggles to recognize her own power, influence and agency in a world that has always told her to quietly obey or suffer the consequences. Just like any adolescent girl, who must raise her hand to speak while simultaneously trying to find her own voice, Katniss must fight to discover and assert her principles, her opinions, and her own identity. It is these discoveries that allow her to question and challenge the status quo, a responsibility that often falls to adolescents, both within and outside of the dystopian world. Katniss realizes that her opinions, her actions and her choices can

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>72</sup> Dominus, Susan. “Suzanne Collins’s War Stories for Kids.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 8 April 2011. Web. 28 October 2013.

make an impact; they are powerful agents of change. With two words representing her agency in a regime ruled by fear and intimidation, Katniss becomes a heroine. She ignites the first sparks of rebellion in her own district with her first public display of her unwillingness to play by her society's established rules. "I volunteer" spreads a murmur through society. Like the citizens of Panem, the reader is forced to wonder, if 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen from the Seams of District 12 can make a difference, why can't I?

## Conclusion

While giving a speech for his Equality Award, Joss Whedon, the creator of the popular television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, lamented that reporters always ask why he chooses to write strong female characters. Joss responds to these questions with indignation, "How is this even a question? Why aren't you asking a hundred other guys why they don't? [Mimics a reporter:] *Why do you write these strong female characters?* Because you're still asking me that question."<sup>73</sup> Whedon's dilemma impacts not only his own work, but a world of stories consumed by young girls who deserve to see themselves—and their potential to become powerful, independent, courageous and compassionate women—represented in popular fiction.

In our society, we still see headlines that tell of unequal wages among genders or of female comedians getting booed off stage because of their gender, not the quality of their craft. Because we still look at series like Suzanne Weyn's *The Bar Code Tattoo*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* and recognize the rarity of portraying the strength, courage and otherness in female characters leading a rebellion, closely reading and

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<sup>73</sup> "Joss Whedon Perfectly Answers the Question 'Why Do You Write Strong Female Characters?'" *The Huffington Post*. n.p. Web. 28 Oct. 2013.

analyzing these stories matters. I believe we must look closely at these series for the simple reason that girls matter, and that female empowerment is always at risk. I would go even further—if someone were to compare the legitimacy of these popular books to that of classics such as *Little Women* and question why one would focus on these arguably unproven, recent tales, I would maintain that regardless of the author, regardless of the time period and regardless of the age of the intended audience, many aspects of how women and girls navigate life have not changed. In contrast to much of literary tradition, young adult dystopian novels with female leads are just beginning to show young girls that they can step outside of societal constraints to become heroines, and these stories reflexively showcase both the struggle that adolescent girls experience, as well as the powerful possibility of overcoming it.

Not unlike the adolescent readers who buy these books, and who are trying to find their place in political and societal discourse, Kayla, Tris and Katniss have no choice but to grow up and find themselves amidst the chaos of their dystopian societies with people telling them who they should be, who they should not be, how to act and how not to act. While they may deal with more than the average adolescent, once they find their self-identity they complete one leg of their journey and move on to the next one—as stronger and truer individuals. In helping adolescent female travelers, Pipher states, “I encourage girls to search within themselves for their deepest values and beliefs. Once they have discovered their own true selves, I encourage them to trust that self is the source of meaning and direction in their lives.”<sup>74</sup>

Through their hardships, Kayla, Tris and Katniss discover their self-identities, which helps lead them to freedom and hope. Every triumph and every heartache allows them to

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<sup>74</sup> Pipher, 1994.

discover their self-identities and become the strong heroines that Weyn, Roth and Collins created them to be—young female heroines worthy of admiration, worthy of an audience and worthy of respect. This is as true today as it was when I was a naïve 17-year-old reader, and it will continue to be true well into the future—no matter how bleak it might be.