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Recommended Citation

Watterson, McKenzie K., "A Generation of Katnisses: The New Power of Female Protagonists in Young Adult Dystopian Literature" (2017). *Undergraduate Theses and Professional Papers*. 150.

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A Generation of Katnisses: The New Power of Female Protagonists in Young Adult
Dystopian Literature

By: McKenzie Watterson

There is no question that we live in a world of turmoil. Today's youth face challenges with unprecedented nuances. Luckily, in the face of arising obstacles, a generation of incredible role models has emerged in an unexpected place: young adult dystopian fiction. With 27.7 million copies of the book sold and \$400 million in movie ticket sales, *The Hunger Games* roared into the spotlight in 2012. Fans emerged from every walk of life. This enormous success brought visibility to the growing genre of young adult dystopian fiction. Everything in the genre seemed new and fresh, nothing more so than the protagonist; in a story packed with action and intrigue, the character who rises to victory is Katniss Everdeen, a girl, and though she is arguably the most popular, Katniss Everdeen is not alone. Young adult dystopian novels are replete with strong female protagonists, and more appear every day. These women are powerful new role models for today's readers, young and old, so it is vitally important to understand them. Three protagonists in particular serve as excellent examples of this emerging trope. Katniss from *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, Tris from *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, and Lauren from *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler all lend important insight to the emerging archetype. In order to understand these powerful new women, this essay will attempt to craft a recipe of sorts. The first ingredient, dystopia, will require readers to delve deeply into these protagonists' worlds, seeking to contextualize

their lives. Positionality, this recipe's second ingredient, is found as the paper discovers the new agency possessed by these women and how they achieve it. And the final ingredient, and perhaps the most complicated, is the protagonists successful (if unwitting) participation in feminist ethics, which can be used to understand their motivation and power sources. This is a recipe for a whole generation of empowered, caring, unique female protagonists, a recipe for a Katniss.

This paper will begin its exploration of the new dystopian female protagonist by examining the environments in which these characters live and how they garner agency in dystopia. By their very definition, dystopian societies are flawed. Understanding what is wrong in these societies is key to recognizing how characters operate within them.

For example, in *The Hunger Games*, the characters all live in Panem, a country whose flaws lie in its authoritarian government. The most obvious oppressive tool of the Capitol is the books' namesake, the Hunger Games. The games arose in direct response to rebellion. When one of the country's districts, District 13, rebelled against the Capitol, it was obliterated, and the Hunger Games were established as a reminder of those "Dark Days" (Collins, 18). Each year, a boy and a girl from each of the country's twelve districts are "reaped" by the Capitol and forced to participate in the games, where they must fight the "tributes" from all the districts on national television until only one is left alive. Katniss knows that "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" (Collins, 18). The citizens of

Panem are powerless to stop or escape their children's bloodshed. The message is clear; dissent in Panem will be met with violence.

Despite being the most brutal of the Capitol's weapons, the Hunger Games are not its most powerful method of control. The government regulates everything from electricity to free speech, but is especially omnipresent in its control of food. In all but the richest districts, people are starving – to the extent that they are willing to take perilous risks to feed themselves and their families. Many of the Panem's youth are desperate enough to sign up for a government program called "tesserae." In exchange for a "meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person," children must enter their name an additional time to the games' reaping pool. These children risk their lives as they take out tesserae for each member of their family. Furthermore, the reward for winning the games is a year of food for the victor's district (Collins, 19). Because the people are so hungry, the Capitol can use food to motivate its citizens towards even the most heinous actions both inside and outside the games. The people of Panem are too hungry to focus on much beyond survival. Panem is flawed because of its brutal authoritarian regime. It places control above all else, using deplorable methods to oppress its people.

On the other hand, the society in *Divergent* is malfunctioning in subtler ways. Tris's world is divided into five factions, each living by a different set of ethics. These factions were formed in the aftermath of an apocalyptic war, and each blames the violence on a different flaw in humanity:

"Those who blamed aggression formed Amity. [...] Those who blamed ignorance became Erudite. [...] Those who blamed duplicity created

Candor. [...] Those who blamed selfishness made Abnegation [...] and those who blamed cowardice were the Dauntless.” Roth, 42

Unfortunately some of these factions, such as Dauntless and Erudite, require strict and uniform adherence to their code of ethics. Divergence from this code will leave one factionless. Tris explains, “to live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to live divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community” (Roth, 20). In this society, community is synonymous with uniformity.

This rigidity is especially problematic in factions where the original code of ethics has been warped. For example, when Tris leaves her home in Abnegation to join Dauntless, she is surprised by their definition of bravery. Instead of replacing cowardice with bravery, the faction has cultivated brutality. In hand-to-hand combat training, the man in charge of Dauntless initiation, Eric, forces the initiates to fight until their opponent is unable to continue. He encourages initiates to fight viciously even after their opponent has fallen, saying, “a brave man never surrenders” (Roth, 95). Any dissent from Dauntless initiates or members is met with the threat that they will be made factionless. Without room for dissent, some factions’ original purposes are dangerously disfigured, so much so that it leads to the very violence the factions were created to avoid. Where Panem is inherently flawed in its design, the society in *Divergent* is failing because it has strayed from its purpose.

Lauren’s America in *The Parable of the Sower* is dystopian for yet another reason; it is crumbling. Throughout the narrative, it is clear that, though there once was a great society, it has dissipated into catastrophe. Clean water is incredibly

expensive (even more so than gasoline), the government is ineffective and corrupt, and the environment is in disaster (Butler, 13, 15, 45). The chaos is worse for women. Through Lauren's narration, one learns that rape is a constant threat. When she sees a naked woman on the street, she assumes "she had been raped so much that she was crazy" and remarks that it is not uncommon (Butler, 6). Worst of all, the young people have no hope for a better future. Lauren's friend explains, "I won't be able to afford college. I won't be able to get a job or move out of my parents' house because no job I could get would support me and there are no safe places to move. Hell, my parents are still living with their parents" (Butler, 44). In Butler's novel, American society has descended into violent chaos and fractured into small, walled communities.

Lauren lives in one of these communities, and although the wall and community lends them safety, it also makes them a target. They are constantly fighting off break-ins. Lauren explains that it is "crazy to live without a wall to protect you [...] most of the street poor— squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general— are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both" (Butler, 7). Grotesque inequality makes people desperately violent, and places even the poorest of walled communities in danger. Lauren's society is caught in the throes of violent anarchy, and no one is concerned with anything beyond survival.

The Hunger Games, *Divergent*, and *The Parable of the Sower* all contain societies that are truly dystopian. Now that a general understanding of their worlds has been established, one can determine each protagonist's place and begin to understand her agency. Katniss, Tris, and Lauren all have a similar relationship with

the world around them; they are societal outsiders. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean they are outcasts within their communities. Instead, it suggests that they work outside of, and sometimes against the dystopias in which they live. This is significant because, as this paper has already established, their societies are all failing on some level. Therefore, the protagonists' full participation in the dystopias would indicate stagnancy, if not failure. The fact that these girls find a way to operate outside of flawed societies without alienating themselves from their communities is what gives them their agency. This paper will show how they express different ideas, develop new skills, and eventually find opportunities to create new communities.

It is clear to see that Katniss is ideologically opposed to the society created by the capitol. In Panem's authoritarian regime, she refuses to be controlled. In order to serve her community, she ignores laws. "Trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties," yet she does exactly that to feed her family and community (Collins, 5). Furthermore, she conducts trade in a black market called "The Hob," making most of her money there (Collins, 6). When she disregards the laws of Panem, Katniss rejects the ideology of the Capitol.

Despite her rejection of Capitol beliefs, her connection to her community gives her a complex understanding of them, which she uses to her advantage. The Hunger Games are designed to be as entertaining as possible. When Peeta, her fellow tribute from District 12, declares his love for her the citizens of Panem, and readers of the novel, expect a tragic love story. Though she is not romantically

interested in Peeta, she plays into the public's expectations to gain advantage in the games. As she decides to ally herself with Peeta, Katniss thinks, “

“It just makes sense to protect each other. And in my case – being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12 – it's an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors”

Collins, 247

Katniss's ideas about her love life differ from that of society's, yet she is able to use her perspective to gain popularity with watching sponsors and ensure her survival.

In addition to a differing ideology, Katniss gains important skills because she is a societal outcast. In a world where everyone is controlled by hunger, she learns to feed herself and others. Because of her years illegally hunting in the woods, she can use a bow and arrow, set snares, fish, and forage for food (Collins, 111).

Throughout the games, these skills give her incredible advantages in both wilderness survival and combat with the other tributes.

Tris's position as an outsider also gives her a unique perspectives and skills. Tris is Divergent, which means she has the unique aptitude to live in multiple factions. She imagines the world more complexly than those with the aptitude for only one faction. As a member of Abnegation, she admires their commitment to service, but admits, “when I try to live it myself [...] I have trouble. It never feels genuine” (Roth, 24). Furthermore, as a Dauntless initiate, she expresses her dissatisfaction with their ethics code as it is presented to her: “I do not want to be greedy; I do not want to be like Eric, terrified of other people's strength” (Roth154).

In a society where she is expected to blindly commit to her faction, Tris instead thinks critically about the world around her.

Her Divergence also grants Tris important skills. The Dauntless use fear simulations to train their initiates to be brave. Unlike her peers, Tris can manipulate the simulations. She realizes, “if it’s in my head, I control it” (Roth, 254). While her fellow initiates struggle to face their fears, Tris conquers her own. Her skills extend to other, more menacing simulations. When the Erudite hijack the entire Dauntless faction using simulation technology, Tris is unaffected (Roth, 419). The very divergence that makes her a societal outcast grants her agency above all others; she cannot be controlled.

Like Katniss and Tris, Lauren also differs ideologically from her society. Though her father is a Baptist preacher, she stops believing in her father’s God at a young age (Butler, 4). Instead, she builds a new belief system called Earthseed. Earthseed is predicated on the belief that “God is change” (Butler, 20). She believes that humans have the ability to affect changes around them if they are prepared and aware; “God exists to be shaped” (Butler, 20).

Lauren’s belief in her own agency helps her to survive. When faced with increasing threats from the outside, others in her community simply build higher walls and get more guns. Lauren, however, understands that change is inevitable; the threats will never cease and her community’s way of life will end. She decides,

“We can get ready. That’s what we’ve got to do now. Get ready for what’s going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more

than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don't know what they're doing!" Butler, 44

Unlike those around her, Lauren faces the reality that things will be much worse before they get better. She develops survival skills. To prepare for future danger, she constructs "grab and go pack," a pack full of survival necessities, including books and seeds to multiply both her knowledge and her food. Her emergency pack saves her life, and the life of others when violent outsiders invade her community.

Lauren's unique belief that God is change, and that she has the agency to shape that change, makes her more powerful than anyone else in her community.

Katniss, Tris, and Lauren are as unique as the societies in which they exist, and collectively, they achieve a new kind of agency in dystopia. The societies around them are irreparably flawed. These protagonists succeed because they operate outside dystopia, developing new ideas and skills that empower them to help themselves and their communities.

With an understanding of the protagonists' environments and their agency established, one can now delve more deeply into their motivation and identify the source of their new power. Because these women exist in entirely different worlds, traditional ethics theory fails to comprehend their motivation and success. Much in the way the protagonists developed their own unique ideologies, this essay must turn to nontraditional theories to understand them. Feminist ethics, specifically care-focused approaches to feminist ethics, best evaluate the power found by Katniss, Tris, and Lauren.

It is important to first understand the basics of feminist ethics in order to determine how it applies to the protagonists. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines feminist ethics as “an attempt to revise, reformulate, or rethink traditional ethics to the extent it depreciates or devalues women's moral experience” (Tong). This reconsideration of traditional ethics is rooted in the belief that traditional ethical codes fail women in a number of ways. According to Alison Jaggar, traditional ethics codes show less concern for women’s interests, trivialize moral issues of the private realm, and imply that women are morally immature (Tong). Furthermore, she criticizes them because their values are traditionally masculine, valorizing independence, autonomy, hierarchy, rules, and domination and devaluing aspects of the traditionally feminine realm such as relationships, interdependence, community, connection, responsibilities, and partiality (Tong). Feminist ethics are a direct response to these failings. The Stanford Encyclopedia notes, “all feminist ethicists share the same goal: the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women” (Tong). Feminist ethics best serve to understand our protagonists because they are all women who are oppressed in some way.

When searching for the source that empowers Katniss, Tris, and Lauren to effect change in their societies, one can look specifically to care-focused approaches to feminist ethics. Important theorists of the feminist ethics of care movement, such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings question the notion that “universal, abstract, impartial, and rational knowledge” is necessarily closest to reality (Tong). Instead, they suggest, “the ontological assumption that the more connected the self

is to others, the better the self is" (Tong). Additionally, they propose that knowledge most accurately represents people's experiences in the world when it is "more particular, concrete, partial, and emotional" (Tong). In contrast with traditional ethics, feminist ethics of care values connection and the power of emotional relationships.

Seeking an example outside the novels already discussed in this essay, one could look to *Moon Dwellers* by David Estes. The narrative is split between two protagonists. Followers of traditional ethics would grant the moral high ground to Tristan, a young prince who has broken away from his corrupt and cruel father in order to independently establish himself as a man of the people. He is powerful because of his position in the nation's hierarchy and the universality of his concept of justice and rights. On the other hand, those who subscribe to feminist ethics of care would grant moral superiority to the character Adele. Her rebellion against a corrupt government is fueled by her desire to protect her family. She builds alliances with other young people and strives to serve those she cares about. Her strength is rooted in her sense of responsibility to loved ones and interdependence with her community. The differences between Tristan and Adele highlight the main conflicts between traditional ethics, and feminist ethics of care.

It is important to note, however, that these two ethical ideologies do not necessarily result in a binary. In fact, Carol Gilligan lauds women exactly because they are able to incorporate both codes into their lives:

"women [...] can speak the moral language of justice and rights nearly as fluently as the moral language of care and responsibilities, [but]

today's boys and men still find it very hard to articulate their moral concerns in anything other than the moral language of justice and rights” Tong

According to Gilligan, these women can achieve moral superiority because they can draw from multiple codes and decide what elements are best. Lawrence A. Blum explains a situation where the blending of codes is necessary. He criticizes the kinds of generalizations made in male ethics, claiming that without care, one could not achieve them. For example, Blum discusses the specific principle “Protect one’s children from harm,” which comes from the general principle of benevolence. Blum argues, “most parents subscribe to this specific principle, but only those parents who are caring — that is, sensitive to and aware of their children's unique interests and needs — will know when and how to meet its terms” (Tong). In this example, only people who care about those around them are able to achieve the moral standards set by the traditional ethic.

Another element of feminist ethics of care that helps evaluate our dystopian protagonists is Gilligan’s three levels of morality. She developed the levels in direct response to Kohlber’s levels of morality, which she believes ignore the moral complexity of women (Tong). Women operating at Gilligan’s first level “overemphasize the interests of their selves.” At the second level, “women overemphasize others' interests.” And finally, at the third level, “women weave their own interests together with those of others.” This essay will show how Katniss, Tris, and Lauren all find incredible power when they operate at Gilligan’s level three.

Now that a fundamental understanding of feminist ethics of care has been established, one can look to the stories of Katniss, Tris, and Lauren to see how they are motivated and empowered by their participation in the code. To begin with, Katniss's care for others creates communities both within and outside of the games that grant her agency and save her life. Motivated by love for her sister, Prim, Katniss learns invaluable skills with her bow and arrow. Her abilities with a bow not only feed her family, but they also make her a strong competitor in the Hunger Games. Furthermore, it is only when her sister is reaped for the games that Katniss volunteers as tribute (Collins, 22). Her choice, motivated entirely by care, might seem like her downfall, but instead, it gives her incredible power. When people see her sacrifice, she becomes a national sensation. Sponsors line up to help her through the games and the people of the Capitol adore her. More importantly, however, she strengthens the community within District 12. The people of her district rally behind her as "first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches their three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me [...] It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love" (Collins, 24). In authoritarian Panem, the district's solidarity speaks rebellion. As the people of District 12 band together, one can witness Katniss's transformation into a symbol of unity.

Furthermore, during the games, Katniss cares in unprecedented ways. Despite the fact that she is thrust into the most violent of competitions, she creates caring alliances like none that have ever existed in the arena. One particular partnership allies with many values of the feminist ethics of care, shows Katniss

operating at Gilligan's morality level three, and serves as an important power source for her. Katniss's alliance with Rue from District 11 is a perfect example of interdependence, care, and community. At the beginning of the partnership, it is Rue who cares. She saves Katniss from an attack from other tributes by pointing out a Trackerjacker nest, and later heals Katniss from their stings (Collins, 189, 201). Rue even teaches her how to communicate via Mockingjays (Collins, 212). When Katniss allies with her, offering food and protection, the two become interdependent. They move forward at Gilligan's level three, considering each other's interests when making choices. Later, when other competitors kill Rue, Katniss once again becomes a national symbol of solidarity. She covers the body in flowers, and vows to win for Rue (Collins, 213). Her care for Rue becomes a new source of motivation. Additionally, to thank her for helping Rue, District 11 sends her loaves of bread. Katniss notices, "This is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own" (Collins, 239). Through her care for Rue, Katniss creates new connection between districts. It continues to help her when the other competitor from District 11, Thresh, spares her life. When she realizes he is not going to kill her, Katniss knows, "he is breaking the rules to thank me" (Collins, 288). Her alliance with Rue not only helps her to survive, it inspires brave new connections between districts that continue to empower her. The government of Panem thrives only when the districts and their tributes are in conflict; Katniss is revolutionary because she creates community between them. She is most often motivated by her care for others, and as a result, she is empowered to change her entire society.

Tris is also strongest when she is caring for others. During training, she volunteers to take the place of another initiate, Al, during his punishment. She stands in front of a target while knives are thrown at her so that he does not have to. When one of the leaders offers to let her switch back with Al, she thinks, "I remember Al's wide eyes and his quiet sobs at night and shake my head" (Roth, 162). Because she cares for her friend, she stands bravely through the punishment, and in Dauntless, such an intense show of bravery is significant. Later, when another initiate, Edward, is stabbed in the eye by his competitors, Tris is the only one who steps up to help. While everyone else panics, Tris finds a way to help, knowing, "I have to suppress hysteria if I'm going to help him. I have to forget myself" (Roth, 202). In both instances, Tris is empowered to do good because she cares about someone in trouble. Her care has a ripple effect and later, after she is attacked, her friends reciprocate, protecting her when she is weak (Roth, 291). Throughout the novel, Tris develops interdependence between initiates and between factions. In contrast with society's conformist idea of community, she redefines community to mean interdependence, helping one another. Like the women lauded by Gilligan who can operate at level three or benefit from both traditional and feminist ethics, Tris combines the ideologies of the Abnegation and Dauntless factions to create a new form of caring. When her father asks her whether she is selfless, which Abnegation values, or brave, which Dauntless values, she replies, "often, they're the same thing" (Roth, 457). Furthermore, it is only when she unites members of Abnegation (her family) and Dauntless (herself and her friend Four) that she is able

to stop a war between the factions. Like Katniss, Tris is a force of interdependence, care, and unification.

Lauren, too, is an excellent example of a character who benefits from the values of feminist ethics of caring. Throughout the novel, she has one goal: to establish a new community with her Earthseed ideology. In order to do so, however, she must survive and construct a community of interdependent people who are willing to listen to her. This challenge, of course, is exacerbated by the horrific conditions within her dystopia. However, because she refuses to participate in the (literally) cutthroat, zero-sum mindset that nearly everyone around her has adopted, she is able to achieve her goal. Lauren gains all of her followers and supporters because she first cares and helps them. After their community is looted, Lauren and two other survivors take to the road to find new sanctuary. It is not long before Lauren saves a young family from violent thieves. She admits to her fellow travelers that she wants the family to join them because “they need us more than we need them” (Butler, 184). Lauren operates at Gilligan’s level three, looking out for others’ interests by saving them and feeding them, while also moving toward her own goal of creating an intentional, interdependent community. This trend continues throughout the narrative; she gains followers each time she cares for others until she has a group large enough to call a community. Another element of feminist ethics becomes crucial for her, and that is partiality. Because they live in such a desperate world, universal principles that align with traditional ethics, such as “aid the needy,” would be crippling for her. It would be impossible for her to help everyone in need. Instead, she is more powerful because she is dedicated to helping

those she cares for. Because of her partiality, she is able to successfully protect her community. Lauren is motivated by her desire for an interdependent community, and is empowered when she practices feminist ethics in its construction.

So what, exactly, makes a Katniss, Tris, or Lauren? The attributes that are at the core of these women are exactly what make them so powerful. All three are perfectly situated to launch; they are on the cusp of adulthood with meager parental influences as they determine their roles in the world. They are societal outsiders, rejecting the norms of failing dystopias and, instead, embracing ideologies that benefit their communities. Perhaps unwittingly, they are excellent practitioners of feminist ethics of care. Their greatest motivation and power comes from their care for others, and they are able to blend their own needs with others', crafting mutually beneficial solutions and gliding into Gilligan's level three of morality. Katniss, Tris, and Lauren are important because they are this generation's role models. These women are powerful not because they climb society's ladder, but because they invent a whole new path, bringing others with them as they rise. This is the recipe for the newly powerful female dystopian protagonist, and she is revolutionary.