

Article

Ambiguity, Ambivalence and Extravagance in *The Hunger Games*

Kelly Oliver

Department of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235, USA;

E-Mail: kelly.oliver@vanderbilt.edu

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Abstract: I argue that Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* is an emblem of what Julia Kristeva calls the “extravagant girl” who wants to have it all and to be the best at everything. Katniss has an ambiguous gender identity, both masculine and feminine, paternal and maternal. And she has ambivalent desires. I conclude that this ambiguity and ambivalence open up new possibilities for girls and initiate an aesthetics of ambiguity.

Keywords: popular culture; film; feminism; Psychoanalysis; aesthetics

1. Introduction

Strong girl protagonists are becoming popular in Young Adult Fiction and Blockbuster Hollywood films such as *Twilight*, *Hannah*, *Kick Ass*, *Brave*, *Frozen*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, among others. Elsewhere, I have analyzed these tough girls in relationship to traditional representations of girls as princesses in Disney fairytales; and I have argued that these young heroines both conform to traditional stereotypes and simultaneously resist them.¹ Whereas in most of these narratives the

¹ See [1]. See also [2] where I argue that adolescent virgin girls who are at home in the forest hunting with bows and arrows have become new cultural icons for young girls, with strong girl characters wielding bows and arrows such as Hanna (Soarise Ronan) in *Hanna*, Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) in *The Hunger Games*, Merida (voiced by Kelly Macdonald) in *Brave*, and Tauriel (Evageline Lilly) in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013). Like the Greek goddess Artemis, these girls are forest dwellers who are not afraid to kill, especially to protect their virginity. These figures present pubescent girlhood as an attractive combination of danger and innocence, strength and beauty. I focus on the ways in which these films allow for feminist resistance to the traditional roles assigned to girls—namely care-giver,

teenage protagonists have strong desires that drive their actions, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) has decidedly ambivalent desires even as she fights the good fight like her Hollywood sisters.

In this essay, I argue that Katniss's ambivalent desires and ambiguous gender identity open up possibilities for girls beyond the traditional patriarchal constraints of wife and mother. Furthermore, I suggest that psychoanalytic theory is helpful in analyzing this ambivalence and ambiguity precisely because Freud and his followers insist that desire and identity are always filled with ambivalence and ambiguity. Psychoanalysis is useful because rather than conceive of identity and desire as either/or binaries (masculine/feminine, male/female, paternal/maternal, heterosexual/homosexual), it insists on the inherent ambiguity and ambivalence in both identity and desire.

In addition, I argue that in *The Hunger Games* and other recent filmic representations of girls, we see repeated images of suffering fathers and catatonic mothers. Employing a very loose psychoanalytic framework, I analyze the ways in which these weak parental figures give rise to the strong girl figure. Katniss in particular navigates between memories of her suffering, now dead, father, and her emotionally unavailable mother. Here, I take up what it means for conceptualizing girlhood and the identity of girls that our young heroine is positioned between these parental figures of suffering and loss. The psychoanalytic framework helps to diagnose this suffering and loss in terms of how they give birth to our strong female protagonist. I explore the ways in which these girls draw their strength not only in counterbalance to parental figures of suffering and loss, but also from loving bonds with sibling figures. In the case of Katniss, these figures include Prim, Rue, Gale and Peeta. These sibling bonds appear in excess of patriarchal roles traditionally open to girls and women as wives and mothers.

Very generally speaking, in roughly half of these narratives of tough girls—*Hannah*, *Brave*, and *Kick Ass*—the girl protagonist fights for her independence from men and boys; and in the other half—*Twilight*, *Frozen* and *Divergent*—to varying degrees, the girls are reinscribed in traditional heterosexual romance.² While in Suzanne Collins's trilogy, the final epilogue puts Katniss squarely into a domestic scene as wife and mother, throughout *The Hunger Games*, her relationship to these traditional roles is ambiguous [11–13].³ Perhaps, we can imagine that even as wife and mother, Katniss

sister, lover, and eventually wife—even as they also reinscribe these roles within the new image of hunting girls. I conclude that the ambiguity of these characters in relation to traditional gender roles unlocks the possibility of an alternative feminist aesthetic that opens up, rather than closes down, various options for girls and women.

² There has been important feminist work on images of violent women in popular culture. Notably, Jeffrey Brown discusses the excessive sexualization of action heroines in popular culture [3]. Hilary Neroni discusses our fascination with violent women and argues that these figures disrupt traditional stereotypes [4]. These books are more concerned with women than girls. The same is true of the groundbreaking work by Sherrie Inness [5,6]. Ilana Nash discusses how coming of age stories for girls alternate between innocence and sexualization [7]. And Georganne Scheiner analyzes traditional images of women and girls in early Hollywood film [8]. For another helpful analysis of coming of age in film, see [9]. And Jennifer Stuller argues that women and girls have finally broken into the boys' club of super heroes [10]. Rather than take sides on whether or not these films are feminist or progressive, as the reader will see, I am more sympathetic with the conclusions of Sherrie Inness, who maintains that these images simultaneously reinforce and break through gender stereotypes.

³ It remains to be seen how the movies decide Katniss's fate. Unfortunately, the books resolve much of her ambiguity and ambivalence in an epilogue, set years later that has Katniss and Peeta, the baker's son, married with two children playing in the yard. Although theirs is not exactly a fairytale love-story in that they are bound by shared trauma rather

occupies a space in between maternal and paternal or feminine and masculine, an ambiguous space of new possibilities. Unlike the heroines in other narratives, Katniss is fighting neither for independence from men nor for (or from) the love of one of them. Obviously, this description is painted in the broadest of strokes and is meant merely to set the stage for a more in depth analysis of the figure of Katniss in *The Hunger Games* books and films. Insofar as *The Hunger Games* promotes open-ended ambiguity rather than traditional or fixed gender roles or ideals, it can be seen as part of a new aesthetics of ambiguity.

What makes Katniss Everdeen so captivating is that she does not know her own heart. She is not a believer fighting for a cause. Rather, she is a survivor fighting to live. She is ambivalent about both boys, Gale and Peeta, who are smitten with her. Indeed, she prefers chasing animals to chasing boys. Unlike other love triangles wherein the girl simply cannot decide between the two boys because she has strong feelings for both, although she cares about them, Katniss doesn't seem to have strong romantic feelings of attraction for either. So too, she is ambivalent about the war between the Capital and the Districts, resisting signing onto the rebellion even though it is clear that the President, representing the Capital, means her harm. This is more obvious in the books than in the films where the leaders of the rebellion turn out to be just as corrupt as the leaders of the government. Ambivalence runs deep with Katniss, at least until her instincts kick-in and she acts without thinking. All of her personal relationships are filled with ambivalence, except perhaps her relationship with her little sister, Prim, whom she cares for as a surrogate mother when their own mother is rendered ineffective by grief over their father's death. Prim, however, like the ideal father, dies, as if to reinforce the notion that everything purely good or unambiguous must die to maintain its fantastic status as innocent victim.

In addition, Katniss herself is a symbol of ambiguity. Specifically, she embodies gender ambiguity, as she is shown fresh-faced, wearing hunting garb that could just as well have hung in her hunting pal Gale's closet, alternating with princess gowns and full make-up for the pageants and televised interviews. While it is clear that Katniss prefers her Tomboy look and practical hunting clothes, the movies (more so than the books) show her in extravagant dresses looking radiant. The "girl on fire" is hot. The films alternate between showing us Katniss as Tomboy and Katniss as beauty queen, but they do not show us Katniss as sex symbol. (One movie poster for the second film shows Katniss as half princess and half hunter, her face split in half). Indeed Katniss's sexuality is a mystery, even to herself. And it is her gender ambiguity and her ambivalent sexuality that make her attractive. The fact that she is not a true believer, that she embodies ambiguity, seemingly opens up new possibilities for her future trajectory into womanhood.

Unlike Hannah, who is fighting to avenge her mother, or *Twilight's* Bella who fights to save her beloved Edward, or *Kick Ass's* Hit Girl who fights for vigilante justice, or *Divergent's* Tris fights for freedom along side her love Four, Katniss is never sure what exactly she is fighting for. She finds herself in combat more than puts herself there. And yet, it is her noncommittal attitude that makes her

than romance, in the end, Katniss is reinscribed into a familiar domestic scene, even if she is hunting while Peeta gardens and bakes bread at home. This epilogue feels out of place after hundreds of pages of Katniss on the fence about love and war. The fluidity that is Katniss becomes fixed into the traditional roles of wife and mother, even if they could be reimagined differently. And perhaps her history requires that we imagine those traditional roles differently, that we imagine Katniss could not take up those roles in any straightforward way.

sympathetic in a world where commitments lead to fundamentalism on both sides of war. Whereas her Hollywood sisters take sides, Katniss remains detached from any cause, perhaps aside from protecting her sister Prim. And yet, as we will see, this sisterly love resists becoming fundamentalism, even if it is used to spark the fire of resistance to The Capital.⁴

In addition to her ambivalent desires and ambiguous gender identity, Katniss also takes up both maternal and paternal roles in relationship to her family and loved ones. She protects her mother, sister, and her friend and fellow games contestant, Peeta, along with young Rue and other games participants. Her relationship with Rue, a surrogate sister, is especially sweet as she bonds with her in the midst of the games with violence all around them. She hunts to feed Rue and tried to protect her from the vicious “career” tributes. In the end, she fails and Rue, another idealized innocent, dies. But it is the tender moment when she risks her own life during the games to take the time to make a flower shrine for Rue and salute her life and death that moves people’s hearts. This loving and defiant gesture becomes the ignition switch for the revolution to come. Katniss’s sisterly love has unwittingly sparked the war against The Capital.

Katniss herself is a combination of love and defiance. Indeed, it is usually her heart that leads her to defiance, rather than some deep-seated belief in a cause or in rebellion for its own sake. She is an underdog who unwittingly can’t stop herself from continually standing up for the underdog in a harsh world. Her loving care, which we see her bestow on Rue and Peeta during the games, and on her little sister Prim outside of the games, displays her maternal side. But, her hunting prowess and ability to survive in the forest and therefore in the games displays her paternal side. With her father dead and her mother emotionally unavailable, Katniss must take up both roles and mother and father herself and those around her.

Katniss takes up both the masculine and feminine as well as the paternal and maternal roles. Katniss is a revolutionary, a hunter, and a soldier. And yet she is a princess deciding between the handsome sensitive baker’s son who has been pining for her since childhood or the dashing adventurer with whom she shares her passion for the forest. Does she love the more paternal hunter adventurer or the more maternal sensitive baker? Or, does she love her sister more than either of these boys? Given her committed relationships to Prim and to Rue, along side her conflicted and less than amorous relationships to Gale and Peeta, an argument could be made for Katniss as a latent example of Freud’s bisexuality thesis.

⁴ According to psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, adolescence is typically a time of fundamentalism [14]. Beyond the childish wonder at the world with its continual questioning “why”, the adolescent looks for something to believe in. The adolescent wants to believe in an absolute truth or eternal love, a soul mate, something to replace its parents, who have proved a disappointment. The adolescent is a true believer, who either embraces an absolute ideal or gives up all ideals and embraces the death drive. Both extremes can amount to the same thing if the adolescent turns to violence in the name of one extreme or the other. The adolescent cannot move beyond the need to believe and is doggedly fixed there rather than risk questioning and uncertainty. In this regard, Katniss is unique. Neither nihilist and nor true believer, she walks a line that leaves open new possibilities, beyond either the self-destruction that can result from nihilism or the destruction of others that can result from fundamentalism. Kristeva describes “the malady of ideality” as either of these—the nihilist who believes in nothing or the suicide bomber who kills others and himself in the name of an absolute ideal [14].

And yet, this argument does not feel compelling precisely because of Katniss's ambivalent desires. This is to say, it is not just that Katniss cannot decide between Gale or Peeta, or between boys or girls, but rather that her desires go beyond sexual attractions and towards love, even innocence, which is associated with her relationship to the forest and nature.⁵ Indeed, Katniss's relationship to both Gale and Peeta is more like a relationship to brothers than lovers. Given the asexual nature of Katniss's relationship to her "sisters", Prim and Rue, and to her "brothers", Gale and Peeta, the psychoanalytic bisexuality thesis, while instructive, falls short of describing the love of siblings that sustains Katniss through her various struggles. A comparison to the animated hit film *Frozen* shows the rise of sisterly love as an alternative to romantic heterosexual love. In *Frozen*, it is sisters Elsa and Anna's love for each other that saves them and their frozen kingdom. Like *The Hunger Games*, however, *Frozen* ends with a traditional romance between Anna and Kristoff forged Hollywood style through their conflicts along their journey to find Elsa. As if young audiences (or perhaps adults) are not ready for the power of sisterly love to resist patriarchy, *The Hunger Games* novels (it remains to be seen how the films end) and *Frozen* end with a more or less traditional heterosexual romance.

It is noteworthy that actress Jennifer Lawrence describes her experiences on the set of *The Hunger Games* films in terms of fraternal camaraderie with her fellow actors. Lawrence's comment suggests that growing up with brothers prepared her for spending time with males in nonsexual relationships. And this is also part of Lawrence's appeal as an actress and celebrity. Katniss is driven by sibling love that is at the core of her most decisive actions. In this regard, the camaraderie of siblings, all in the same powerless boat when it comes to relations with adults and parental figures, nourishes the adolescent figures as they make their way into adulthood in a hostile world.

It is not Katniss or her "siblings", but the rebellion, and in turn The Capital, that turn sibling love into fundamentalism that leads to war. The emotional force of Katniss's dedication to Rue even in the context of *The Hunger Games* is the catalyst for the rebellion. And the Mockingjay pin that she wears in the games, which was given to her by a friend in the book and by her sister in the film, that for Katniss is a symbol of sisterly love becomes the symbol for resistance.⁶ And The Capital uses Katniss's fraternal love for Peeta to undermine the rebellion. In addition, the romance between Katniss and Peeta is staged to please the audience and help them survive the games. In other words, even their romance, at least initially, is a strategy used by the adults to manipulate emotions. What starts out as the bond of sibling love is perverted by the adult world and turned into sex, violence, and politics. In Collins's trilogy, it is unclear whether or not sibling love can withstand corruption by the adult world. For example, Gale becomes a zealot for the resistance and eventually that turns Katniss away from him. Both Rue and Prim die, leaving Katniss without sisterly solidarity. And in the end, her relationship with Peeta becomes a sexual relation, circumscribed by traditional roles of wife and mother. Indeed, by the end of the trilogy, none of the strong sibling love bonds survive as such. Although it is perhaps telling that the last image of the books is of siblings, the son and daughter of Katniss and Peeta, playing together in the yard.

⁵ For a discussion of Katniss's relationship to nature as a symbol of innocence, see [1]. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to go beyond the bisexuality thesis.

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the connection between the pin and sisterhood.

In the end (of the book trilogy), Katniss chooses Peeta, the baker boy over Gale, the hunter, because, as she says, “what I need to survive is not Gale’s fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That is can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that.” ([13], p. 388). What drives Katniss to Peeta is the same thing that drives her to the forest and to hunt: survival. She needs his hope and optimism to go on.

In her relationship with Peeta, she is more adept at survival and at being brutal when the situation seems to require it. She is constantly rescuing Peeta. And in some ways, gender roles are reversed in that she is a hunter and he is a baker. Certainly, Peeta is the softer and more loving of the two.⁷ And yet, it is the combination of masculinity and femininity in each character that makes them such good compliments. Although fans disagree, with some on “team” Peeta and some on “team” Gale, Peeta’s vulnerability is what attracts Katniss to him. And the gender ambiguity of both characters is what makes them appealing.

2. Between Maternal and Paternal

Another dimension of Katniss’s sibling relationships to Rue, Prim, Gale and Peeta is the maternal and paternal roles she takes on to protect them. It is noteworthy that in her breakout role, *The Hunger Game*’s Jennifer Lawrence also plays a teenager, Ree Dolly, taking care of her family in the Ozark Mountains in *Winter’s Bone* (2010). In that film, she hunts, kills, and skins squirrels to feed herself and her younger siblings. Ree is also hunted down and badly beaten by criminal elements involved with her drug-dealer father. Like Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Ree in *Winter’s Bone* has to look after her siblings because her mother is mentally and emotionally unavailable and her father is missing and then dead. The beating scene in *Winter’s Bone* is extremely violent and young Ree is badly injured. Yet, both Katniss and Ree are particularly well served by their hunting skills, taught to them by their fathers.

With their mothers emotionally absent, these girls step in to fend for their families. They take up the maternal role in relation to their own mothers and their siblings. For example, Katniss takes care of her younger sister Pris, and volunteers to compete in the Hunger Games in her stead, while her emotionally fragile mother cannot come to terms with her fate. Ree Dolly teaches her younger siblings to hunt squirrels and takes care of them while her catatonic mother sits glassy eyed in her rocking chair. Katniss is hunting to feed her family after her father’s death, which left her mother mourning and unable to function. Ree Dolly in *Winter’s Bone* (2010) hunts to feed her sibling after her father’s disappearance and death and her mother’s emotional and mental breakdown.

With their mothers absent emotionally and mentally, these girls take responsibility well beyond their years. It is not just the maternal figures that are missing in action or rendered catatonic. In these films, the paternal figures are also missing or dead. And the girls must fill their shoes, too. As I mentioned, Katniss and Ree Dolly’s fathers are dead. These hunting girls take over the paternal responsibility of providing for, and protecting, the family, along with the maternal responsibility of

⁷ For an interesting analysis of reactions to the gender identities of Katniss and Peeta, see [15].

caring for it. It is noteworthy that Katniss learns her hunting skills from her father, who gave her a bow and arrow and taught her how to shoot. Rather than take up the typical feminine and maternal role, and thereby following in the footsteps of their mothers, Katniss is her father's daughter. Her toughness is the result of identification with her missing fathers, combined with a certain compensation for her missing mothers. Katniss repeatedly sings her father's praises, more so in the books than in the films. Katniss learns her survival skills from her father, even as she also takes up a more maternal role of caring for her mother and sister.

Significantly, it is not just any father with whom Katniss identifies, but an oppressed father. Katniss's father is an oppressed mine worker who dies in the mines in district 12 where there is never enough to eat. Hers is not a father whose authority goes unchallenged. He is not even the typical paternal authority of patriarchy that rules his own family.⁸ Rather, her father, like Ree Dolly's, is wounded, battered, and eventually killed. They are fathers beaten to death by a system that no longer recognizes their authority. It is telling that in *The Hunger Games*, the paternal authority turns out to be the evil and corrupt President Snow whose central mission is to keep the districts oppressed and hungry. The sympathetic father is the beaten father and not the corrupt father of the law (embodied by President Snow). It is also noteworthy that there are alternative maternal figures too. For example, Effie Trinket, Katniss's handler of sorts, takes on a maternal role both when she scolds Katniss and instructs her on how to behave and later when she is sympathetic to Katniss's sufferings. Like Katniss's real mother, however, Effie is ineffectual; and in the end, Katniss must console and mother her. By the end of the trilogy, however, Katniss's mother emerges from her catatonia—thanks in large part to Katniss mothering her own mother—and becomes a healer. Katniss's own mother, then, represents multiple maternal figures.

The multiplication of paternal and maternal figures *The Hunger Games*, and the ambiguous relationship of Katniss to them, opens up new possibilities for our young protagonist. Arguably, the damaged maternal and paternal figures are necessary for Katniss's flourishing. The mute and emotionally unavailable mother (Ree Dolly's mother in *Winter's Bone* and Katniss's mother in *The Hunger Games*), verging on catatonia, is importantly different from the absent mother. Whereas the absent mother requires that the girls step in and fill her vacancy, the catatonic mother is still there, in need of mothering herself, but fulfilling a different aspect of the maternal function crucial to opening up an ambiguous space beyond the reproductive future assigned to girls and women within patriarchy. Both the absent mother and the dysfunctional mother enable the girl to identify with the father insofar as the maternal law, along with the maternal policing of the paternal law, has been relaxed.

In some cases, however, the absent mother, like the absent father in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, can become more powerful dead than alive in terms of reinforcing the law. For example, in traditional fairytales, such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, or *Sleeping Beauty*, and even *Frozen*, missing mothers and their evil maternal replacements, function to make the girls more beautiful, chaste and maternal; that is to say, they are caring, loving, sensitive girls, who identify with the poor victimized dead mother while suffering at the hands of the evil step mother. The ideal of maternal and feminine purity and beauty associated with the missing mother is embodied by the girl, who eventually takes her mother's place,

⁸ The weak or missing father is a departure from earlier narratives that pit rebellious daughters against domineering fathers. For an analysis of this tension, see [7].

which is to say her rightful place, as princess or queen. Since she is an ideal and therefore unattainable fantasy, she cannot exist and therefore her power comes from her absence. She is more powerful dead than alive because if alive her imperfections would be obvious; she would be a mere woman rather than the ideal mother.

In addition, the oppressive situations of these would-be princesses is what makes them humble and lovable, whereas their powerful evil step-mothers and step-sisters are beastly, seemingly, at least in part, because of their power. These girls are the underdogs and we root for them. There is a clear separation between good and evil such that the oppressed princesses ascend to the throne not only because of their birthright as inherited from their idealized parents, especially the dead mothers, but also because of their purity and goodness. In the end, in these classic fairytales, good triumphs over evil. More recent twists on these fairytales are more ambiguous in terms of the separation between good and evil; *Maleficent* (2014) is a prime example of the ambiguity of the maternal protagonist (played by Angelina Jolie). Here again is a tale that promises relationships between women and girls outside the patriarchal confines of motherhood or wife with the mother-daughter duo of Maleficent and Aurora, and yet ends by awkwardly inserting a prince charming into the scene, as if the love between girls or women is what is truly extravagant within the patriarchal imaginary.

3. The Catatonic Mother

Unlike classic fairytales, with dead mothers, however, in contemporary dystopian fantasies like *The Hunger Games*, the mother may be emotionally absent but she is still physically present. And her presence serves to demystify the maternal function by showing it as dysfunctional, even detrimental to these bruised and battered women suffering from depression as a result of the limited reproductive role assigned to them as wife and mother. Their husbands are dead and gone and they are left alone without the resources to raise their children. These single mothers are not the ideal beauties of maternal femininity displayed in earlier fairytales, but rather flesh and blood women whose lives have been shattered. If the ideal mother is the absent mother, then the blank stares and catatonic bodies of contemporary emotionally damaged mothers make present this fantasy of the good or ideal mother as fantasy. In other words, these dysfunctional mothers show us that the ideal is necessarily absent because it never was present. It was just a fairytale. Instead, we have broken women trying, and failing, to cope with desperate situations.

And yet, it is the mothers' inability that somehow feeds their daughters' abilities. They are not dead, which means both that their daughters do not have to take their place entirely and that they cannot be idealized. The absence of a maternal-feminine ideal frees the girl to explore alternative expressions of femininity, girlhood, and perhaps eventually womanhood. And in terms of Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, the absence of paternal authority figures puts her in a relationship of authority with her siblings and sibling surrogates. In these filmic representations of maternal catatonia, the emotionally unavailable mother makes possible the girl's strength and flourishing by allowing identification with the necessarily absent and therefore ideal father.

In *Winter's Bone*, this ideal is shattered when Ree Dolly learns that her father is a criminal and murdered for not paying criminal debts. In the Young Adult fantasy world of mainstream blockbuster *The Hunger Games*, however, the dead father remains the ideal father throughout, evidenced by

Katniss's reminiscences about him at crucial moments in the books even more so than the movies. More than once, memories of his voice singing to her, or explaining the secrets of the woods to her, save her life. Moreover, it is as if taking up the paternal role, especially in relation to their siblings, these girls also save their mothers. It is important to note that by the end of the films, these mothers are returning from their catatonia thanks to the active role played by their daughters.

4. The Suffering Father Beaten to Death

With no older brothers and dead fathers, these girls step up to fill the paternal role as protectors of the family. Taking up the paternal role in relation to their mothers and her children, they give their mothers something to believe in, again. Facing death and beating the odds, they bring their mothers back from the edge of death and give them something to live for. These plucky girls, the oldest daughters, take over for their fathers and thereby help to reconnect their mothers to the family. But, as we have seen, it is not the father of the law or the authoritarian father with whom they identify. Nor, is it the loving father. Rather, it is the beaten father and their father's suffering with which they identify. Both Ree Dolly (from *Winter's Bone*) and Katniss from (*The Hunger Games*) are victims of beatings themselves. They are both victims and providers, beaten and fighting back. Trained by her father, Katniss is a capable killer of both animals and people. By killing animals for food, she proves that she can provide. By killing people, she proves that she can outlive their enemies. Through both hunting and defending her life against their attackers, she proves that she is a survivor, in the double sense of surviving abuse and being tough. But, her survival comes with and against her identification with the beaten and suffering father.

In these filmic fantasies the sadomasochistic identification with the beaten father is a defense against the father of the law and his punishment. The suffering father's victimization allows the girl to bond with a paternal most like herself; that is to say, the girl as victim of the authoritarian and threatening paternal law can find an alternate ideal in the father as victim. This identification supports the revolt against the paternal authority. And this revolt against the authoritarian father, in a paradoxical move, authorizes the girl's agency. An identification with the beaten father transforms the passive victim of parental love and punishment into an active agent, while also turning the threatening parents into passive victims. In psychoanalytic terms, we could say that the punishing father becomes the beaten father and the castrating mother becomes the catatonic mother. The perpetrator becomes the victim—but one with whom we identify; and, with these sadomasochistic fantasies we find both revenge and reunion through imaginary and symbolic satisfactions. In this way, we not only separate from our parents to become individuals, but also we cope with the pain of that separation, the separation that prefigures all others.

In terms of Ree Dolly or Katniss Everdeen, their positions as sixteen year old girls is not usually seen as a powerful one but rather one of suffering the various blows of adolescence, particularly insofar as teenage girls are too often the victims of sexual abuse and incest, among other forms of sexism. Coming to terms with the gender roles available to them within patriarchal culture can be difficult. During puberty, girls can feel especially vulnerable as their hormones make them more emotional and they learn to cope with their menstrual cycles. These factors may make the experience of pubescent girlhood a type of suffering, at least insofar as things are happening to the girl that are

out of her control—she suffers various bodily and psychic changes. Thus, while she may prefer to identify with a strong ideal father, even the father of the law, rather than a catatonic and ineffectual mother, the suffering father provides her with a figure closer to her own experience. The beaten father fantasy combines the experience of passive suffering with active paternal prowess and authority. And yet, importantly, this suffering ideal father is not the punishing authoritarian father of the law. In addition, identification with the suffering father fuels the solidarity of siblings in the bonds between brothers and sisters in these films. These siblings bond in their struggles against the punishing father of the law, sometimes through an identification with a suffering father. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, the rebellion is fueled by sibling bonds in the fight against the punishing father of the Capital.

Katniss Everdeen's identification with the beaten father both makes her victimized and gives her power. In the words of one critic *The Hunger Games* offers "a hyper-charged version of high school, an everyday place with incessant anxieties: constant judgment by adults, hazing, bullying, and cliques...the books could be seen as a menacing fable of capitalism, in which an ethos of competition increasingly yields winner-take-all victors...But maybe the reason for its success is simple: it makes teens feel both victimized and important" [16]. Katniss's father was an exploited coal miner who died at the hands of the authoritarian government, embodied by the punishing father of the law, President Snow. Katniss identifies with the suffering ideal, and therefore absent, father, which allows her to revolt against the stern father of the law. Like Katniss herself, the suffering father with whom she identifies was beaten by the punishing father of the law, namely, the authoritarian government headed by President Snow. Unlike Katniss, however, he succumbed to this stronger and evil father who figuratively beat him to death. His death allows Katniss not only to idealize him and his suffering, but also to take his place. In deed, she takes the beating fantasy to a more literal level insofar as the film shows her beaten and bruised, even abused and victimized, over and over again. She survives the beatings and through her suffering eventually triumphs over the authoritarian father.

It is her suffering, and the identification with her suffering, in the abusive games that leads to the rebellion in Panem. Katniss becomes the unwilling symbol of the revolt through both her tenacity and her suffering. Her good heart and her innocence win over the people of Panem and their sympathies help her win the games. But, without her prowess with a bow and arrow and forest survival skills learned from her father, she would not have survived long enough to capture their hearts. Interestingly, it is Katniss's ambivalence about becoming a symbol for anything, especially for the rebellion, that secures her role as the Mockingjay, which becomes the symbol for the uprising against the oppressive government. She wears a Mockingjay pin for luck in the games and to remind her of her sister(s), but that symbol becomes associated with both her strength and vulnerability in the games, which sparks the uprising of the districts against the Capital. The Mockingjay is a bird that repeats back what it hears in the very voice of those who said it, thereby creating an uncanny and haunting echo. Like the Mockingjay, Katniss echoes the government and President Snow, repeating their commands but now made uncanny by the twists and turns of her own voice and her own heart.

5. Conclusions

Even as she is not sure of her own heart, she follows it. She is true to herself in the midst of contradictory and ambivalent desires. Insofar as *The Hunger Games* figures Katniss as an in-between

character—between masculine and feminine, maternal and paternal—it undermines binary oppositions that force girls onto one side or the other, and thereby promotes a feminist aesthetics of ambiguity as an imaginary space where alternative identities are possible. A feminist aesthetics of ambiguity presents and represents multivalent meanings for femininity, girlhood, and womanhood that allow girls to imagine futures for themselves beyond those traditionally circumscribed by the roles of lover, wife and mother within patriarchal culture.

The Hunger Games undermines traditional ideals of femininity and romance even as it idealizes its teenage heroine. Katniss discovers that both the Capital and the rebels are corrupt and power hungry. She settles for Peeta because she needs his calming presence. Unlike her idealistic princess predecessors, Katniss is a realist. She doesn't believe in the rhetoric coming from either side of the war. And she doesn't pine for a prince. Rather, in the end of the book trilogy, playing a game they developed to get through the traumas of the war, when Peeta asks Katniss, "you love me, real or not real", she replies "real". These are two traumatized bruised souls confessing their love for each other, which is not the traditional flower pedals and wedding dress type of romance of classic fairytales.

Although in various ways *The Hunger Games* perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes (especially the princess trope), at the same time, it leaves open the possibility that Katniss's future is not necessarily the reproductive and yet emotionally barren life of her mother. And while the extremes of idealized princess or abuse victim close down options for girls, the ambiguity of Katniss's identity and the ambivalence of her desires open up possibilities traditionally unavailable. Insofar Katniss is allowed to take-up masculine and feminine, paternal and maternal roles, the books and films open up possibilities beyond traditional gender stereotypes. Insofar as they offer a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" approach to gender roles, they allow us to imagine an in-between space of ambiguity. The ambiguity of Katniss's identity and the ambivalence of her desire mark her extravagance within traditional popular culture narratives. With this extravagant girl, the possibility of a new aesthetics of ambiguity and ambivalence opens up the horizon for a future that is not entirely like the past. Perhaps the true extravagance that Hollywood brushes up against, but cannot entirely embrace, is extravagance of sisterly love as an alternative to romantic love.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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