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Gender Performativity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract

Gender and sexuality performance is a central element in both Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. The larger focus will be on individual freedom through gender performance through the references to the romance plot, thus emphasizing gender as a social construct. In relation to this I will explore how the gender performance we see in both works emphasizes an exaggerated female gendered persona, but in completely opposite ways. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a story where women's rights have been revoked, and thus women are back in gender roles taken to the extreme, with no rights, no opinions, and no cosmetics or beauty products of any kind. A once independent woman is turned into an object, a 'vessel' whose sole purpose is to bear children to save the population. Meanwhile, *The Hunger Games* exaggerate today's Hollywood-glam oriented society, and thus the female role that the narrator has to perform is a traditional girly, made up, and lovestruck teenager, where the focus is on her looks to distract from her personality. I will use existing criticism to see whether or not Katniss is a hero or a 'shero', whether her supposed 'male characteristics' makes her a 'shero' or just a "man with breasts". We will see how performing traditional forms of gender, including going into romantic and/or sexual relationships, is a means of survival for both narrators.

Judith Butler's theories about performativity and the mimicry and imitation of 'the original' lay the theoretical groundwork for this research. The constant repetition of romantic ideals taken from fairytales and harlequin romances in *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the imitative structure of both gender and sexuality. The same can be said about *The Hunger Games*, where the imagine of 'the original' female appears after the protagonist's make-over and she is made to put on a feminine role to

succeed in her goals in a way that brings to mind Butler's idea of drag performance as a parody of 'the original'.

In addition to gender, this thesis explores sexuality and heteronormativity within both dystopian works. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, female sexual agency is heavily looked down on, and the protagonist, Offred, rebels by engaging in sexual acts with the Commander and Nick. These acts, however, are performative in the same way the gender expression is, as it largely consists of purposeful acting and pretending, as well as conscious imitation of romantic scenes in movies. The love plot in *The Handmaid's Tale* has thus been criticized as being dangerous to women as it depicts negative expectations when it comes to these imitations of pre-existing 'molds' such as the 'knight in shining armor' and the rescue fantasy. In *The Hunger Games*, the romantic relationship between Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark is a fabricated romance created to help them both survive in the Hunger Games. The heterosexuality that Katniss performs reveals the ways in which Katniss does *not* conform to heteronormative expectations despite what it appears on the outside, as the performance is strategic to her, as opposed to Peeta, who feels genuinely. There are several ways in which Collins's love triangle challenges the common tropes in young adult fiction, including the overturned gender dichotomies and the fact that the object of desire, Katniss, does not seem to return her suitors' romantic feelings, and can thus be read as an aromantic character. Ultimately, the love stories in both texts work as distractions from the horrors of the dystopian worlds they exist in, Gilead and Panem respectively.

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Introduction

Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are both novels of dystopian fiction, set in what used to be North America, that center around a female character in a totalitarian society; a world of oppression and constant surveillance, completely consumed by government control and manipulation. Both of these novels then, explore a reality in which our society has developed in a negative direction, away from the ideal utopia, exploring problems that were relevant at the time they were written. Atwood imagines a dystopia where environmental issues are at the core of the changes in society, as climate change and pollution has rendered a large part of the population infertile. Meanwhile, Collins's "Hunger Games" series, as a contemporary series considered to be aimed at teenagers and young adults, got the idea for *The Hunger Games* while channel surfing between a reality TV program and actual war coverage. In the "Getting to know Suzanne Collins" part of the first "Hunger Games" book, she describes the experience as unsettling in the way the lines began to blur. "On one channel there's a group of young people competing for, I don't know, money maybe? And on the next there's a group of young people fighting an actual war" (Collins 440). This is the dystopia found in the "Hunger Games"; Collins takes out current media- and "Hollywood glam" obsessed society and takes it to the extreme, presenting the reader with a country so desensitized to televised violence that the rich have little to no qualms about watching children slaughter one another on live television. *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a highly feminist vision of dystopia, a society in which women's rights have been completely revoked and women are forced to contribute to their own oppression by conforming to very strict gender roles and restricted, but at the same time enforced, sexuality. Collins's series has also been praised by feminist critics for presenting a strong female character that breaks free from the "damsel in distress" archetype and, most

importantly for this topic, rejects the love plot that seems to have become a necessity in contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults.

This thesis will contain a critical analysis of gender and relationships in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Collins's *The Hunger Games* and will explore the different ways in which the critique of essentialism is present in both novels' treatment of gender. I will focus on the female protagonists' gender and sexuality performativity in both works, often in relation to the love plot and the love triangle (quadrangle, in Atwood's case). Lois Feuer writes in her critique of *The Handmaid's Tale* that reviewers of the novel "invariably hailed it as a "feminist *1984*" and, like many handy tags, this one conceals a partial truth" (Feuer). While both the *Tale* and *1984* depict totalitarian regimes, Feuer points to the fact that Atwood brings something new and different into the dystopian tradition, namely the feminist debate over "essentialism". With this she both "participates in and extends the dystopian genre" (Feuer) and we will see later how this extension still prevails in the new wave of dystopian fiction to which Suzanne Collins belongs. The way essentialism is debated in the novel makes it relevant to use Judith Butler's theories on gender identity, performance and performativity when speaking of the *Tale*. When speaking of performativity, I will make use of Judith Butler's work on gender and sexuality performance, especially her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*.

Judith Butler

Judith Butler's work as a gender theorist has significantly influenced feminist and queer literary theory, and has changed the way we think about sex, sexuality, gender and language (Salih). A large portion of Butler's work questions the formation of identity and subjectivity, "tracing the processes by which we become subjects when we assume the sexed/gendered/'raced' identities which are constructed for us (and to a certain extent by us)

within existing power structures” (2). This part of the introduction will look at Butler’s theories on gender and performativity. Her best known works are *Gender Trouble* (1990) and the “rethinking” *Bodies That Matter* (1993), books largely studied by gender and queer theorists, will both be used in this research. Salih mentions in her book on Butler the difficulty to ‘pin her down’ into one specific field. Because of the importance of French thinkers Michel Foucault (1926-84) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) in her work, some will classify her as a poststructuralist, though she is also equally influenced by psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and Marxist theory (6).

Butler’s theories on sex, race, and gender reject the previously assumed notion that they are biologically determined as essentialists claim. Essentialists believe in the binary opposition of sex, gender and race, that for any specific entity there is a set of attributes and characteristics that are necessary to its identity and function. Instead she, among many other theorists, argues that they are socially constructed and fluid in their interpretation and expression. She proposes a set of “periodic practices based on performative theory of gender acts that disrupts the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame” (*Gender Trouble Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* xxxi). Instead of sex and gender being predetermined, poststructuralists, and Judith Butler, argue instead that identity, be it sexual-, racial-, or gender identity, is something that is performed, something we *become*, not something we inherently *are*. Sex and gender are “the *effects* rather than the cause of institutions, discourses, or practices” (Salih 10). With this theory, Butler extends Simone de Beauvoir’s famous insight from *The Second Sex* that “‘one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one’” (*Gender Trouble Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 12). In other words, there does not have to be a relationship between body and gender, the body can be ‘female’ but it

does not have to display 'feminine' traits the way the man/woman binary pushes. To a certain extent you can *choose* your gender, even if it is just how gender presents itself. Butler's idea on performativity in relation to sex and gender (not so much race in this context) is especially important for this research on women in oppressive dystopias. Reality in dystopias is often exaggerated to make some form of commentary on either society or humanity, and in case of Margaret Atwood we have the exaggeration of these constructed gender roles that put into focus the performance that go into gender. *The Hunger Games* does something similar where Collins places focus on the different beauty and behavior ideals for men and women that we are exposed to in the media by making the female protagonist perform, quite literally in this context, these expectations of femininity and sexuality. Additionally, Collins switches up some of these expectations by giving the female protagonist so-called 'masculine' attributes and the male character 'female' attributes, further emphasizing the constructedness of what is often perceived as the 'correct' way of expressing the genders.

It is important to note that Butler not does mean that gender identity is a performance, but instead she claims **that the performance pre-exists the performer**. There is no actor; the performance creates "the *illusion* of an interior and organizing gender core" (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 173, my emphasis). In *Gender Trouble*, she states the following:

(...) Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (...) There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 33).

When it comes to identity, Butler writes that coherence is both desired and idealized. This desire produces the effect of an internal core or substance, but is produced through words, acts, and gestures on the *surface* of the body. When one's identity is incoherent, it leads to identity issues that can be found in both Atwood and Collins, where the protagonists struggle with knowing who they are under this new performance. Butler draws clear distinction between performativity and theater because there is no actor, yet later in this research we will see the lines between performativity and theater (purposeful acting) blurring. For example, Katniss learns "to parody gender, to borrow Judith Butler's terms, masquerading in ways that destabilize the binary opposition between male and female that patriarchal control is based upon" (Henthorne 45). Katniss's way of parodying gender is similar to what Butler has to say about drag performances, and how drag "effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler 174) and proves how there is no 'original' gender identity, just imitations and parodies of the very *notion* of an original. Additionally, Butler implies there is no inner core that becomes affected by the performativity, we see in both Atwood and Collins there seems to be a core, a subject that, while affected by the performativity, is not completely converted by it. Because of the immense control and authoritative power on both these novels, the enforcing of gender roles becomes especially evident and severe, thus the protagonists are aware of their own performance and actively play with it and manipulate it to varying degrees.

Important to this particular research is what Butler has to say as gender performance as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems. There are, of course, laws and restrictions within a society, culture, or family that may determine how you are allowed to present, or *perform*, your gender. Butler puts emphasis on the fact that in our society we "regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

Subversion of Identity 178). There is a definite stigma attached to falling outside the binary and for some people, depending on where they live and on their support system, it can be dangerous. We see that in these two dystopian novels, this danger is magnified and exaggerated, as any slip-up in their performance could lead to the death of not only the protagonist herself, but also her friends and family. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss has to perform what is essentially a parody of 'the original' female gender to become likeable so she may have a chance to survive the Games. Her gender performance is tightly linked to the romantic relationship she has to pretend to have with Peeta, again to gain sympathy and increase the chance of surviving. She must continue this performance throughout the series to ensure her own safety, as femininity is perceived as unthreatening to the authorities, who fear she will encourage rebellion. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the performance is also tied, literally, with survival, as whoever falls outside of the gender norms or heteronormativity are sent to labor camps or executed. Performing sexuality and romantic relationships in this text is a way of coping with the horrors that are happening, we see for instance how Offred fakes sexual interest in the Commander to help herself to pretend or spare herself the trauma.

Gender

The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is an important novel in the line of dystopian fiction. Unlike many other dystopias that came out before it like *Brave New World*, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, and *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Handmaid's Tale* brings forth feminist themes and issues in what is not only a novel, but a social critique. It is regarded as one of the classics within its genre and was nominated for the Ritz-Paris Hemingway Prize in France and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel won the *Los Angeles Times* Prize, the General's Award in Canada, and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best science-fiction

work published in Britain in 1986 (Ketterer 209). In her article ‘Feminism’s Phantoms’, Barbara Ehrenreich writes that the feminist imagination has been far more productive of utopias rather than dystopias, and she lists Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* as examples of feminist utopias. The lack of dystopias is for good reason, Ehrenreich writes.

Almost every thinkable insult to women has been tested and institutionalized at one time or another: foot-binding, witch-burning, slavery, organized rape, ritual mutilation, enforced childbearing, enforced chastity, and the mere denial of ordinary rights to own property, speak out in public, or walk down the street without fear. For misogynist nastiness, it is hard to improve on history (Ehrenreich 33).

Yet she mentions there has been no shortage of ‘paranoid folklore’ when it comes to what the future holds for women, and this is what we see in *The Handmaid’s Tale*; women driven back to servitude as breeders and maids, their diversity and individuality erased.

Readers of dystopian fiction will recognize many of the themes and features of Atwood’s novel, like war, constant surveillance, oppression and lack of freedom, and underground movements and rebellion, and we will be able to trace a lot of these issues back to real issues in the world. David Ketterer writes that it is usually assumed that writers of dystopias are concerned with describing the horrors of life if present trends continue, and that the author may hope that his or her fiction will ‘serve as a warning’ or call for a rebellion against the current systems. The *Tale* does this by showing “what might happen if certain attitudes are carried to the extremes” (Miner 149). In an interview (in *Vogue*, January 23, 1986) Atwood said “It’s logical (...) there’s not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in con-temporary conditions or historical fact” (Greene 14). Greene rightly states that it is this logic that makes the *Tale* such a chilling story. The text explores the

backlash against women's rights that was gathering force at the time the novel was written; everything the women's rights movement worked for has been revoked in the Republic of Gilead, including but not limited to women's right to own property, to have their own economy, and their right to have an abortion. In this sense, Gilead serves as a typical dystopian setting, yet Ketterer argues that the *Tale* differs from previous dystopias, making it possibly "the first of its kind" (Ketterer 216). The Historical Notes at the end of the novel, taking place in year 2195, sets it apart for the reason that it lets the reader know that the society it portrays is already in the past and the world has moved on. It is not until the end that the reader realizes he or she has been "fictively situated in this post Gilead future, a future perhaps like the present of the 1980s to the extent that from both perspectives Gilead appears to be an almost incredible societal extreme" (212). Because of this unanticipated shift, Atwood's dystopia is shown to be transitory rather than permanent, setting it apart from previous novels with the same dystopian themes.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore Gilead's gender essentialism and how that is tied to gender performance. Gilead preaches both gender and sexuality essentialism by creating various categories for women that all relate to servitude, housework, and/or men (Marthas, Wives, Handmaids), invoking the associations to roles being played, of simply going through the necessary motions. Handmaids are not to write, read, drink alcohol, have friends, ask questions, or be concerned with their appearance at all and thus all cosmetic products and regular clothing are forbidden. In addition they have been reduced to "containers", "two-legged wombs", and "ambulatory chalices", having no importance or relevance apart from their reproductive abilities. The list for the 'correct' way to act is long and archaic, and there is a clear distinction and power imbalance between 'male' and 'female'. This type of gender enforcement forces women to contribute to their own oppression by giving them no choice

but to conform and *perform* society's idea of gender. Gilead's strict gender roles reveal the illogicalness of the gender binary and the idea that gender as biologically determined and as carrying inherent traits.

Butler's critique on essentialism, the idea that that gender is not biologically determined, but instead is a social and cultural construct that is performed as a means of survival, is demonstrated through Offred's performance of Gilead's female gender. Offred takes on a role that is forced upon her, changing from a once independent woman into a meeker version of herself that follow the rules and conventions of Gilead. Everyone that falls outside of Gilead's perception of gender is punished. Any breaches to the new order may result in the person in question to be sent to the Colonies (labor camps) as "Unwomen" to work with toxic waste, and similarly, men who rebel or fall outside of the heteronormative get sent to the Colonies as well or hung for "gender treachery". Her performance is often seen through the way she emphasizes her own acting and scripted speech, especially in relation to the other Handmaids or with the men. Furthermore, the reader sees her doubting the other handmaids around her, wondering if they are "playing" too or if it is just her. They (the handmaids) must look good from a distance, Offred thinks. She calls them "picturesque" and "soothing to (...) the Eyes, for that's who this is a show for" (224). All of this contributes in highlighting the handmaids as performers in a show, made even more evident when Offred finds out about the secret movement some of them are a part of as an act of resisting the regime. "What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (76). The word 'present' alone places emphasis on the pretense and the performed act.

The handmaids' 'extreme gender' has been forced upon them in a way that exaggerates and highlights the social construct and the expectations of gender presentation, and the quote

above is important to this theory. It brings associations to Beauvoir's previously mentioned "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one". The 'made thing' implies a broken or distorted identity as a result of societal pressure or conditioning. We get the sense that the constant exposure to these views, and the manipulation from the authorities, begin to change Offred's mindset until she accepts the new norms. Gilead's leaders attempt to present the society as an utopia for women as a strategy to normalize the regime and brainwash the population into believing that it truly is better like this, and they use classic manipulation techniques such as making the women think they are spoiled, lucky, and in a good place. The authority claims that women can now, in this type of society, be valued fully instead of taken for granted. "Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery" (231). That is the justification the handmaids are given by the ones in power, and there is a continuous emphasis on the fact that it will be better for the next generation because "it will become ordinary" eventually (43). Gender norms differ slightly from culture to culture, proving how everything can be viewed as 'ordinary' if we see enough of it for long enough. Gilead's strict gender roles is thus seen to be influencing and brainwashing its citizens to conform to ideas that, compared to what the feminist movement encourages, are highly extreme and limiting. An example of the conditioning taking effect can be found when Offred sees some Japanese tourists and notes: "We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem underdressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (38). In this way, the reader is aware of her performance through her inner monologue, where we see an observant woman aware of the gendered configurations around her. The fact that she recognizes that their minds have been changed, that she is now repelled by women looking the way she used to, is important in relation to Butler's claim that there is no actor, no

affected core. Offred's awareness of how she presents herself insinuates that there *is* an actor, a subject that, while affected by the performativity, is not completely converted by it.

The Hunger Games

The "Hunger Games", the bestselling and award winning trilogy by Suzanne Collins, is considered to be a part of the new wave of dystopian fiction, often aimed towards young adults. Where the older classics focused on the fear of the world changing and were often dark and hopeless, the 'new wave' is more hopeful, while still staying true to the dystopian tradition of strict control and oppressive authorities.

The message of the adult dystopia is that this terrible future must be prevented before it is too late, whereas the message in children's dystopia involves the in-text hope that the oppressive regime can be successfully undermined, preparing the readers for whatever flawed world they inherit outside the book (Childs 187).

In this way, these two works represent the beginning and end of a chronology of female-led science-fiction. The female lead is interesting development, as many of the most popular Young Adult dystopian book series today have a female protagonist, such as *Matched*, *Divergent*, *Delirium*, and *Wither*, all published after the success of *The Hunger Games*. Though the female protagonist is a step up from dystopias that largely revolve around men, she does not escape criticism from scholars and critics, who have pointed to the fact that many of these females are primarily white and middle class "as well as fitting in heteronormative gender roles despite having some costume or character elements that can also be read as queer" (Mains et al. 180). In "The Female Hero in Literature", Christine Mains states that female characters in these type of genre works typically have been restricted to roles defined in relation to the male hero, such as the sexy temptress, the damsel in distress, and the virginal bride who is the object of his quest and reward for his heroism. Even female protagonists, she

writes, are often passive heroines rather than active heroes. An example of such a passive heroine in contemporary literature for teenagers and young adults is Stephenie Meyer's Bella Swan, who drifts through the "Twilight" book series, shy and self-conscious, without any real goals or ambitions of her own, and the majority of the story is which male character she will choose in the end in a classic love triangle. As opposed to this 'passive female' trope is the trend of writing women who take on a narrative role that is "conventionally male" (181), and it is within this framework that we find Collins's Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen year old girl from District 12, one of the poorest districts in Panem. Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place in the Hunger Games, a sadistic televised game in which twenty-four children from the ages twelve to seventeen compete to the death. To gain more popularity and sponsors, Katniss and Peeta's (the male tribute from District 12) agents and mentors train them to act friendly and pleasant, dress them up in 'statement' clothing and extravagant make-up, all of which lies far beyond what Katniss is comfortable with. Most importantly, because Katniss is seen as too unpleasant to be able to draw sponsors on her own, they are urged to take on the role of star-crossed lovers, leading them to fake a whirlwind romance throughout the course of the Games, and after.

Most of the critical work and studies on the "Hunger Games" started appearing in 2012, with a few articles having been published before that. A lot of the studies revolve around Katniss Everdeen and gender, while others look at warfare and political resistance, or the desire for morality in an immoral world. A critical eye has also been turned towards Panem's government control in relation to popular culture, and the ways in which this appeals to a young audience who are just learning to find their own identity and independence in a world largely controlled by what we see and read in the media. A question that is often asked in regards to Katniss is whether or not she is regarded as such a positive female character and

role-model for young girls *because* she distances herself from standards of femininity. In short, is she what some critics call a “man with breasts”? In their article “Heroes or Sheroes”, Christine Mains et al. discuss the two opposing views on female heroes in literature: that women can be heroes without imitating men, or that a woman in such a position must be referred to as a ‘shero’, her character and plot different enough from the conventional hero to justify coining a new term to describe her (Mains et al. 179). The labels mention previously such as the damsel in distress and the virginal bride become important when we start examining the “Hunger Games” and how society keeps pushing these labels onto Katniss to perform, in an attempt to make her easier to control. Some critics have pointed out how Collins has flipped the expected dichotomy, by making Peeta the “damsel in distress” that Katniss has to save and protect in all three books.

The ‘hero or shero’ question seems to push against Butler’s theories, reconfirming and encouraging the binary by insinuating that if a woman embodies these ‘male’ attributes then she is somehow less of a representative for the category of ‘woman’ overall, and thus somehow less worthy of praise. Is Katniss ‘acting like a man’ or is she simply acting like herself? This notion that Katniss, and other female character similar to her, ‘act like men’ falls under what Butler mentioned about how people who fail to “do their gender right” are punished for it. In this case, Katniss falls victim to this ‘punishment’ and criticism for acting too manly and ‘unladylike’, both *in* the text and outside by readers. Critics agree that Katniss is not a traditional and stereotypical female character, meaning that she has “masculine traits” and only bends to feminine norms when she must, i.e. when the Games require her to be seen as likeable or sweet and innocent enough not to be seen as a threat. In *The Gender Knot*, Allan Johnson lists ‘male identified qualities’ such as: “control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy,

self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability)” (Johnson 122) and states that they are all viewed as valuable and are culturally rewarded. In comparison, here is Johnson’s list of ‘feminine qualities’:
“cooperation, mutuality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking” (122). Instead of existing only within the ‘male’ category, Katniss adheres in complex ways to both, evoking a hybridity or androgyny and thus challenging the gender binary in more ways than simply being ‘a girl who acts like a boy’.

The fact that she is made to perform an exaggerate feminine role to ensure her own survival in the Games adds another interesting dimension to the dynamic of gender in *The Hunger Games*, and Katniss learns that both masculinity and femininity are performances that can be utilized in different ways depending upon one’s needs and desires. As previously mentioned, Katniss’s parody of the ‘original’ female ensures her survival within the Games and highlights the idea of gender as a social construct.

Katniss’s more ‘masculine’ gender presentation is balanced out and contrasted with female characters that to a greater extent embrace traditional feminine norms, like her little sister Primrose “Prim” Everdeen, a small, beautiful and delicate twelve-year-old, full of empathy and care for both humans and animals. Prim’s light and blue eyes is a stark contrast to Katniss’s olive skin and dark hair and is thus a stark opposite to Katniss in both looks and demeanor. Katniss’s hateful feelings towards Prim’s beloved cat contribute in setting her apart from traditional female norms that encompass nurturing and loving qualities. Prim and their mother work as nurses for the community and injured people often come to their home looking for treatment. Prim and their mother gladly help the injured, but Katniss will flee the

room at the sight of blood, injury, and frightened relatives, as seen when she tends to an injured Peeta in the arena, squirming and wincing her way through it. Still, it is important not to forget that Katniss's main goal and motivation through the story is survival, and that that survival is directly correlated to her love for Prim. It is a protective and maternal type of love that transcends what she eventually grows to feel for Peeta, something that will be explored further in the chapter on relationships. This caring side of Katniss falls under the 'feminine' qualities and the way she expresses this care is through strength, bravery, and sometimes ruthlessness, i.e. 'male' characteristics. In other words, on first glance it might seem like she possesses only 'male' attributes, but on further inspection we find there is a mix.

Relationships

Chapters four and five of my research will focus on the female protagonists' romantic and sexual relationships, or lack thereof, and how that, in several ways, ties into Butler's idea of performative genders and sexualities. It is necessary to begin this section with my definitions of romantic and sexual relationships and where that distinction may be drawn both in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *The Hunger Games*. Merely physical relationships are defined as sexual, but do not necessarily have to contain any desire. Romantic desire is a desire for closeness, intimacy, and connection on a level beyond what most would define as friendship. Offred's relationship with the Commander will here be defined as sexual, but without any sexual desire in Offred's case. In contrast, Offred desires Nick both romantically and sexually, seen in the way she "hungers" for the traditional romantic tale of a fairytale prince. Yet, we will come to discover that Offred's relationship with Nick is as much as a construction as her gender, even if it is implied that they do love each other. It is merely an act, a delusion, something they both do to distract themselves and convince themselves they have what has become forbidden. Both these novels contain elements of romance, but cannot

be said to be 'romance novels' (though some critics have claimed 'love' to be the most important element to both these novels) because of the dystopian themes of war and oppression which overshadows it. A common definition of the romance novel highlights the essential element of the declaration, of the "I love you" or another phrase that carry the same function. The phrase is avoided in both books, in the *Tale* it only shows up in flashbacks between Offred and Luke, and in *The Hunger Games* we only see Katniss use the word 'love' in relation to her little sister.

According to Lyman Tower Sargent and Lucy Sargisson's journal article "Sex in Utopia: Eutopian and Dystopian Sexual Relations", gender and gender relations have been considered at length, while sex and sexual relations have not. In our society and culture, female sexual desire is treated differently than male sexual desire in the way that it is often used against women, and women are encouraged from a young age to either repress or keep desire secret. It is thus an important issue to bring up in literature and bring into focus female sexuality to showcase that it does not have to stay hidden. This is important in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where we see that while robbed for all her rights and choices, Offred still takes pleasure in teasing Guardians and lusts after Nick.

However, there is another end of the spectrum that is not often considered in media either and equally as important, and that is the notion of asexuality and aromanticism, the lack of sexual and romantic desire. I will argue for Katniss's aromanticism, as several critics have stated that Collins presents her as neither heterosexual nor homosexual. Portraying Katniss as aromatic challenges heteronormativity in young adult fiction and shows how a woman does not need a man by her side, but if she *wants* to, like Katniss in *Mockingjay*, it is her choice.

The Handmaid's Tale

Previous readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* view the love plot, especially the relationship between Offred and Nick, as a force that subverts Gilead's power. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich states that "as in *1984*, the only subversive force appears to be love" (Ehrenreich 34). Love and desire is complicated for Offred, as she continually thinks back to Luke during her meetings with the Commander and Nick, respectively. It is also complicated because it is prohibited, she is not to have romances or sexual relationships with anyone except the Commander once a month, and yet we see her rebel these notions, if only faintly in the form of teasing guards or playing Scrabble, which in the novel is presented as a sinful and almost sexual act. Offred possesses sexual desire, but this desire is controlled and often repressed. Her relationship with the Commander is another necessity as she has no other choice, and her *performance* in this relationship is directly linked with her gender performance. Similarly, Offred acts around Nick, and they find themselves citing old movie script, only further emphasizing the constructedness of love and romance.

A critic who disagrees with these readings that the love story in the *Tale* stands for freedom and subversion for the female character, is Madonne Miner, who in her article on reading the romance plot in *The Handmaid's Tale*, approaches this view with great skepticism. She claims the opposite, namely that the text "continues to represent the love plot as something potentially dangerous to women who entangle themselves therein" (Miner 161). Miner draws attention to Offred's frequent comparison between objects only to claim there is no connection between the objects, such as equating red flowers with the blood on hanged men's hoods. This is the foundation of Miner's analysis of Offred's relationship with the three men in the novel. She argues that Offred wants them to stay as separate individuals, but that they still merge and become difficult to distinguish from each other. She notes similarities between

Luke and the Commander and says that the text provides “two male characters who mirror one another; structurally, these two are twins. Offred does not draw attention to the parallels between the two men, and might protest against such connections (“None of these facts has any connection with the other” [140]) but the text insists upon them” (160) . This blurring between her beloved husband and her Commander is disquieting, Miner says, as it casts doubt upon the narrator’s story of Luke’s love *and* upon love stories in general.

However, it is Offred’s affair with Nick that most critics argue is the ‘subversive force’ that frees Offred. In contrast to Luke and the Commander, who are both oppressive men who have “the word”, Nick functions as “the fairy-tale prince, setting the princess free with a kiss” (161), who saves her and seems to bring life to Offred. There are several instances of these types of ‘roles’ being played between Offred and Nick that suggest that their relationship is a performance meant to provide both of them comfort. At once instance Offred imagines a stock scene from typical romances: “I have no rose to toss [from the window], [Nick] has no lute. But it’s the same kind of hunger” (201). The rehearsal of old movie scripts and scene set-ups contribute in invalidating the way some critics read the romance plot. Additionally, Offred uses the language of Harlequin romance to recount her experiences with Nick.

Offred’s account comes right out of mass-market bodice rippers (...) Operating within this traditional grammar (men are princes or made of darkness; women are princesses or damsels in distress), Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances (163-4).

With this, Offred “accepts these archaic plot lines as model for her own” (166). By using this well-known language, these scripts and pre-existing plots, Atwood also highlights the performativity of gender and the influence these old stories and romances have on how we think it should be. Offred draws from what she knows and ends up with old clichés and

stereotypes that reinforce the gender binary. Other ‘red flags’ in relation to Nick is the similarities Offred notices between the carpeting on the stairs to Nick’s room and the carpeting at Jezebel’s, a place that very much encourages the gender hierarchy and the binary gender/sexuality roles, and the way Offred completely loses interest in Ofglen, Mayday (the resistance), and the possibility of escape after getting involved with Nick. If love is the subversive force of the novel, if love equals freedom for the female character, then these facts about Luke, Nick, and the Commander suggest a dark fate for women in romantic relationships.

The Hunger Games

The Hunger Games uses elements from two familiar genres in ways that appeal to readers of all ages and genders: war narratives and romance fiction, and some argue that it is a young adult romance set in a dystopian society. However, I will argue that it is first and foremost a dystopia, a war narrative, with a hint of a love story. The emphasis should be placed on the books as a war narrative, as Katniss’s continuous disinterest and discredit of the romance is integral to the books and works as an important shift from many other books targeted for teens and young adults today that often revolve around romance or the yearning for romance. The romance side of *The Hunger Games* is, in fact, a purposeful distraction meant to pull attention away from the horrors of Panem, and provides both a distraction for the citizens of the Capitol, but also provides a break from the tragedies for the reader.

Katniss marrying and having children with Peeta at the end of *Mockingjay* was questioned by fans as being out of character for her, however, critics have studied Katniss’s choice and revealed varying possible answers as to why Katniss chooses Peeta at the end of the trilogy. June Pulliam suggests that her marriage is a direct result of the discipline and conditioning

that Katniss was exposed through throughout the series, arguing that as a teenager, she is more receptive to these influences and thus ends up marrying. We see this type of shaping and control of women's choices also in *The Handmaid's Tale*, albeit more overtly. Another critic suggests something else, namely that Katniss's choice is a way to *preserve* herself as she is and *not* change herself as a person. Katniss has a strong moral compass and a sense of right and wrong, and because Gale might be complicit in Prim's death, Katniss gravitates away from him, as Prim will always remain her number one priority. "Finally, she chooses [Peeta] because the alternative, choosing Gale, would mean a betrayal of one of her highest values: the preservation of innocent life" (Myers 142) Thus, marrying Peeta is a highly unromantic choice, but a choice which allows her to stay true to herself, and to Prim, who she remains loyal to even in death.

Chapter 1: Gender Performance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) takes place in a dystopian totalitarian society so riddled with infertility and low birth rates that the government has built a society around brainwashing the few women who are still fertile and assigning them as handmaids (i.e. belongings) to powerful men in an attempt to bring the birth rates back up. The result is the Republic of Gilead, a society that enforces rigid gender essentialism that restricts the way women look, act, and think. Judith Butler suggests that gender is always a performance, put together by words, acts, and gestures that imitate a perceived 'original,' and thus the performance rejects essentialist beliefs that gender is biologically predetermined and exists on a strict binary of male/female. Gilead critiques gender essentialism by portraying the consequence of an exaggerated enforcement of it in a fictional society. As a result of the enforced gender norms, gender as a performance becomes relevant in the way Gilead's gender essentialism promotes behavior that does not necessarily come naturally to the population, but instead the behavior is necessary for survival.

This chapter explores the gender essentialism in Gilead and the performance this evokes in both men and women, but women most importantly. The essentialist gender roles found in Atwood's dystopian novel reveal the shortcomings of the gender binary and the idea of an 'original' and 'true' gender, as Butler puts it. Just as Butler emphasizes the desire for a coherent and consistent identity, we see in *The Handmaid's Tale* that the oppression and enforced 'personas' lead to the loss of an internal identity.

1.1 Appearance And Behavior

When it comes to one's personal identity, Judith Butler underlines the importance of coherency and consistency between the performance and the person's self-perception, and she refers to the created identity as "enacted fantasy or incorporation" (Butler 173). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that this ideal gender identity is produced on the *outside* of the body through acts, words, gestures, and desire, to create the illusion of an internal core or substance. It is an illusion "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler 173). These acts, words, and gestures that encompass the 'gender illusion' are all, according to Butler, repetitions of a perceived "original" preexisting identity. "The action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*," Butler writes. "This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (178). In many ways Atwood anticipates several of the points Butler later will make about repetition, impersonation, and ritualized gender performance. However, the way Atwood portrays the rituals and repetitions pushes back on some of Butler's claims that the ritualization of gender normalizes binary gender norms, instead we see in *The Handmaid's Tale* that the repetitions expose the ritualized gender performance instead of obscuring it.

One of the first things one may notice while reading *The Handmaid's Tale* is how gender is expressed through the exterior, particularly the clothing, in a way that highlights the handmaids as "prisoners of their societies" (Hammer 44) through the lack of variety and personal choice. The handmaids are like "a flotilla of swans or anything that [repeats itself] with at least minimum grace and without variation" (Atwood 224). By placing such emphasis on appearance, Atwood acknowledges the repetitiveness of gender expression and in true

dystopian fashion brings it to the extreme. The handmaids wear loose fitting garments that cover them from head to toe, and everything except the white wings around their faces is red. Similarly, Wives wear blue and Marthas wear green. In “The Calculus of Love And Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* And the Dystopian Tradition”, Lois Feuer refers to the color-coded clothing as a ‘submersion of the self’ and thus the loss of identity is an ever-present threat. This happens as the categorization distinguishes every ‘type’ of woman from each other, creating the illusion of only three separate identities, or ‘cores’, in a way that discourages individuality. The scene at the beginning of the text where Offred, the novel’s narrator, gets dressed does not read like a woman putting on her own clothes, but like an actress putting on a pre-determined costume. “The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. (...) I pick up the shopping basket, put it over my arm” (Atwood 18). She goes through every piece of clothing, the shoes, the gloves, the skirt, and the veil, drawing attention to the act of getting dressed up in them. Her red clothing paired with the basket on her arm bears associations to Little Red Riding Hood, and thus Offred is made into actress, as someone portraying a role that has been handed to her. Later on we will return to this notion of playing a role in a fictional world.

The stilted dialogue in the *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates how speech goes into gender performativity and functions as another repetitive act like the clothing. The dialogue, especially the conversations between the handmaids, is often scripted, in an attempt to more easily control them. They are discouraged to speak to each other too much without using the standard words and phrases, as female friendships are seen as ‘suspicious’ in Gilead. Because they are using an actual preexisting script, the repetitiveness of the speech is made literal, just like the clothing makes the handmaids look like a repetitive pattern. The speech usually goes like this:

”Blessed be the fruit,” [Ofglen] says to me, the accepted greeting among us.

“May the Lord open,” I answer, the accepted response.

(...)

“The war is going well, I hear,” she says.

“Praise be,” I reply.

“We’ve been sent good weather.”

“Which I receive with joy.” (29)

At this point, Ofglen is more interested in deviating from the stiff speech norms than Offred, who continues to stick to the script throughout the conversation. Offred notes how Ofglen walks “demurely, head down, red-gloved hands clasped in front, with short little steps like a trained pig’s on its hind legs” (29) and wonders if that makes Ofglen a “real believer”.

However, Ofglen’s citing of the script, and her way of walking, is as much of a purposeful performance as Offred’s, and this we know because she is later revealed to be a part of the underground rebel organization Mayday. Like Offred, Ofglen acts exactly like she should as a handmaid, emitting all the right gendered signals of Gilead to be convincing in her performance, and that includes speaking the way they are supposed to speak. In short, the clothing is nothing more than costumes mimicking a perceived ‘ideal’ and the speech pattern is nothing more than lines read from a script written by others. Thus we see here an overt allusion to performing and play-acting, highlighting the fact that they, both the handmaids and the society itself, have not always been this way but they have no choice but to conform to the new gender norms.

Gilead constructs women as seen objects instead of seeing subjects. The distinction between seeing and being seen is important in the novel as there is a large focus on the question of visibility, and a lot of the performance that goes into Offred’s every-day life is centered

around the fact that “the Eyes” are constantly thought to be watching and listening in. The Eyes is what Gilead calls their secret police, the name evoking associations to the ‘all-seeing eye of God’, but “whereas God means to induce trust and peace, Gilead’s eye spreads distrust and fear” (Twohig 15). This omnipresent power leaves its literal mark on the handmaids by the having national seal of Gilead tattooed on their ankles, like prisoners or branded cattle. “I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource” (Atwood 75).

With this reminder branded onto her, Offred’s fear of being seen, watched, and listened in on, is what drives her gender performance. When approached by the Japanese tourists asking to take her picture, Offred turns modest, looking down and shaking her head. “I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it’s said” (38).

Modesty as a character trait is often considered a female trait, and in *The Handmaid’s Tale* modesty is highly encouraged, as illustrated by the way they dress and their soft voices when they speak. Later in the novel, Offred and Ofglen stand outside a store that only contains machines that prints out prayers, and each machine has an eye painted onto it, emphasizing the connection between the Eyes and ‘the eye of God’. In the reflection of the store window, Offred and Ofglen look into each other’s eyes for the first time. “There’s a shock in this seeing; it’s like seeing somebody naked, for the first time” (176). Having finally ‘seen’ each other, and having admitted that neither of them believes that God listens to the machines, they get excited and eager, yet they do not completely let go of their outward performance even though Ofglen assures Offred that there are “no mikes”. Beginning to see each other as an individual, with their own thoughts and ideas, and not just a generic handmaid creates “risk (...) where there was none before” (176). “Keep your head down as we walk,” Ofglen says, “and lean just a little towards me. That way I can hear you better. Don’t talk when there’s

anyone coming” (177). They continue to repeat and portray what Gilead expects them to portray, like modesty and conformity, out of fear of the surveillance that could get them caught and have them punished for deviating from the role assigned to them.

However, it is not only the ‘all-seeing eye’ that watches the handmaids; there is also the constant male gaze. In the earlier chapters we find Aunt Lydia explaining to the handmaids that “to be seen (...) is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (Atwood 39). Being seen is clearly being compared to a sexual act, and because homosexuality is illegal in Gilead we know Aunt Lydia means strictly heterosexual sex. Thus the handmaids are seen as sexual objects through the male gaze. Pamela Cooper mentions the prevalence of the so called ‘male gaze’ in the novel in her article "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*":

The Handmaid's Tale thus brings together pre-Christian notions of absolute patriarchal authority -- the omniscient, avenging god-- with postmodernist theories of the objectifying and possessive male gaze -- the omniscient, avenging eye. The proprietorial eye of male desire becomes the weapon of fascism in Gilead (Cooper 50).

The ‘all-seeing eye of God’ merges with the objectifying male gaze. Being seen is equated with sex, with being desirable, insinuating that women have the choice between being a sexual object for men or invisible altogether, as shown through Aunt Lydia’s “modesty is invisibility” comment (Atwood 38). The male gaze ensures that women are objectified and viewed as sexual objects, and this happens despite them being covered from head to toe, as seen in the beginning of the novel when Offred teases the young guard, enjoying the power of deciding for herself when she wants to be looked at, knowing that the guard wants a handmaid “of [his] own” (32).

Offred's trip to Jezebel's, a brothel for Gilead's elite, as the Commander's "evening rental" (245) brings another dimension into the seeing/being seen dichotomy where Offred has to wear yet another costume, both clothing and make-up, that caters to the male gaze, transforming her from an 'invisible' sexual object (signaled by her clothing) to a 'visible' sexual object (also signaled by her clothing). "I've never worn anything remotely like this, so glittering and theatrical, and that's what it must be, an old theatre costume, or something from a vanished nightclub act; the closest I ever came were bathing suits (...)" (242). At Jezebel's, Offred meets her old best friend Moira, who escaped the Center but who now works at the brothel and is dressed up in what is supposed to be an animal costume in the form of an ill-fitting strapless top, net stockings, high heels, and a tail and ears. She notes how Moira "always hated high heels" (251). Deborah Hooker states that the costumed prostitutes emphasize the female role as that of a "masquerade" which denies her the chance to experience desire in her own right instead of the man's (Hooker 287). The women at Jezebel's are meant to be seen and desired by men, and their costumes, mimicking old dance- and Halloween costumes, reflect that just as much as Gilead's modest clothing reflects how they view the handmaids as innately sexual beings that should cover up as to not be 'tempting'.

Because of the constant surveillance and the danger of being seen, Offred is constantly aware of how she *presents* herself, which points to the fact that Gilead's regime has not completely taken over her mind and transformed her into a 'true believer'. As to not overtly challenge the regime, she has to stay calm and collected, keeping her inner thoughts and feelings to herself. This is also a way of performance, as she puts on an exterior that does not match her inner thoughts, and we will see a very similar thought process when we come to analyze Suzanne Collins. "I wait," Offred thinks. "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech" (76). Offred attempts to 'look good' by keeping her silence and by

performing everything the way it should be performed. In the beginning of the novel she often wonders if Ofglen is doing the same thing.

Ofglen's head is bowed, as if she's praying. (...) I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She's out to make the best of it.

But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise? (41)

Whenever Ofglen does not show the same concern for acting the part as she does in the passage above, Offred becomes nervous and more aware of her own reactions. As people categorized as exactly the same person, any slight deviance from the norm meddles with the notion that they are the same and they could become easy to spot as 'non-believers'. At the sight of the dead men hanging from the Wall, Ofglen has a reaction that fails to mirror Offred's. "I felt a tremor in the woman beside me. Is she crying? In what way could it make her look good? I can't afford to know. My own hands are clenched, I note, tight around the handle of my basket. I won't give anything away" (43). Offred here wonders what game Ofglen is playing, but refrains from asking as that would reveal her as a non-believer, and she would rather continue acting and presenting herself in a good light than give herself up.

1.2 Women and Childbearing

The Republic of Gilead is in total control over women's reproduction in a way that both oppresses and dehumanizes. In Gilead, a woman's worth is measured by her ability to have children as large parts of the population have been rendered sterile as a result of nuclear and chemical pollution. The dangerously low birthrate led to a desperate government creating a new system in which the essentialist notion that a woman is not a real woman unless she can have children is preached and supported. Thus the few fertile women are turned into 'Handmaids' who are to deliver children to their Commander and his wife through sexual

surrogacy. Offred expresses an awareness of this oppression and dehumanization by describing both herself and other handmaids using terms like “containers”, “two-legged wombs”, and “ambulatory chalices”. However, the feeling of having been reduced to one’s reproductive abilities is not only limited to women, we also see how Offred’s lover Nick “possibly (...) feels used” and that he “possibly wants something from [Offred], some emotion, some acknowledgment that he too is human, is more than just a seedpod” (Atwood 273-4). Thus, the regulated sexual encounters and the strict gender roles do not only affect women, it also reduces men to their reproductive organs, even if not to the same extent.

The importance of children in relation to womanhood as opposed to manhood, even though that is important too to a certain degree, comes through in the way Gilead always considers failure to conceive a child as the woman’s fault. In this way the novel works effectively as a “fictional realization of the backlash against women’s rights that gathered force during the early 1980s” (Neuman 858) by enhancing various problematic views of sex and gender such as body autonomy and the right to abort. Offred’s doctor tells her that most of the old men, the Commanders, either cannot make it anymore or they are sterile. Offred notes that the word ‘sterile’ is a forbidden word, seeing as “there is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (70-1). The law, here, is inherently oppressive against women, placing all blame on them even when they are not to be blamed.

The biblical story of the barren Rachel and her handmaiden Bilhah serves as the justification of Gilead’s treatment of women, and the handmaids are told this story repeatedly. The sentence “give me children, or else I die”, taken directly from this biblical story, shows up twice in the novel itself to show how the indoctrination has affected the narrator. The first

time the sentence shows up the reader might think they are Offred's own words, unless he or she is familiar with the biblical story. The second time, however, we are told the origin of the line and we see the way it has been "drummed into" the handmaids. The Commander reads them a 'bedtime story' from the Bible that they keep locked up so the women cannot read from it on their own.

It's the usual story, the usual stories. (...) Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high-school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar (99).

The fact that Offred uses the words 'drummed into' shows her awareness of the situation and the manipulation and brainwashing that goes on. This is how the social construct of gender comes to be what it is. There is a constant pressure to conform to what society deems as the proper way to express gender. In Gilead's case, the ones that refuse, or the ones who fail, are punished in a more extreme way than they would be in reality

The first time we see the sentence 'Give me children, or else I die' highlights the results of the manipulation instead of the manipulation itself. We see it first during Offred's doctor's appointment, where the doctor offers to have sex with her because he knows there is a big chance the Commander is sterile, and that would not end well for Offred.

"Lots of women do it (...). You want a baby, don't you?"

"Yes," I say. It's true, and I don't ask why because I know. *Give me children, or else I die.* There is more than one meaning to it" (71).

Originally, the line in the Bible is not meant to signal literal death, but more of a hyperbole to highlight a desperate *need* to have children. This is one of the meanings Offred attaches to the sentence, possibly as a result of Gilead's manipulations but also possibly because of her own daughter who was taken away from her. Yet there is also the literal death that awaits her if she fails to bear the Commander's child, thus she has no choice but to want children, unless she would rather die. The fact that the biblical line is in italics here is important as it signals that, to a certain degree, the words are not her own but instead they are repetitions of what she has heard so many times before. As we have already seen, Butler claims that repetition is one of the components that makes up gender performativity. Here, Offred's repetition is made literal (i.e. it is an actual replica of what she has been actively taught) and she repeats it on purpose, as indicated by the italics. It shows that Offred has not internalized the idea or this particular way of speaking, which is what Butler usually means when she writes about speech repetition.

1.3 Internalization and Social Conditioned Gender Norms

As we have already seen, according to Judith Butler, gender norms and stereotypes are social constructs that we have internalized and repeat over and over, though we have also seen that even though gendered acts are repeated in Gilead it does not mean the norms have been internalized yet. However, as Aunt Lydia says, internalizing new views does not happen overnight, "but after a time (...) it will become ordinary" (43). If we think about it, there is no real reason for why pink should be a 'girl color' and blue a 'boy color', but media marketing and societal pressure over time has made it so that many accept this as a truth. These manipulations, whether conscious or subconscious, and socially accepted norms play large roles in how Butler views gender as something that is always a 'doing' by a subject that does not pre-exist the deed. We have already examined how Gilead's gender norms do not come naturally to the people who live within the walls of the regime, instead they are simply

performing already pre-existing ideals, and now we will look more closely into the conditioned and manipulated mind to see how this performance affects the subject's sense of self.

The assumption that all the handmaids are the same makes it difficult to keep one's individuality, and Offred finds herself subconsciously internalizing these ideas through the course of the novel. This fits with what Butler claims is a political problem that feminism encounters, namely the essentialist assumption that the term 'woman' denotes a common identity (Butler 6). Lois Feuer draws attention to the doctor's habit of calling Offred "honey", to which Offred notes: "[honey is] what he called his wife, once; maybe still does, but really it's a generic term. We are all *honey*" (Atwood 71). These gender abstractions, Feuer writes, are major threats to individuality and cause Offred to become subsumed by her category and think of herself as "we", as part of hivemind instead of an individual person. "Our skin gets very dry. For some reason I said *our* instead of *my*" (167, original emphasis). Feuer also writes that men also fall victim to gender abstractions in the *Tale*, pointing to the fact that Aunt Lydia refers to all men as "them", similarly to how Offred uses "we/our". Put together, enforces the gender binary by assuming everyone is the same within the supposedly two distinct categories 'male' and 'female'.

Stillman and Johnson mention that Offred tries to retain a sense of self, to see herself as a "distinct individual differentiated from others" (Stillman and Johnson 73), but that this self eventually breaks down as seen in the quote above. Consider also the way she, at the beginning, refuses to use the word "my" to refer to the room she sleeps in because of the lack of privacy, but later eventually ends up calling it "mine" anyway: "Was he invading? Was he in my room? I called it *mine*" (59, original emphasis). It is important to note that by pointing

out these internalized ideas herself, she shows that she is not *completely* overthrown by them even though she is clearly affected. The lack of a real name also contributes heavily to this loss of identity and the notion that all handmaids are ‘the same’. Their names, composed by ‘of’ and the name of their Commander, strips them of an essential means of identification and instead turns them into one of the crowd. Offred realizes the importance of being an individual instead of a crowd after a conversation with the Commander where he claims that ‘women can’t add’. “For them,” he says, “one and one and one and one don’t make four (...). Just one and one and one and one” (195). She later goes on to conclude that “one and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other” (201-2). Replacement is an issue when it comes to the handmaids, as they are simply replaced with another one with the same name if the previous one fails to work out (i.e. is murdered or sent to the Colonies), like the “new Ofglen” that takes the old one’s place. The merging and blurring identities these women experience critiques the belief that ‘woman’ is a common identity and underlines the importance of being seen as an individual.

The Japanese tourists that have come to see and experience Gilead at the beginning of the novel illustrate what the authority is trying to achieve, namely a “glossy surface image” (Chow 24) using visual culture to “[edit] and [craft] visual scenes for the purpose of manipulating people and offering only a surface view of reality” (Laflen 87). “From a distance it looks like peace,” (Atwood 22) Offred says in the beginning of the novel, and that is what the authorities want people to see, both outsiders and the citizens within the walls of Gilead. However, as Offred states, it only looks idyllic from a distance, and Offred instead idealizes the way Japanese people’s culture is being presented to her: “That was freedom” (38), “I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry”

(39). Even, so Offred is torn on what she feels about these women's 'revealing' clothing. Her reaction to the tourists and how they dress in short skirts, high-heeled shoes, and wear their hair uncovered shows the way the mindset of Gilead has managed to turn her away from something she used to think nothing of. "We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem underdressed. *It has taken so little time to change our minds*, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that" (38, my emphasis). Once again we see Offred being aware of being manipulated, and she later uses the words "my indoctrination" (165) that also shows that her indoctrination has not, in fact, gone as deep as Gilead thinks. She has not been fooled by the glossy surface image. Aunt Lydia's words "this may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (43) stresses the ways in which humanity is adaptable enough to be able to get used to anything after a certain time of exposure and "as long as there are a few compensations" (283), as Offred's mother said.

We see here two polar opposite ways of performing the female gender, both ways socially conditioned to be seen as 'the norm'. One of the female "types" is the conservative one that uses the idea that women should cover up as to not be seen as sexual objects, and the other a more sexually liberated one (usually Western but here Eastern) that believe women should dress how they like without having to fear being objectified. Like Butler writes, gender is not always constituted consistently in different historical contexts, and that is illustrated here. According to Jill Swale, Atwood got some of her ideas for *The Handmaid's Tale* from her visits to both Afghanistan and Iran "where women are treated in the same light as they are in Gilead's society--some ways better, some ways worse" (Swale). Stephania Barbé Hammer writes that Offred wrongly equates western fashion with feminine liberation, "already signalled stylistically through Atwood's description of the high-heels which emphasizes how very much this clothing imprisons rather than frees" (Hammer 44), and points to the irony in

the fact that the person wearing the western fashion is eastern, “a representative of a culture notorious for its oppression of women, at least from a western point of view” (44). This, Hammer writes, is a satirical message that suggests that *both* Offred and the Japanese tourists are prisoners of their societies, in different ways. The repetitions of both these types of gender expression create potentially harmful stereotypes for women, and Atwood illustrates how “true personal freedom exists for neither woman in the world which [she] is describing, which by implication, reflects not a future reality but a present actuality” (44).

As this incident with the tourists implies, Offred has become unaccustomed to seeing exposed skin, both others’ and her own and reacts to her own body with distaste. “My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*” (72, original emphasis). Something particularly worth noting about this passage is the words in italics. Like the line from the Genesis, the italics here imply that these are not her words. *She* does not find her body shameful and immodest, but society does and she has been told that it is and should thus be covered up and hidden. She even explains it in the next sentence: “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (72-3). It is not shame or modesty that makes Offred uncomfortable with her body, but instead she draws attention to the powerlessness of being a woman and a handmaid in a society where her fate relies on her body and its ability to produce children. Her reaction towards her own body shows how heteronormativity, gender norms, and objectification of women is damaging on a deep, psychological level.

What is being performed does not always coincide with the ‘inner core’ that resists these societal pressures. While Offred shows that she has internalized some ideas by reacting negatively to, for instance, old fashions and nudity, her following thoughts show that these influences have not manifested themselves completely. The Mayday underground organization also contributes in highlighting this resistance to the regime by showing how more than just one handmaid sees the wrong in Gilead’s oppression.

1.4 Fairytales

The allusions, and sometimes direct references, to something fictional like fairytales and paintings, evoke heavy associations with acting and performances, creating the sense of something that is not quite real, or should not be real. This theme of fantasy and fairytales also reemerges when speaking of relationships later on in this research. The references to elements from fairytales, like castles and princes, makes the horrors of Gilead stand out more starkly than they would without such a sweet and harmless contrast. Though, of course, the classic fairytales were often dark and nightmarish in their original form, which would explain the usage of such allusions in a dystopian world so far removed from what we would call a ‘fairy tale’. Similarly to how Gilead presents itself as an utopia for women while in reality it is a bleak dystopia, fairytales are often seen as fun, lighthearted stories with a ‘happily ever after’ while in reality a lot of them end in tragedy.

The use of fairytale allusions are repetitions of old romantic ideals and old ‘sweet’ stories, and are thus representative as a way of performance. Arguably, turning the environment around her into a fairytale is escapism for Offred. The first introduction to this running theme of unreality, or fairytale allusions, happens after Offred dresses up in her ‘costume’ at the beginning of the novel. As already discussed, her ‘costume’ alone evokes associations with

performance and playacting, but now she creates a setting to put herself into. “I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way” (18). This can be seen as a stage set-up that Offred steps into after putting on her handmaid costume, ready to put on her role. Here, the path through a forest and the carpet for royalty bears resemblance to settings you would find in a fairytale. Old buildings are usually associated with fairytales, and we learn that the house she is in is a large Late Victorian house built for a large rich family, like a mansion; a cozy and familiar setting that is not the first setting you might think of when you hear the word ‘dystopia’. It works as a contrast against the horrors that go on in the house, and in the society itself. The narrator uses the word ‘fairytale’ several times in the text. The first time happens while walking down the stairs in the hallway mentioned in the paragraph above. She catches a glance of herself in the mirror: “like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood” (19). As mentioned in part 1.1, her red cloak evokes the story of Little Red Riding Hood, but it is a version ‘dipped in blood’. The parody here is all but humorless; it is only funny in its irony. Gender as a parodic act, to use Butler’s words, is here highlighted by these fairytale references, but Offred prescribes the same humorless parody onto the Commander during the reading session. “Now he looks like a shoemaker in an old fairytale book. Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?” (98). Here she also acknowledges it as a disguise, as something inauthentic. The use of fiction and fairytale as reference for the way the role is played can through these examples put emphasis on the horrors of Gilead, as it is so far removed from the magic of the fairytales we know.

Using these fairytale references, Offred puts herself into a different story, a different world, even if this world is a fabrication and not real. At times she finds comfort in comparing her

situation to a fairytale, thus using it as a tool to escape her reality and move into a more tolerable one. At one point in the novel, Offred goes to steal a daffodil from the sitting room in an attempt to do something, to be active rather than passive. She imagines herself “in the wood at midnight” looking for “a magic flower” (109). At the “Prayvaganza”, a public ceremony that is usually for group weddings for women and military victories for men, Offred likens the group of handmaids standing in line two by two to private school girls that “went for a walk and stayed out too long. Years and year too long, so that everything has become overgrown, legs, bodies, dresses all together” (225). An uncomfortable thought, so Offred adds: “As if enchanted. A fairy tale, I’d like to believe” (225). In this way, the fairytale references are coping mechanisms on Offred’s behalf.

References to beautiful and picturesque paintings contribute to place emphasis on presenting a good-looking exterior so that one can maintain the illusion that all is good.

[Offred and Ofglen] must look good from a distance, picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that’s who this is a show for (224).

The paragraph above is from the Prayvaganza, a show they are forced to participate in. That the event is televised makes it an organized performance from the authorities as well, to demonstrate how “obedient and pious” (224) the handmaids are. They look nice, picturesque, but it remains a front, a glamorized photograph. This is what the tourists come to see and photograph, as if the entirety of Gilead is just some bizarre tourist attraction. In fact, the argument here is that all of Gilead is a show, a performance, that exists to distract from the oppression and sexual slavery that goes on behind the scenes, so to speak.

Chapter 2: *The Hunger Games* and gender performance

The Hunger Games (2008) by Suzanne Collins, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, takes place in a dystopian totalitarian society controlled by a government that will do everything to remain in power. *The Hunger Games* is the first book in a trilogy by the same name and centers around sixteen year old Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to take her sister's place in the Hunger Games, a sadistic televised game in which twenty-four children and teenagers are forced to compete to death within an arena set in a forest. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Hunger Games* brings forth the issue of gender norms and gender essentialism, especially in the way that, in order to have a chance at competing in the Games, Katniss has to take on a more stereotypically feminine role in order to be liked by the audience. The novels also explore the influences the media and celebrity culture has on the population, resulting in an obsession with having the 'perfect appearance'. Collins challenges the traditional gender norms by reversing the gender dichotomy when it comes to the two main characters, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, presenting the reader with an unemotional 'masculine' female character thrust into a world of glitz and glam in a way that emphasizes that not every woman has to enjoy 'girly' things in order to be female.

2.1 Blurring Femininity and Masculinity

Katniss Everdeen rebels against conventional femininity and to some she seems to be portrayed as what Christine Mains et al. refer to as a 'man with breasts'. In their article "Heroes or Sheroes", they write that a 'man with breasts' is a female character that lacks any feminine traits but instead is portrayed a lot like a man. These "tough girls" or "action chicks" are prevalent in the media, especially in the fantasy and science-fiction genre. "Heroes or Sheroes" presents two opposing views on female characters in literature: that women in

fiction can be heroes without imitating men, or that a woman in such a position must be referred to as a ‘shero’, that her character and plot differs enough from the conventional hero’s (Mains et al. 179). Before we can further examine Katniss ‘masculine’ qualities it is necessary to define what qualities are usually regarded as ‘masculine’. In *The Gender Knot*, Allan Johnson lists ‘male identified qualities’ such as: “control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability)” (Johnson 122). In comparison, here is Johnson’s list of ‘feminine qualities’: “cooperation, mutuality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking” (122). Picking out Katniss’s masculine traits is easy, even from the very beginning of the text. The novel begins with Katniss getting ready to go out hunting, which we later learn is a responsibility she has inherited from her father after his death.

By taking over her father’s role, Katniss is drawn into a “male lineage” (Mitchell 130) that contributes in the blurring of gender in Katniss’s life. The first few paragraphs refrain from giving the protagonist a gender, as it never mentions that Katniss is a ‘she’. Instead, the opening evokes associations to traditional masculinity with the hunting, the coldness towards the family cat, and the bravery needed to go out to hunt illegally in the first place. Thus, in the first few pages we learn that Katniss is masculine in the way she dresses, with hunting boots, trousers, her braid tucked into a cap, and wearing her father’s old jacket. The genders markers seen here are mostly masculine, apart from the braid, which many will see as a feminine trait. Personality-wise, we learn that in addition to be brave she appears indifferent and in control of her vulnerability, “So I learned (...) to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (*THG* 7), is unpleasant, “Even at home, where I am less

pleasant” (7), unforgiving, “But to be honest, I’m not the forgiving type” (10), and does not want children, “I never want to have kids” (11). In the scene when she gets prepared for the Games, Peeta’s friendliness is contrasted with Katniss’s lack thereof. I will return to the role reversal between Peeta and Katniss later on, but for now the focus remains on Katniss’s ‘male presentation’. Friendliness is often seen as a necessity for women in the way that women are expected to smile and be pleasant while men can get away with being more sullen and ‘broody’ as there is some mystery tied to those traits when they belong to a man. Katniss challenges the ‘pleasant female’ idea. She is unemotional, and rarely smiles or laughs. As Haymitch, Katniss’s mentor, states: “You’re got about as much charm as a dead slug” (136). All of these ‘unfeminine’ characteristics stick with Katniss throughout the course of the novel, with an emphasis on her unpleasantness and the control she has to have over her emotions in order to not seem like “a weakling” (26) in the Games. These characteristics coincide with Johnson’s descriptions of stereotypical male traits.

Katniss’s more ‘masculine’ gender presentation is balanced out and contrasted with female characters that to a greater extent embrace traditional feminine norms, most importantly her little sister Primrose “Prim” Everdeen, a small, beautiful and delicate twelve-year-old, full of empathy and care for both humans and animals. She also enjoys cooking and flower arranging, is described as fragile and easily frightened, and is full of empathy and care for both humans and animals. Prim’s blonde hair and blue eyes is a stark contrast to Katniss’s olive skin and dark hair and is thus a clear opposite to Katniss in both looks and demeanor. The difference between them is illustrated through the way they respond to the family cat, Buttercup.

[The cat] hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home

(...) The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay (4).

Katniss's feelings towards the cat contribute to setting her apart from traditional female norms that encompass nurturing and loving qualities. Prim and their mother work as nurses for the community and injured people often come to their home looking for treatment. Prim and their mother gladly help the injured, but Katniss will flee the room at the sight of blood, injury, and frightened relatives, as seen when she tends to an injured Peeta in the arena, while she squirms and winces her way through it. Jessica Miller points out that Prim, being "especially capable of ministering to the sick, (...) exhibits a type of strength that is more acceptable for women in our culture than Katniss's physical strength is" (Miller 150). Miller writes that in Western civilization, "caring for dependents, preparing family meals, wearing makeup, and being empathetic are considered feminine, whereas bread-winning, making household repairs, building muscle, and being protective are considered masculine" (150). Thus, we see in *The Hunger Games* a spectrum of female characters, ranging from Katniss's hostile masculinity, to Prim's delicate femininity. Naturally, one should not forget Effie Trinket's loud and over-the-top femininity that represents the media's – often ridiculous and unattainable for the majority -- beauty standards. Thus, do all of the points made about Katniss's masculinity make her one of the 'men with breasts' that Christine Mains writes about, since she does not seem to adhere to very many of the 'female' traits? It might seem like it at first glance, but we will soon explore how Katniss moves between femininity and masculinity in a way that makes it difficult to pin her down to one specific side of the spectrum.

It seems that the 'hero or shero' question pushes against Butler's theories of fluent and non-binary genders, and instead reconfirms and encourages the male/female binary by insinuating that if a woman embodies a certain amount of 'male' attributes then she is somehow less of a

representative for the category of ‘woman.’ In short, is Katniss ‘acting like a man’ or is she simply acting like herself? Does a female character *have* to adhere to a certain number of ‘female’ characteristics to be considered ‘female enough’? A reason for this view could be what Miller writes in her essay “Katniss and the Politics of Gender”, where she mentions Beauvoir’s suggestion that by being limited to what is defined as feminine, women are proposed to not only be different from men, but inferior to them. Miller says that, unfortunately, it often sounds as though Beauvoir thought that “women have to stop being feminine in order to live truly fulfilling lives” and that “she also seemed to think that gender differences weren’t compatible with true equality between women and men” (Miller 151). Since then, Miller continues, “other feminist philosophers have championed traditionally feminine traits of the kind Prim displays, arguing that the problem isn’t femininity itself, but rather its devaluation in society and the lack of choices available to women and men” (151). So, to appear as though we perceive femininity as inferior, society has begun to look down on more masculine female characters. Meghan Gilbert-Hickey points out, however, that Collins does not invert gender norms so much as she complicates them. It is not such a simple matter as to changing the feminine into the political and the masculine into the domestic.

(...) When Katniss performs femininity and heterosexuality, thereby exposing to us, as readers, the extent to which her femininity is an act, she is doing so in accordance with what we have traditionally labeled as feminine reasoning: the desire to win bread not just for herself but also for vulnerable, kind Peeta. It’s circular and very muddled: her femininity is performed, but the very notion that she’s willing to perform it is an act of “feminine” nurturing (Gilbert-Hickey 100).

This recalls one of the points in chapter one where I suggested that the performance we find in *The Handmaid’s Tale* brings exposure to the ways in which gender is an act. Gilbert-Hickey also theorizes that Collins seems to argue that rigid gender norms don’t work and will, in the

end, prove to be an insurmountable detriment (101). Further she suggests that Collins demonstrates the fallibility of ultra-masculine men and ultra-feminine women, as the characters who conform to strict interpretation of gender either end up lonely or dead, like Gale and Prim in the last book *Mockingjay*. The blurring of the masculine and the feminine in *The Hunger Games* encourages breakdown of the male/female gender binary and shows the advantages of adapting traits from more than one gender.

Thus, while Katniss's masculinity is prevalent and some might argue she is not 'feminine enough' to count as a female hero, it is important not to forget that Katniss's main goal and motivation throughout the text is survival, and that that survival is directly correlated to her love for Prim. This exposes her "innate femaleness" (Mitchell 128) in the sense that femaleness tends to be tied with caring abilities. Even in the beginning of the novel, before traditional femininity is forced onto her, Katniss shows how she *does* embody loving and caring qualities despite her outwardly masculinity. Jennifer Mitchell states that Katniss taking Prim's place in the Games "can be ascribed to her undying notion of maternal protection" (128), and Lindsey Issow Averill emphasizes how Katniss's care is a "natural care" that "always remains her polestar" (Averill 173) even though her moral compass becomes more nuanced through the trilogy. This maternal instinct for Prim repeats later in the text with another tribute, twelve-year old Rue from another severely poor and oppressed district, who Katniss feels a strong connection to because she reminds her of Prim. This love and care for Prim, and by extension, Rue, transcends what Katniss eventually grows to feel for Peeta, something that will be explored further in the chapter on relationships.

Katniss and Peeta have overturned the gender dichotomy. Katniss is similar to a power fantasy, an expression often used to describe superheroes like Superman and Captain

America. Where Katniss strength in the arena is her archery, Peeta's skills are not as physical but instead they have roots in the domestic. Peeta is a baker, a traditionally feminine occupation, and uses the artistic skills he learned from decorating cakes to camouflage himself in the arena. Tom Henthorne suggests that Peeta, as opposed to Gale's static masculine ideal, develops into a person "who is ultimately able to transcend the gender he was assigned and become someone new" (Henthorne 57). Additionally, Peeta expresses emotions a lot better than Katniss. "His kindness, sensitivity, and willingness to work in teams also defy masculine stereotypes, as does his general lack of aggression" (58). In comparison, Katniss is less willing to work in teams, preferring to either take care of underdogs like Rue or work alone, and shows anger management issues when she shoots an arrow "without thinking" (*THG* 117) at the Gamemakers during the presentation of her skills because they were more preoccupied with eating than paying attention to her. In the world of *The Hunger Games*, Peeta is praised and rewarded for his more 'feminine' personality: "I'm not as smooth with words as Peeta" (349), "[He is] likeable. He has a sort of self-deprecating humour naturally" (135). The male tribute from District 11, Thresh, seems to have a personality similar to Katniss, yet he is not expected to alter it to get sponsors the way she is. "(...) He's been very solitary, speaking to no one, showing little interest in training. (...) He ignores Caesar's attempts at banter and answers with a yes or no, or just remains silent" (146). Katniss seems to take notice of the double standards, because she says, "If only I were his size, I could get away with sullen and hostile and it would be just fine! I bet half the sponsors are at least considering him" (146). Thus, Collins shows that being sullen and hostile is viewed more negatively when internalized by a woman rather than a man. *The Hunger Games* portrays a hostile female protagonist and a more up-beat and positive male protagonist, and this challenges the expectations and creates an interesting dynamic where the man, Peeta, fills the role of 'damsel in distress' while Katniss ends up rescuing Peeta in all three books. Thus,

masculinity is no more fixed than femininity, and Peeta's character helps highlight this by showing that gender is a matter of performance rather than biologically pre-determined traits.

2.2 Performing and Parodying Gender

The caring side of Katniss falls under the 'feminine' qualities but the way she expresses this care is through strength, bravery, and sometimes ruthlessness, i.e. 'male' characteristics. In other words, on first glance it might seem like she possesses only 'male' attributes, but on further inspection we find there is a mix, and this mix is important when it comes to challenging gender essentialism. The mixing together of so-called masculine and feminine qualities in Katniss becomes more important as the book progresses, as her chances in the Games rely completely on her ability to perform femininity and an exaggerated 'girliness' in what turns out to be a 'fake it 'til you make it' strategy that essentially functions as a parody of 'the original' female gender that Judith Butler claims does not exist.

The pre-Game makeovers in the Capitol bear a resemblance to drag performance. Butler suggests that drag's intention is not to degrade women, nor is it "an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality", but instead drag mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.

As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (Butler 175, original emphasis).

Katniss's makeover transforms her outwardly less than traditionally feminine appearance into the archetype of a typical 'Hollywood woman', complete with extravagant dresses, thick

layers of make-up, and a total lack of body-hair. Where her only 'feminine' gender marker used to be her long, braided hair, Katniss has now been assigned the entire 'package' that is stereotypical feminine presentation. Now a complete opposite from her usual self, this extreme femininity presents itself almost like a drag performance. The makeover is, in Butler's terms, an imitation without origin, a "fantasy of a fantasy" (Butler 175), and an imitation of an original identity that has no actual reference.

While highlighting the absurdity of the fact that this particular image of a female is seen as 'the original' and 'the norm', Katniss's transformation also emphasizes the Capitol's obsession with beauty and outer appearance, as well as wealth and consumerism, and mirrors our own society's ever-growing obsession with appearance and celebrity culture and mimicking of way those individuals present themselves. Katniss's new appearance, accompanied by her mentors' attempts at making her appear more likeable for the masses (i.e. smile more and act less sullen) creates a whole new persona that she must keep up if she is to gain sympathy and win the Games. It is all about "presentation [and] televised behavior" (*THG* 53) in a way that revolves around how the public perceives you.

Katniss's portrayal as a character with a distaste for fashion and beauty thus not necessarily have to undermine femininity in itself, but instead critiques the obsession with appearance and Hollywood glam that is prevalent in our own society. In our western media, women often feel pressured or shamed into getting rid of their body hair, and Collins uses Katniss as a way of challenging this perception of feminine beauty. "My legs, arms, torso, underarms and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped for [hair], leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. I don't like it" (71). In *Catching Fire* it is mentioned that Katniss has not continued this type of grooming and has to be shaved and waxed all over again for the Quarter Quell Games, thus

emphasizing the lack of influence this particular societal standard has on her. Additionally, Katniss gets dressed up in dramatic clothing, hair, and make-up, and when she looks into the mirror she refers to her mediated self as a “creature” she can no longer recognize (139).

Katniss’s distaste in her make-over has little to do with traditional femininity, but rather it is a rejection of the indulgent lifestyle of the Capitol and material pleasures she is unused to, in the same way she feels uncomfortable, especially in *Catching Fire*, about what and how much they eat compared to all the poor districts (including her own) that have to go hungry.

Tom Henthorne also refers to Butler’s theories of gender parody in his book *Approaching The Hunger Games Trilogy*, writing that through her experiences in both Panem and District 13 (in *Mockingjay*), Katniss learns that both masculinity and femininity are performances and that they can be performed in different ways depending on one’s needs and desires. What we see is that Katniss learns “to parody gender, to borrow Judith Butler’s terms, masquerading in ways that destabilize the binary opposition between male and female that patriarchal control is based upon” (Henthorne 45). This can be seen in the ways she performs on stage in front of the audience as well as the way she uses her ‘masculine’ emotionless façade she has adapted as to not appear weak or defeated. In the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, we find that Katniss’s “indifferent mask” (*THG 7*) is something that she consciously adapted after she, as a child, constantly scared her mother with what she would “blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule [their] country” and then realized this would “only lead (...) to more trouble” (7). Thus, she “learned to hold [her] tongue and to turn [her] features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read [her] thoughts” (7). This benefits her greatly in the Games. After the reaping where she volunteers to take Prim’s place, she begins to form what will be a large part of her game strategy. “(...) I don’t want to cry. When they televise the replay of the reapings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I’ll be marked as

an easy target. A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction” (53). Inside the arena, Katniss makes sure to play with the audience to ensure that she has the upper hand by deliberately hiding almost all her emotions. She knows that they look for reactions to play up the drama, so when she overhears that Peeta, who is supposed to be on her side, has teamed up with the brutal “Career tributes” from the privileged districts (the winner of the Games is often a Career tribute because of their extensive training), Katniss refuses to look confused or frightened, which the audience will expect as they believe Katniss and Peeta to be in love (see chapter four for more on this). “I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!” (191). Katniss also hides physical pain to avoid appearing weak. When she severely burns her leg and needs help from sponsors to get treatment, she has a strategy figured out on how to obtain it. “I can’t show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does” (209). Mental perseverance and stubbornness to give in are both valued and encouraged, and often seen as masculine traits, and Katniss uses it to her advantage and ends up receiving ointment for her burn. Her ‘masculinity’ helped her through the Games, though it is important to note that not showing emotions does not equal being emotionless. It is as Henthorpe suggests; Katniss uses masculinity to her advantage, but she certainly does possess the more typically feminine caring side, as we have already seen in relation to Prim and will soon explore further in relation to Rue within the arena.

This unemotional ‘masculine’ approach works in the arena when it comes to making herself less of a target, but in front of the crowds Katniss is required to perform traditional forms of femininity that includes playing the “silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress” (pre-Game) and “innocent little girl” (post-Game). This does not come as easy to her as the more

stereotypically masculine behavior, but she learns to use it to her advantage, as the ‘girly’ performance wins the superficial audience over easily. During the opening ceremony before the Games begin, she impresses the audience with her clothing, which is on fire to represent her District as the one that produces coal, as well as her behavior.

Remember, heads high. Smiles. They're going to love you! I hear Cinna's voice in my head. I lift my chin a bit higher, put on my most winning smile, and wave with my free hand. (...) As I gain confidence, I actually blow a few kisses to the crowd. The people of the Capitol are going nuts, showering us with flowers, shouting [her and Peeta's] names, our first names, which they have bothered to find on the programme. The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can't suppress my excitement. Cinna has given me an advantage. No one will forget me.

Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire (81)

This highlights the idea that a livelier female is preferable to a more sullen one and shows how Katniss slowly learns to manipulate the crowd. This seems more like a parody than her masculine performance, in the sense that it is not close to how she would usually act, while she is slightly masculine otherwise. Her femininity is more heavily constructed and Katniss and her team struggle to find a persona that suits her and that she can play in a believable manner during the pre-Game interview. “We try me playing cocky, but I just don't have the arrogance. Apparently, I'm too “vulnerable” for ferocity. I'm not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or mysterious. By the end of the session, I am no one at all” (137). In the eyes of the superficial audience she cannot be pigeonholed into any category that they are familiar with and that therefore it is implied that she will be rejected for acting like herself. In this world of mediated glamour and glitz, where conformity to standards are the norm, there is no room for individuality.

Her most important display of femininity within the arena itself happens with little twelve year old Rue, who reminds Katniss so much of Prim that she decides to team up with her despite the fact that Rue is far from the Game's strongest player. With Rue as her ally, we are once again reminded of Katniss's caring and mothering side, and that she is not incapable of substantial social interaction. "I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be" (244). Miller mentions how Katniss's protectiveness "[require] actions more typically associated with masculinity" (Miller 147) and points out how *The Hunger Games* both begins and ends with two incredible physical displays of protectiveness; first volunteering for Prim and then threatening to kill herself rather than allowing Peeta to die. While what she does for Rue after her death is not physical in the same way, it still ends up being seen as brave and reckless while having a root in the more caring. Katniss sings a lullaby for Rue as she dies and kisses her temple once she is gone. When a tribute dies, the nearby tributes are meant to clear out so that the bodies can be collected, but Katniss remains and her rage against the Capitol emerges, starting the rebellion that eventually leads to the civil war in *Mockingjay* where Katniss functions as the mascot for the rebelling districts. "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 there is a part of every tribute that they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I" (276). She decorates Rue's body with flowers, wreathing her face and weaving them into her hair.

They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it. "Bye, Rue," I whisper. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction (277).

This rebellious act makes Katniss both brave and caring, emphasizing both sides of her as equally important and valuable.

Having too many feminine characteristics is often seen as negative. For instance, a beautiful girl that takes pride in her appearance and enjoys fashion and make-up tends to be seen as vain and silly. Additionally, females with a more serious or sullen personality are viewed as less than a male with the same traits. We see a similar mentality in *The Hunger Games* after Katniss's make-over and the televised interviews that follow. After Cinna, Katniss's stylist, finishes dressing her, her reaction to herself is positive, after the initial shock of looking like a "creature". "I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun. For a while, we all just stare at me. 'Oh, Cinna,' I finally whisper. 'Thank you'" (140). Her gratitude does not stem from her enjoyment of her look only, it stems from the fact that her attire and all the work put into it means that Cinna believes in her. The flashier and more extravagant the look, the higher are the chances of getting sponsors and thus win the Games. Katniss mentions on a previous occasion, District 12 tributes were presented to the audience naked, but covered in coal, so her complicated and thought-out dress that transforms into flames when she spins around is proof that Cinna has faith she will not be the first to die. However, when her manager and prep-team pairs this new feminine appearance with the roles she must play during the interview, she notes that she comes across as silly. "I survived the interview, but what was I really? A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress. Giggling. The only moment of any substance I had was when I talked about Prim. (...) [I'm] silly and sparkly and forgettable" (159). Later, during the Games, Katniss overhears the career tributes, the ones from the more privileged districts, call her "pretty simple-minded" (190) because of the way she was portrayed during the interview.

Thus we can conclude that her appearance combined with her pleasant and bubbly behavior is seen as a negative combination and she is assumed to be silly and simple-minded. However, Katniss is not silly, she is not shallow, and she is not simple-minded. *The Hunger Games* shows through Katniss gender performance where she plays with both gender expressions that appearance is not necessarily a reflection of who you are, that one can be pretty yet not shallow, and that one can be quiet and sullen yet not uncaring. The gender hybridity found in the series breaks down the gender binary and challenges the male/female dichotomy in a way that does not simply reverse it, but complicates it and mixes it up.

Chapter 3: *The Handmaid's Tale* and relationship performance

3.1 The Color Red: Sexual Desire and Repression

Before we begin to look at the different relationships in the novel, both romantic and sexual, it is relevant to explore the notion of desire in the text, and how it is expressed by the female protagonist. The way sexuality is so tightly regulated in Gilead strips everyone, not only women, of choice when it comes to sexual expression. Yet, while discouraged by society, Offred still expresses her repressed sexuality through various small actions and cues, which again shows how society's attempt at brainwashing its citizens has not succeeded as well as it might seem on the outside looking in. The color red in the novel, as in the real world, symbolizes desire, lust, and sexuality. This is why the handmaids wear red cloaks, shoes, and sleep in red rooms. I suggest that it is not a coincidence that her name is *Offred*, even though the name consists of 'of' and 'Fred' to signal who she belongs to. The color signals not only the handmaids' status as sexual objects (seeing as red is seen as the color of desire) but also represents Offred's personal desires.

If we agree that red is the color of desire, then the tulips in the novel function as symbols of desire for Offred in a way that is more empowering than the dehumanizing red of her outfit which turns her into a sexual object. Serena Joy's garden represents Offred's repressed sexuality. In one instance, the tulips make an appearance in relation to Nick, showcasing Offred's sexual desires for him. When Offred sees Nick polishing his car, the sexual innuendos are plentiful, but subtle, hidden in descriptions of the tulips. While often not red, the tulips in *The Handmaid's Tale* are always red to stand as a metaphor for the Handmaids.

In the driveway, Nick is polishing the Whirlwind again. (...) The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalices; thrusting

themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards. Nick looks up and begins to whistle. Then he says, “Nice walk?” (54-5)

The way the descriptions of the tulips occur between two mentions of Nick frames him as the object of Offred’s desire, though possibly subconsciously. The use of the word ‘chalice’ here brings to mind Offred’s comment on how handmaids are ‘ambulatory chalices’, thus we can argue that the tulips represent the handmaids, useless once they become too old to conceive. Thus, in a lack of other outlets, Offred uses flowers as means to express her sexuality in a safe and ‘non-shameful’ way. Offred recognizes that Serena Joy’s garden has something subversive about it (her words), it has a “sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*. (...) Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire” (161-2, original emphasis). It is clear that the entire garden evokes feelings of desire. While these feelings usually narrow in on Nick, flowers are also mentioned in order to describe Luke, her ex-husband, who she misses dearly: “there’s a scar, no, a wound, it isn’t yet healed, the colour of tulips, near the stem end, down the left side of his face” (114-15). To say that a wound is the color of tulips sounds strange, as something as beautiful as a flower is not usually associated with pain and suffering, but with this association we are brought back to the description of the tulips opening up in relation to Nick, thus we can assume, yet again, that this particular red flower symbolizes Offred’s feelings for these two men.

3.2. Offred and the Commander

Every relationship of Offred’s in the novel that goes beyond strictly ‘business’ has to be secret and remain hidden from the ‘all-seeing eye’. Her relationship with the Commander transforms

from a clinical business arrangement into a closer, more intimate relationship that is considered inappropriate by society and must therefore be secret. Originally, Offred and the Commander are to have sex once a month, in the presence of the Commander's wife, in the hopes of Offred becoming pregnant. Their relationship evolves from this when the Commander asks Offred to come to his office so they can play Scrabble and have a connection Offred theorizes that he cannot find with his wife. While Offred enjoys the intellectual stimulation her visits to his office bring her, she continuously emphasizes her acting and pretending when it comes to the more intimate sides of their relationship, such as kissing and sex. Her performance as a willing lover is here directly linked with her gender performance as a sexual object catering to the male gaze, expected by society to perform sexually without complaint.

Atwood uses conventions of romance fiction that cast both Nick and the Commander as "the hero". Professor Sarah Morrison writes in her article on the romance plot in *The Handmaid's Tale* that Atwood's novels are often viewed as feminist metafiction that highlight the restrictive patterns and conventions of literary genres that, viewed negatively, have "bound woman as writer and woman as fictional creation" (Morrison 317). Morrison points out that various critics have drawn attention to Atwood's sometimes parodic use of the romance genre and thus her attitude towards these conventional forms become "hard to gauge" (317). It is clear that Offred idealizes the romantic conventions of the past and repeats these in a Butlerian fashion to construct the character of a fairytale princess or a 'damsel in distress' character, but whether Atwood's use of them is purely parodic or not is difficult to tell. Later I will later argue that the overt mimicry is indeed parody, or at the very least purposefully exaggerated for effect.

Further Morrison claims that the Commander plays out a trope in women's romances where the hero, "despite the freedom to employ coercion and physical force, despite societal sanction to disregard the socially inferior heroine's wishes, despite the possible damage to his status" comes to recognize the heroine's "innate superiority and court her honorably" (320). By treating Offred nicely, ensuring her that he wants her to be happy and entertained, the Commander becomes part of the trope Morrison talks about where the man disregards his status to court the woman. This courting consists of making their meetings seem on equal ground, and also make them seem like dates. The Commander is portrayed as a slightly naïve elderly man who gives the impression of not actually knowing the true conditions the handmaids live under, and seems to genuinely want Offred to be "entertained." However, it is important to remember that he still is in a considerable position of power and Offred has no choice but to spend time with him. She does not look at him with any type of desire. On the contrary, she describes him as "positively daddysih" (Atwood 193) and "a shoemaker in an old fairytale book" (98), two different "disguises" that have the similar 'cozy' feel that Offred revels in during the opening of chapter twenty-nine. Offred disguises not only his appearance, but also his actions and their meetings, as something 'cozier'. In other words, she begins to liken their Scrabble meetings to that of a date, as if the Commander is courting her romantically. After the first night of playing Scrabble, Offred feels that "this is like being on a date" (149). She has this thought after the Commander says it is time to go home, and she reacts to his use of the word 'home' as if her home is not just a room that is basically a prison cell. "He asks me if I will be all right, as if the stairway is a dark street. (...) We open his study door, just a crack, and listen for noises in the hall" (149). The pretense of a date is emphasized when the Commander demands a kiss and she complies, only to have to do it again "as if [she] meant it" (150). At the very end of the novel, when Offred gets taken away, she looks at the Commander and thinks, "He looks worried and helpless, but already

withdrawing from me, distancing himself. Whatever else I am to him, I am also at this point a disaster” (306). Morrison points out that the line ‘whatever else I am to him’ keeps alive the hopeful possibility that the Commander sees Offred as “a unique individual rather than as merely a generic Handmaid” (Morrison 320), alluding to the possibility of him actually feeling something for her. Additionally, by sneaking in and out of his office, performing the ‘sexual’ and rebellious act of Scrabble and kissing goodbye, their new arrangement brings allusions to old romantic clichés of sneaking off to meet one’s lover after dark. In short, repeating and performing romantic tropes, that have been repeated over and over again in nearly every romance, helps normalize Offred and the Commander’s relationship and frames the Commander as a romantic hero.

Like the flowers, the Scrabble game turns into a stand-in for sexual activity, a forbidden game that satisfies both the Commander’s need for connection and intimacy. To both of them, this is a way of rebelling and living out fantasies they no longer have access to, and they use each other as a means to an end rather than human beings in his or her own right. Offred thinks back to a time when she was uninterested in Scrabble, but “now of course it’s something different. Now it’s forbidden, for us. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife. Now it’s desirable” (Atwood 149). Also like the flowers, the language surrounding the game turns sexual and sensual, effectively comparing Scrabble with sex, both forbidden acts in Gilead.

I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious (149).

By disguising a mundane game of Scrabble as a sexual act, Atwood not only highlights the lure of the forbidden, but also places emphasis on the transformative quality of the situations in her novel, showing how disguising the truth with something 'glossier' creates a more bearable environment, seeing as the Commander asking Offred to play a word game is a lot less disturbing than making her visit him so he can sleep with her would be.

However, the sexual is not the only thing that is forbidden; the written word is too. Thus, Offred's wordy and complex description of the Scrabble game also points to her yearning for reading and knowledge, another part of normalcy that has been stripped from the handmaids. . "We lean towards [the Commander] a little, iron fillings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (99). This quote not only shows how the handmaids have to hear the same things again and again until it settles in their subconscious and make them internalize Gilead's ideas, but also how desperate they are for 'the word'. By completely removing all sorts of reading experience from the women they are made all but powerless against the pull of literature and they are willing to take whatever they can get, "sexual" Scrabble games included. This works as another manipulation technique to make the handmaids unable to resist and thus, perhaps subconsciously, accept the message given so repeatedly.

Offred interprets the Commander's behavior towards her as his way of rationalizing Gilead's regime and maintaining the 'glossy surface image.' When Offred learns that the last handmaid to visit the Commander's office the way she does hanged herself after Serena Joy, his wife, found out, she suggests maybe she should stop coming there. To this, the Commander replies, "I thought you were enjoying it. (...) I wish you would" (197) and Offred realizes that he wants her life to be bearable to her. She comments upon the justification the ones in power have for the regime: "If my life is bearable, maybe what they're doing is all right after all"

(197). As long as their lives look bearable from an outside perspective, then the authorities can convince themselves they are doing the right thing.

The glossy surface image is maintained both by the Commander, but also by Offred herself, who is forced to pretend and play a role when she is with the Commander. She does this not only when he wants to kiss her while on their 'dates', but she also makes sure to specify that the copulation Ceremony is purely done out of duty and not desire: "I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. (...) It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena" (104-5). After Jezebel's, the Commander forces himself upon Offred, saying "I thought you might enjoy it for a change" (266). Offred ends up not enjoying it, but she still pretends to, to keep up the performance, maintain the surface image, and ensure her situation is more bearable. After Offred begins to see the Commander outside of the monthly Ceremonies, she finds the Ceremonies more uncomfortable than before and she feels shy of him.

I felt, for one thing, that he was actually looking at me, and I didn't like it. (...) This act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower, had become for me indecorous, an embarrassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before.

He was no longer a thing to me. That was the problem (169-70).

Here we learn that previously Offred has been able to dehumanize the Commander in order to go through with the Ceremonies, by turning him into an object, a 'thing', the 'bee to her flower'. What is being done to her by society, she does to the Commander to make her situation bearable. They both contribute in faking this relationship to the best of their abilities, for different reasons, in order to feel more at ease in Gilead. This performative heterosexuality Offred and the Commander is a strategy for survival. Their relationship often disguises itself

as a romantic relationship, but the performance itself reveals the faults and dangers of the system.

3.3 Offred and Nick

Offred's secret affair with Nick the Guardian is the more 'romantic' part of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Where her relationship with the Commander is at times disturbing and nonconsensual, Offred's affair with Nick allows her to act out her repressed desires, both sexual and romantic, to a certain extent. While Offred forces herself to play the part as the Commander's mistress, Offred relishes in playing the part as Nick's romantic heroine. While Offred emphasizes that they avoid using the word 'love', as that would be 'romance' and 'bad luck', their relationship still revolves heavily around the repetition of old romances and fairytales, which reveals both of their desire for romance.

Offred's insistence on repeating and mimicking old romance tropes and clichés emphasizes the performance that goes into her relationship with Nick in the sense that the way she acts is the way that is expected of her according to these stories. By mimicking pre-existing scenarios and ways of speaking, Offred illustrates Butler's later claim that gender is the repetition of acts that precedes the performer. In this case we see the repetition, once again a very literal and purposeful repetition, of gestures, behavior and speech fits this argument quite nicely, though Atwood utilizes the repetition in a way that *acknowledges* the performance at the same time as it problematizes the idealization of heteronormative gender roles.

We know by now that Offred relies on old heroic tales to imagine a different reality than the one she is in, and in this different reality Nick is portrayed as either 'a hero,' 'a prince,' or some other 'female fantasy' character. Because of this, some critics have argued that the

return to the old romance tropes only reinforces stereotypical gender roles. Nick taking the role as the hero, the ‘fairytale prince’ as Madonna Miner calls him, links Offred to the “Innocent Persecuted Heroine genre” who “ultimately [triumphs] through love” (Morrison 321), a trope that makes the heroine’s happy ending dependent on the man’s love. In order to illustrate this mimicry, we will first look at the scene where Offred has sex with Nick in an attempt to get pregnant. At first, Offred tells a false version of what happened, a more ideal version, reminiscent of Harlequin romances, or ‘bodice rippers’, featuring a strong military man as indicated by the minimalistic “military” bedroom.

He moves away from me, turns off the lamp. Outside, like punctuation, there’s a flash of lightning; almost no pause and then the thunder. He’s undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can’t see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, it’s been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once (273).

Madonna Miner finds this “reliance upon traditional grammar” (Miner 163) worrisome, as she feels mass-market bodice rippers provides a dangerous source of role models for women where their role is to be dramatically, and sometimes violently, swept off their feet by ‘men made of darkness’.

The reenactment of a typical romance movie script in the next scene further highlight the performativity of both gender and sexuality, as Nick and Offred fall into another set of old pre-made characters, this time complete with performative speech. Though the scene similar to a Harlequin romance was just a fantasy, this we find out in the next paragraph that starts with “I made that up” (Atwood 273), Offred then tells another version that also falls back onto

traditional grammars. In this scene, both Nick and Offred participate in the reenactment of old romance movies.

“You come here often?”

“And what’s a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this,” I reply. We both smile: this is better. This is acknowledgement that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup?

“Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.” We’re quoting from late movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that: this sort of talk dates back to an era well before our own (Atwood 274).

In her review of Lisa Fletcher’s *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, Pamela Regis writes that, for Fletcher, the phrase “I love you” is a performative “romantic speech act” that is crucial for the romance novel (Regis 2). Regis draws on Butler’s ideas of heterosexuality as an “impossible imitation of itself, an imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original” (Butler “Imitation and Gender Insubordination ” 314), stating that just like the heterosexual romance repeats and imitates itself, the entire romance genre can be seen as performative. The scene above acknowledges parodic behavior in a more overt manner by almost directly copying familiar scenes from romance movies. Butler’s view on parody ties with Regis’s recognition of romantic speech acts imitating itself. This exchange parodies romantic ideals from a movie, which again is an imitation of something previous, etc. The imitation has no original, it is merely mocking a perceived original. By having Offred think that “possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning” (Atwood 274), it seems that Atwood agrees with this view of romances as imitations of a non-existent original, and thus *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be read as parodying traditional romance plots and tropes through these acknowledgements.

Like my claim that Offred turns to fairytale allusions to describe her surroundings and her situation to escape her own dismal reality, the imitations of classic heterosexual romances provide the same function. In the article “The Cinderella Complex: Romance Fiction, Patriarchy and Capitalism”, Jeanne Dubino explores women’s romance fiction, including the Harlequin romance, and writes that many women turn to these kinds of romance novels “in a vicarious attempt to compensate for the lack of attention and validation they get in their own lives” (Dubino 107) and “to absent themselves temporarily from their workaday, routine world” (Dubino 108). This can also be seen as the reason why both Offred and Nick’s fall into these types of escapism performances, the pre-existing ‘templates’ for heterosexual romance feel familiar in a society where they are no longer allowed to exist and where everything they do is regulated and controlled. Offred theorizes that Nick “feels used” and “wants something from [her], some emotion, some acknowledgement that he too is human” (Atwood 273-4) and similarly, she begins to cry when she realizes this type of romance is “all gone now, no longer possible” (274). Dubino also writes that women tend to read romances so that they can “lose themselves in another world, a world in which they project themselves onto the heroine and be, momentarily, at the center of their lives, served by the hero” (Dubino 108). Read like this, Offred’s romantic fantasies, no matter how much they perpetuate binary gender roles and gender stereotypes, are a way for her to take control of her own situation and her own desires. Similarly, by choosing to view Nick as a strong military man or a prince with a flute whose purpose is to court her, she takes control over a situation she has no actual control over and reinterprets it in a way she finds more desirable.

3.4 The Love Story as a Danger to Women

Previous readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* view the love plot, especially the relationship between Offred and Nick, as a force that subverts Gilead's power. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich states that "as in *1984*, the only subversive force appears to be love" (Ehrenreich 34). As we have already seen, the ending is ambiguous and a happy ending is debatable, but some critics, including Ehrenreich, feel like Offred's relationship with Nick gives her freedom and works as a way to fight back against Gilead's oppressive regime. I have stated that Offred's romantic fantasies and her mimicry of pre-existing ideals enable her with the possibility of escape and a choice of how to handle what has been decided for her, but does her romantic and sexual relationships as a whole work as a subversive force?

Madonne Miner disagrees with Ehrenreich's view that the love plot provides freedom for Offred, but instead claims that the love story, as it is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a danger to women. Nick, as we know, functions as "the fairy-tale prince, setting the princess free with a kiss" (161). He seems to bring life to Offred, she even tells him her real name. Miner sees a problem with the mimicry of the "traditional grammar", saying "Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances" (163-4) and that with this Offred "accepts these archaic plot lines as model for her own" (166). Other 'red flags' in relation to Nick are the similarities Offred notices between the carpeting on the stairs to Nick's room and the carpeting at Jezebel's, a place that very much encourages the gender hierarchy, the objectification of women and binary gender/sexuality norms, and the way Offred completely loses interest in Ofglen, Mayday, and the possibility of escape after getting involved with Nick. "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (Atwood 283). She likens her thoughts with a settler's wife might have thought, and

“women who survived wars, if they still had a man” (283). The fact that Offred loses all interest in Ofglen and escape is worrisome as it implies that a woman’s happy end is a man, that love should be the desired ending. However, we see once again that Offred is aware of her own internalized ideas. Right after she says this, she adds, “Telling this, I’m ashamed of myself” (283) that lets the reader know she thinks differently now, wherever she is while recording the tapes. Still, if love is the subversive force of the novel, if love equals freedom for the female character, then these facts suggest a dark fate for women in romance novels.

Some critics agree with the interpretation of the romance plot as a parody of women’s romance, especially of the so-called “rescue fantasy”. At one point Offred sees Nick from her window and they look at each other: “I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it’s the same kind of hunger” (201). Offred equates the desires she feels for Nick with the fairytale romances where the hero whisks the girl out of her tower (i.e. prison), here illustrated by her acknowledgement that this is not the kind of romance that they have. The abrupt ending deprives the reader of closure, not only in regards to Offred’s story as an individual but also in regards to the traditional “rescue romance”, as it is uncertain whether or not Nick actually rescues Offred or not. The altered ending contributes in emphasizing the traditional ways woman’s romance often ends up, parodying it by building up to the end by playing on romantic fairytale allusions and other romantic ideals, only to have it not matter. The ending is up for interpretation, where the more romantic reader might stick to the rescue fantasy while the more pessimistic reader might read it as Nick giving Offred up. Gayle Greene thus suggests that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is essentially a critique of the romantic ending, where the woman ideally only has one end, or goal, namely a man (Morrison 317). When Offred speaks of the appeal of love, she says: “[Falling in love] was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant, a

creature from outer space” (Atwood 237). This frames love, as Greene says, as the ultimate goal. Additionally, this suggests “that for women the central enterprise of romance is self-realization” (Morrison 332) and without it you are not quite right, or quite whole. True love and a romantic ending is desired, both by Offred and by the more romantic readers, but the lack of one reminds the reader of the dangers of the romance plot, namely the risks of getting trapped by gender norms and beliefs that say a woman’s ideal ending is a man’s unconditional love. The parody and imitation of old ideals and a non-existent original, underline the performativity of heterosexual romance, drawing attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality essentialism create rigid structures for people with little room for individuality.

Chapter 4: *The Hunger Games* and relationship performance

4.1 The Function of the Love Triangle

First and foremost, *The Hunger Games* is a story of war and rebellion against an oppressive and controlling government, but within that framework there is a relatable love story that resonates with a lot of readers. While not the focal point, the love story is still an important aspect of the story in several ways. Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel write that by blending these genres, the war narrative and the love story, and crossing gendered divisions, *The Hunger Games* becomes a hybridized entry into the canon of adolescent literature. “The novel is able to bridge the gaps between the binary boy and girl cultures through Collins’s innovating blending of traditional narrative genres. Boldly centering a war novel on the experience of a female character makes *The Hunger Games* compelling, but it is Suzanne Collins’s infusion of the war story with a narrative thread of romance that not only puts her characters at cross-purposes with their initial objectives but that also makes the book – and its sequels – complex” (Lem and Hassel 126-7). This interpretation of the books coincides with what Collins herself has said was her intent when she wrote it. Tom Henthorne quotes Suzanne Collins as follows: “I don’t write about adolescence, (...) I write about war. For adolescents” (Henthorne 63). Even though the books are ‘for adolescents’, Collins does not shy away from portraying the harsh reality of war. The trilogy exposes many of war’s horrors such as injuries, being orphaned, physical and mental trauma, and the tragic loss of young lives in a violent manner. By focusing on the romance between Peeta and Katniss inside the arena, the reality TV-show that is the Hunger Games seems more like a TV-drama rather than a televised murder field. The familiar love triangle plot, which plays out between Katniss, Peeta, and Katniss’s best friend Gale, also helps the reader in a similar manner, as this familiar sub-plot makes the traumatizing war story seem less bleak and horrifying. Bill

Clemente underlines this fact that Collins work connects with adolescent readers' psychological turmoil "through the personal confusions and conflicts with which Katniss Everdeen contents (e.g., the love triangle involving Peeta and Gale (...)) (Clemente 20).

The love plot works as a distraction from the horrors in Panem similarly to how the Hunger Games was created to distract the public from wanting to rebel against the oppressive regime. In fact, the word 'panem' is derived from the Latin phrase *panem et circenses*, which translates to 'bread and circuses'. The concept is explained to Katniss in *Mockingjay*: "in return for full bellies and entertainment, [people have] given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power" (*MJ* 249). The Games work as the "ultimate entertainment" (249) and the staged love plot contributes in this. In Katniss's own words, the romance between her and Peeta is a "fabricated play on [the audience's] sympathies" (*THG* 348). At the end of the novel, when the Games are over, the television airs the highlights from the Games. "Whoever puts together the highlights has to choose what sort of story to tell. This year, for the first time, they tell a love story" (423). Similarly, the reader chooses what story to read as well. Are they reading a love story or a story about war? Is Katniss's struggle to survive more or less relevant to the story than the love triangle? The Capitol relies on the love story, which functions similarly to Gilead in the sense that the romance is part of the 'glossy surface image' used to distract from what lies beneath.

The Hunger Games overturns the common war narrative of a man going off to war while his wife and family waits for him at home in the sense that here, Katniss is the soldier going off to war while her family and Gale are left behind. This changes the stereotypical love plot in the way that gender expectations are once again challenged, like we saw in chapter two. Gale as the "waiting spouse", although they are not directly romantically involved, is emphasized

several times as Katniss thinks about him when she is away, imagining him waiting and hoping she will return home alive. “But [Gale will] be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home” (THG 239). Lem and Hassel also mention how Collins uses conventions of the romance genre and challenges them. They liken Katniss and Peeta to *Romeo and Juliet*, saying “the teenagers’ inability to play out their relationship according to their own desires due to powers outside their control duplicates some of the plot structure of Shakespeare’s play, which also uses poison in the end to bring out a dramatic climax” (Lem and Hassel 126). Katniss’s unromantic character makes this story different from *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance she refuses to get married or have children and at once point distances herself even further from this cliché by stating “we are not star-crossed lovers!” (THG 158).

Love triangles are not uncommon in contemporary young adult fiction, but Collins has several ways of challenging the trope, including what was mentioned in the paragraph above. Critic Amy L. Montz writes in her article “Rebels in Dresses: Distractions of Competitive Girlhood in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction” that young adult fiction “often presents the love triangle of two boys fighting for the love of one girl — Peta and Gale for Katniss, Jacob and Edward for Bella. In young adult dystopian fiction, such love triangles and competition represent something larger and systematic in the control of adolescent girls” (Montz 107-8). Here it is shown that often, the female character finds herself in the middle of two male suitors and has difficulties deciding who to choose to such an extent that it becomes a large, if not *the* largest, part of her storyline. However, while the love triangle does represent systematic control in *The Hunger Games*, as a large part of the love plot is forced upon the characters, the “who-will-she-pick” questions remains in the background through all three novels. Since Montz mentioned Edward and Bella from Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, there is one important

difference between Meyer's love triangle and Collins's, namely the fact that Katniss, as opposed to Bella Swan, is largely uninterested in romantic love, something which I will explore further later on in this chapter. When Gale at the end of *Mockingjay* tells Peeta that "Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can't survive without" (*MJ* 371), Katniss becomes offended and thinks: "At the moment, the choice would be simple. I can survive just fine without either of them" (372). If the love triangle played out in a conventional fashion, with the female having equal romantic feelings for both men, this would not be said at the end of a series, which is when readers expect a choice and a happy ending for the couple. Instead of insinuating that a girl's final goal should be a husband, Katniss Everdeen portrays a female character that functions on her own and challenges the heteronormativity that expects her to end up happily in love.

4.2. "It's all a big show": The Performed Romance Between Katniss and Peeta

Selling Katniss and Peeta as star-crossed lovers is a strategy that gives them an advantage in the arena. It gives them personality, attention, and sympathy. The added sense of tension and drama from the realization that if they end up as the two last remaining tributes, one of them will have to kill the other, makes for exciting television in the Capitol. Katniss's outburst of "but we are not star-crossed lovers" from the previous section leads to her mentor Haymitch reminding her of how the Hunger Games work:

Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you're a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?
(*THG* 164)

Naturally, this makes the romantic relationship between Katniss and Peeta highly performative and through the book the reader sees Katniss mimicking romantic cues that she thinks will fit the scene and make them look good for sponsors and viewers. Tom Henthorne calls it a “showmance”, a romantic relationship that develops within a reality program (101). Once again Katniss utilizes the performance to her personal gain even though she remains uncomfortable with it.

In order to gain sponsors and receive sponsor gifts such as the ointment for her burned leg, Katniss must portray feminine heterosexuality and does this through mimicking certain romantic cues such as kisses at all the right times and a few sweet and well-chosen words. In other words, the heterosexual performance is vital to both her and Peeta’s survival. They are presented as a duo from the beginning; dressed alike for events, made to hold hands, and Peeta confessing her feelings for Katniss during his interview made Katniss “look desirable” (158). However, the love scam really starts taking shape when it is announced that there has been a rule change in the Games, that now *two* tributes can win if they are from the same district. Katniss and Peeta, who have remained separated ever since the beginning of the Games, now join forces in the final section of the novel. The ‘showmance’ that blossoms between them is strategic on Katniss’s behalf (though genuine on Peeta’s) and their first kiss is no different as she only does it to make Peeta stop talking about how he might die from a leg injury. When they receive a pot of medicine for Peeta right after the kiss, Katniss realizes that one kiss equals one pot.

I can almost hear [Haymitch] snarl. “You’re supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy’s dying. Give me something I can work with!” And he’s right. If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed

lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance (THG 305).

She worries about this, as she is uncomfortable with the idea of romance and refers to it with disdain as “this romance thing” (424) even at the end of the novel, which shows how her mind has not been changed. After the first kiss, Katniss begins to mimic the way her parents acted around each other. She mimics “the special tone that [her] mother used only with [her] father” (306) and gently kisses Peeta awake. She notes how genuinely he smiles, thinking “he’s great at this stuff” (306), still believing that he is acting too. When she catches herself forgetting about “the whole romance thing”, she quickly returns to this reenactment of the heterosexual romance she has witnessed in her life. “I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where Peeta picked it up” (309). Another example includes Katniss giving Peeta a “long, lingering kiss” to “[sustain] the star-crossed lovers routine” and then “[pretending] to brush off a tear” (329-30) before leaving him drugged in a cave while she goes off to blow up their competitors’ food supply. Katniss’s final actions in the arena with the poison berries and the threat of a dual suicide unless the Gamemakers allow both her and Peeta to live, is, as mentioned previously, reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The ending is thus a repetition of this old, romantic cliché similar to those in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but with Collins’s twist on the love story they both end up surviving. These are all performative actions that make up Katniss’s heterosexual image. The mimicry and repetitions of such acts reveals the same type of impersonation found in her gender expression, highlighting the performativity of gender and sexuality.

4.3. Challenging Heteronormativity: Katniss's Aromanticism

Having already explored some ways in which Collins challenges heteronormativity, this section looks deeper into Katniss's sexuality, or lack thereof. Tom Henthorne states that "although Katniss is not presented as being homosexual, she is not presented as being heterosexual either, Collins refusing to define her through her sexuality" (Henthorne 49).

Katniss's romantic and sexual feelings are confusing and hard to pinpoint for just this reason. Her romantic feelings for Peeta are undoubtedly a performance, but what about Gale, who is handsome, charming, and interested in her? As Jennifer Mitchell writes, Katniss brings up the possibility of having romantic feelings for Gale only to soon dismiss them. She admits that it could be possible, if she allowed it to happen, but it does not indicate any real feelings for Gale. "Gale's not my boyfriend, but would he be, if I opened that door?" (*THG* 329).

A simultaneous acknowledgment of and refusal to acknowledge presents Katniss in a most ambiguous way; her overt denial of sexual attraction toward Gale can be viewed as a façade (an attempt to prevent herself from turning into her loves-struck and subsequently heartbroken mother) or as authentic (the reaction of someone without romantic or sexual inclinations) (Mitchell 130).

To me, most signs point to Mitchell's last suggestion, namely that Katniss's lack of romantic and sexual attraction towards both Gale and Peeta is authentic, and thus she comes off as embodying aromanticism instead of homo- or heteroromanticism, i.e. she does not experience romantic attraction.

Mitchell points out that rather than Gale, it is the woods that Katniss is primarily attracted to, and there are no real indications that Katniss has romantic feelings for Gale in the same way Gale and Peeta both have for her. "There's never been anything romantic between Gale and me. (...) [Girls whispering about him] makes me jealous, but not for the reason people would

think. Good hunting partners are hard to find” (*THG* 11-12). Later on, when she sets out on a dangerous mission within the arena, she longs for Gale not out of a desire to be intimate with him, but out of a wish for him to be there have “[have her] back” (330). A romance with Gale proves to be not what she wants, what attracts her to him is his company during their hunts, proving that she is strategically in her emotional life even before entering the life threatening arena with Peeta.

With Peeta, the lack of description of how she feels during the kissing scenes suggest that she might not feel much at all, the actions are merely tools to get what she wants, which differs from what is usually found in romance stories for adolescents. During the kiss in live TV after the Games, Katniss concerns herself very little with the kiss itself, only her surroundings and the situation they are in. “He’s kissing me and all the time I’m thinking, *Do you know? Do you know how much danger we’re in?* After about ten minutes of this, Caesar Flickerman taps on Peeta’s shoulder to continue the show, and Peeta just pushes him aside without even glancing at him” (421). Comparing these types of descriptions with another young adult heroine quite similar to Katniss, Tris Prior in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series (2011), the reader is in this series presented with a much clearer view of exactly how Tris feels about her love interest with descriptions of fluttering stomachs, shaking hands, and the confusion about feeling the need to be near him constantly. Books such as *Divergent* balance the action plot with Tris’s growing feelings for Four and leaves the reader confident that they know how Tris feels.

Critics such as Miranda Green-Barteet argues that Katniss’s deviation from “the stereotypical boy-crazy teenage girl” is due to her situation as a citizen in a poor District riddled with hunger, cold, illness, and death. Green-Barteet argues that, as her family’s sole provider,

Katniss “simply does not have much room in her life for the pursuits of typical adolescent girls” (Green-Barteet 38). However, several other characters in the novel have interest in and desire for romantic and/or sexual relationships despite being in a similar situation; Gale with his crush on Katniss, Peeta who falls for her in the middle of all the horrors in the arena, and Finnick Odair and his mentally unstable girlfriend Annie, who get married in the midst of war and misery. Green-Barteet also states not “many of the other young women in District 12” (38) have much room for romance either, but Katniss disputes this claim. After wondering how to “ramp up” the romance, she notes that “there are girls in the Seam, some of the merchant girls, too, who navigate those waters so easily” (THG 352). Then she adds another important clue to reading her as aromantic: “But I’ve never had much time or *use for it*” (352, my emphasis). All of this points to the likely possibility that Katniss’s disinterest is not only due to her surroundings and war-like situation, but is instead evidence of her aromantic orientation, a lack of desire for romance altogether. Not only does this challenge the heterosexual/homosexual binary by suggesting there are other possibilities, it also challenges gender essentialism by diverting from the “boy-crazy” stereotype assigned to teenage girls.

In several ways, the love between Prim and Katniss is the only real love story, while only familial. At least, it is the love story that should matter the most, as it matters the most to Katniss. Katniss’s relationship to Prim is something critics have used to explain Katniss’s decision to marry Peeta, and we will see how soon. First, consider how the only times Katniss admits she “loves” someone, with the exception of the very last page in *Mockingjay*, is whenever it is related to Prim. “How could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I’m certain I love” (11), “Her name’s Prim. She’s just twelve. And I love her more than anything” (149). The only time she says the phrase “I love you” is to Prim and their mother, before she leaves for the Capitol in the beginning of *The Hunger Games*. This is important to

consider, as this phrase is considered “the most common expression of one essential element of the romance novel (...) the declaration” (Regis 2). There are no other verbal declarations such as this from Katniss through the rest of the books. Even in the last page of *Mockingjay*, which could be considered a love confession, avoids these three words. “So after, when [Peeta] whispers, “You love me. Real or not real?” I tell him, “Real”” (MJ 436). Regis writes in her review of *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* by Lisa Fletcher that the phrase “I love you” is considered a performative “romantic speech act”, and so its absence in the series when it comes to Gale and Peeta underlines the notion that *The Hunger Games*’s focus is the war plot, not the romance plot. By reserving this phrase for family only, Collins also pushes against heteronormativity and the expectations readers might have for teenage female protagonists when it comes to love and men.

4.4 Katniss’s Marriage to Peeta: Out of Character or Believable?

Certain readers might have been shocked to find that the epilogue of the final book in the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, paints a strangely domestic picture of Katniss and Peeta in the future, married with two children. The romantic ending might seem sudden and uncharacteristic for Katniss, but several possible explanations for her choice exist. First, however, it is important to take into consideration Peeta’s change of personality in the last installment. Having been kidnapped by the Capitol, tortured and brainwashed into thinking Katniss is a ‘mutt’ (mutation) who wants to kill him, Peeta has a lot of resentment towards Katniss and at one point tries to choke her. While they eventually manage to remind him of who Katniss is, he is still traumatized and not completely the way he used to be. Another factor to consider is how

Katniss now associates Gale with Prim's death, as he was involved with a plot that got Prim and several other children killed in a bombing.

Several critics have studied Katniss's choice and revealed varying possible answers as to why the love triangle ended up the way it did, and June Pulliam suggests that the marriage is a direct result of the discipline and conditioning that Katniss was exposed through throughout the series. She argues that being teenager, Katniss is more receptive to these influences and thus ends up marrying. Pulliam agrees with Butler's view on gender, drawing attention to the way Katniss is taught to look at act feminine, saying this process reveals the fact that "gender is not the natural consequence of sex but rather a disciplinary institution" (Pulliam 174) and a political construct. By making her behave in this stereotypically feminine manner, Collins shows how she is transformed into an "instrument of her own subjection by encouraging her to experience herself as the object of male desire" and thus made to believe "she has little ability to control her life" (177). Katniss's realization of "But now Peeta has made me an object of love" (*THG*159) illustrates this. The repetitive nature of gender and heterosexuality becomes a habit, internalizing the ideas put out by society, and this makes up one theory on why Katniss ended up settling for marriage despite still appearing reluctant towards it even in the epilogue.

Abigail E. Myers however, suggests something else, namely that Katniss's choice is a way to *preserve* herself as she is and *not* change herself as a person. "Katniss, for example, has a strong moral code, a sturdy sense of right and wrong (...). At the core of her morality is steadfast loyalty to her family" (Myers 140-1). She concludes that Katniss marries Peeta because choosing Gale "would mean a betrayal of one of her highest values: the preservation of innocent life" (143). Gale being complicit in Prim's death makes him an impossible partner

for Katniss, as Prim remains her highest priority even in death. Additionally, the very last page before the epilogue reveals that Katniss is still acting strategically; making choices based more on necessity rather than romantic love, which is in line with her characterization throughout the series. “(...) 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 it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that” (*MJ* 436). Katniss still appears to be using Peeta as a tool, though in a more complicated way than inside the arena where she exchanges romantic actions for sponsor gifts. Peeta, as opposed to Gale, does not remind her of destruction and of Prim’s death. In some ways, Peeta is welcome distraction because of his positivity and her choice to marry him is a highly unromantic one. In this way, her decision shows agency and not manipulation like the previous theory implies, which is a more likely way to end a young adult series. The epilogue confirms that Katniss has not changed much as a person, as she says it took “five, ten, fifteen years for [her] to agree” (437) to have children and then was “consumed with a terror that felt as old as life” (437) when she felt the baby stir inside of her. The lack of names for the two children in the epilogue indicates a certain form of detachment, although she clearly does care for them. Katniss never says what made her choose Peeta over Gale, but overall her choice is highly unromantic, either driven by invisible forces or strategically chosen for her own benefit and mental sanity. In Myers words, the only kind of romantic love Katniss can imagine is one that allows her to stay true to herself.

Conclusion

Both of the dystopian novels we have discussed in this research deal with gender and sexuality performativity in the sense that both Atwood and Collins put focus on the repetitive and imitative nature of gender and heterosexuality. Atwood's dystopia reveals the problems with gender essentialism and gender norms by exaggerating the divide between men and women, giving women strict dress- and behavioral codes, and forcing them to go through forced sexual acts and pregnancies. The repetitive clothing, speech patterns, and otherwise regulated activities show the performance that goes into the female gender. The essentialist gender roles found in Atwood's novel reveal the short-comings of the gender binary and the idea of an 'original' or 'true' gender. *The Hunger Games* also portray gender performance through the exterior, using looks to distract from what might be less desirable about a person, like Katniss's sullen personality. Additionally, Collins plays with gender by changing the expectations, placing Peeta within the domestic and Katniss within the physical and political. Through the book series, Katniss learns to parody gender and use her hybridity to her advantage; being masculine when needed and feminine when needed. By comparing her performance with drag, *The Hunger Games* also reveals the problems with the idea of an 'original' female gender. Katniss's possession of both female and male characteristics makes her a person in her own right, and not merely a 'man with breasts' as some critics would call such a character.

The love triangle in both novels works as something relatable within an otherwise very dark and chilling tale, as well as challenging certain aspects of how women in romantic relationships are perceived. Both Atwood and Collins writes societies that attempt to create a 'glossy surface image,' i.e. they try to appear nice and functional by putting on a show, but when by looking deeper into it we see the horrors of these places. The Prayvaganza in Gilead

and the Hunger Games in Panem are similar types of distractions created to both distract and intimidate citizens. In a similar manner, the love plots on both works distract from the dark story they take place in, forcing the reader to question its importance and relevance. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the sexual relationship between Offred and the Commander serves as a reminder of Offred's oppression, but also hints at sexuality being a source for rebellion. The purposeful imitation of old romantic ideals when it comes to Offred and Nick reveal the repetitive structure of both gender and sexuality. Allusions to fairytales and harlequin romances also count as a distraction, as Offred uses familiar tropes to remove herself from the dismal situation. However, this reveals the danger the love plot in relation to women, as relying on fairytale princes and the rescue fantasy makes Offred drop all her thoughts of rebelling. In *The Hunger Games* the fabricated romance also consists of repetitions and mimicry, as Katniss purposefully mimics what she has seen her parents doing. The fact that she does not have one romantic bone in her body makes her a new type of female character within young adult fiction, challenging the heteronormativity to implying that she might be aromantic. The resolution of the love triangle might have disappointed some fans who would have preferred to see Katniss end up alone and in charge of herself, but evidence points to the fact that by marrying Peeta, Katniss does stay true to herself and her moral code, and, most importantly, the love for her sister, which transcends whatever she may feel for both Gale and Peeta. Both novels deal with performativity in a way that makes it clear it is necessary to the character's survival, thus highlighting the dangers of the gender and sexuality binary.

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