

Peer Review

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Female Heroes and Anti-heroes in the Contemporary Novel

The characters of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* and Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* are examples of female heroism and anti-heroism in contemporary literature. Katniss represents the heroic archetype, while Amy is the anti-hero. An archetype is “a literary device in which a character is created based on a set of qualities or traits that are specific and identifiable for readers” (Literary Devices “Archetype”). Katniss is easily recognizable as the hero archetype, as the main character whose story is followed throughout *The Hunger Games*. Not only that, but she also follows in the steps of other well known heroes, such as Beowulf or Odysseus, as they learn and adapt along their journey. Amy is a perfect anti-hero; she “has characteristics opposite to that of a conventional hero” (Literary Devices “Anti-hero”). While the hero “is generally admired for his bravery, strength, charm, or ingenuity” (Literary Devices “Anti-hero), it is difficult to admire many of Amy’s qualities. However, she is undeniably brilliant, clever, ruthless, and cunning. These are qualities that can often be found in conventional heroes, but Amy uses them to manipulate others. She may be unlikeable, but it is impossible to deny her resourcefulness. As one writer noted about many of Gillian Flynn’s female protagonists, “they’re not fussy about getting blood on stuff” (Oyler).

The overwhelming commercial response to Katniss, the hero of *The Hunger Games*, and Amy, the anti-hero of *Gone Girl*, reveal how society views female protagonists who use anger, violence, and wit to achieve their ends for good or ill. In short, society loves them, even if characters like Amy are hard to actually like. *The Hunger Games* was published in 2008 to become an instant best seller, with over 100 million copies in print, translation into 54 languages,

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and a five **year** consecutive run on The New York Times best-seller list (Alter). Although it was written for the YA genre, the series has fans from tweens to grandparents, appealing to readers of all ages. *Gone Girl* was published in 2012. When commenting on *Gone Girl*'s popularity at the time, Tina Jordan of The New York Times reflects, “the book gave readers something they’d rarely seen in fiction — a female character who was unapologetically and absolutely straight-**up** evil — and they couldn’t get enough of it” (2019). In Amazon’s list of the 50 best **selling** books of all time, *The Hunger Games* Trilogy occupies spots one, four, and five, while *Gone Girl* is at number 9 (Pesce).

Amy is consumed with perfection, but “every day is a chance to be less than perfect” (Flynn 222). She feels she has always been “a product” (Flynn 224). With that mindset, disappointment and resentment are inevitable. Like most perfectionists, her standards are unattainable and unrealistic. For instance, she states that love isn’t necessarily a competition, but doesn’t “understand the point of being together if you’re not the happiest” (Flynn 224). Amy and Nick struggle with the fallout of money problems, family issues, and infidelity in their marriage, but the shifting dynamic of power within their relationship is not the real competition, nor is it unusual in real life. Amy is not competing with **Nick** - she is competing with everyone. Her anger with Nick isn’t because of his cheating, his distance, or his family. She is enraged because “he had single-handedly de-amazed Amazing Amy” (Flynn 234). Just as the world has become less enamored with the Amazing Amy books as fictional Amy has grown up, real Amy has learned that she can’t guarantee the same level of adoration in her future. Her solution is “a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick for doing this to me. A story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless and adored” (Flynn 234). Amy’s **motivation** is to shift the narrative from cast off wife to tragically killed heroine. In destroying

Nick's image, she recreates her own. Her motives are undeniably dark and twisted, and the successful implementation of her plan, are a source of morbid fascination.

From the start of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss displays true perseverance and grit. Grit can be defined as "sustained perseverance and passion for long term goals" including "working strenuously toward challenges and maintaining effort and interest despite failure, adversity, and plateaus" (Voss). Rather than forcing the adoption of a persona, these extraordinary and fraught circumstances bring Katniss' natural grit to come to the fore. When Katniss volunteers to replace her sister in the Hunger Games, she decides to become whatever is necessary for survival. Katniss faces an impossible situation - if she ever wants to see Prim again, she must kill other children and emerge the winner of the Hunger Games. In a sense, Katniss has been perfecting this outward impassivity and strength for years. As a child, she learned to stay quiet and school her "features into an indifferent mask" as a form of protection (Collins 6). The only person around whom she feels safe enough to allow that mask to slip, "the muscles in [her] face relaxing" (Collins 6), is Gale. Even at home, Katniss is on guard. It could be argued that the challenges required for survival in the Seam have been preparing her for this very moment. Katniss' inner pragmatism makes her a formidable young woman. She is not the product of a contrived persona. Rather, Katniss' innate toughness is drawn to the fore because of the extraordinary circumstances she accepts in order to protect her sister. Voss calls grit "an essential component of achievement." Gucciardi et al argue that "mental toughness reflects a psychological capacity of individuals that characterizes their potential for action toward an objective or purpose, particularly in response to challenging circumstances." In Katniss, Suzanne Collins shows how truly dangerous a person can be when they choose to embrace the parts of themselves, the ruthless, fierce, and fiercely loving parts, that increase the chances of survival.

These are the very elements that made Katniss' story resonate so powerfully with young people when it was released in 2008. At the time, new high school and college graduates in the United States emerged from the relative safety of surviving the next exam or paper into an economy experiencing "scenes of fiscal trauma...unparalleled since the Wall Street crash of 1929" (Dix 6). When the Great Recession started in 2008, it's greatest impact in developed countries was on young adults (Sironi 105). The release of *The Hunger Games* in 2008 gave young people, hearing news reports and perhaps feeling the pinch of the Great Recession on their own families' finances, the opportunity to compare their own reality with "the disparity between the wealth of the Capitol and the poverty of the districts" (Montgomery 254). The "horrifying nature of makeovers, fancy costumes, and rich food as a prelude to being required to battle to the death"(Montgomery 254) is a stark parody of a society obsessed with reality TV, but willing to ignore the reality of poverty and need during an economic crisis. Like so many teens and young adults during the Great Recession, Katniss has learned that adults don't always behave correctly or have all of the answers. Camera crews, rather than document injustice, eagerly film it, "perched like buzzards on rooftops" (Collins 16). Young people disillusioned by their parents' inactivity or failures during the Recession can hear their own anger and fear in Katniss' remembrance of her mother "who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones" (Collins 8). This collective loss of faith in grown ups and in the concept of rules, of trusting people to do what is right, is a shared burden for many as they reach young adulthood. While it can lead to a sense of hopelessness and despondency, Katniss' story is a clarion call showing that it is possible to fight back against the failures of earlier generations.

While Katniss' story is a call to continue to fight back against evil and inhumanity, Amy's plots and schemes plumb the depths of desperation and cunning. Katniss embodies the

most heroic of all characters - the protector. Amy pictures that which is difficult to look at or acknowledge, the kernel of selfish calculation in all people. Katniss is an aspiration; Amy is a horror. As Gillian Flynn stated, "the world can be divided into the people who like to look under the rock and the people who don't want to look under the rock" (Oyler). Amy's character forces the reader to look under the rock and recognize the ugly, slimy parts of human nature.

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Peer Review of Rough Draft

Great job on your rough draft Jessica! Your paper was very enjoyable to read and well-written! You thoroughly explained your theme and literary device and connected them well to each novel (*The Hunger Games* and *Gone Girl*) with substantial quotes. Your sources are scholarly and utilized well throughout your paper. I like how your theme focused around two different kinds of heroism and the literary device, archetypes (which I didn't know much about until you defined it—nice job adding the definitions).

Your strengths include a strong thesis and introduction. Your theme is clearly stated with supporting passages from novels and scholarly sources. A literary device also connected nicely with the theme and examples throughout your paper. You showed a great correlation from the theme to societal events with good evidence to back it up. You also went above and beyond the two academic sources needed with your two primary sources (novels).

As for weakness, there weren't a great deal of them. There were some spelling and grammatical errors (see above side comments) and your conclusion could have a little more bulk to it. You have a great start to your conclusion, but there were just a few elements missing from the rubric. For example, make sure you restate or circle back to your thesis in the conclusion. Also, review the main parts of your paper and discuss whether these things add or detract to the book's popularity. Also, when cutting and pasting dialogue from a source, highlight it and make it the same color (black) as the rest of the text. Some quotes were grey, not too big of a deal, but this way it looks more uniform. Lastly, double check that one source on your works cited page that I commented on above as I'm not sure if it is cited properly or in the wrong place.

Other than those few things your tone remained consistent, and your paper is well organized. As my critique is subjective, feel free to utilize what you like. I enjoyed reading your

paper and with a few tweaks you will be on your way! If you have any questions about my critique, please reach out to me. Nice job!