POST-FEMINIST ACTION HEROINES IN DYSTOPIAN SOCIETIES: KATNISS EVERDEEN & MAX GUEVARA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this survey is to investigate the effects of our post-feminist ethos on the representation of female action heroines in popular narratives, specifically in the genre of dystopia for young-adult audiences/readers using Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy and the television series *Dark Angel* as case studies. This dissertation is motivated by two research questions: (1) are post-feminist heroines adequate role models for young audiences/readers? And (2) to what extent does our post-feminist ethos influence and limit the heroic nature of female leading characters? This enquiry has been conducted following a methodology which combines (a) textual analysis of the main sources under investigation, (b) the examination of cultural products as a means to understand society, and (c) gender studies focusing on the representation of women and gender roles in the media. On the basis of the results of the present research it can be concluded that the contemporary heroines provided by dystopian works are remarkably limited with regards to their performance as heroic characters, and that their weaknesses reflect our society’s fears of the failure of patriarchy and the seizure of power by women. This study advances our understanding of the effects that our post-feminist ethos exert over the representation of action heroines in fiction, and it notes the need for gender equality not only in society but also in popular narratives.

**Key words:** the *Hunger Games* trilogy, *Dark Angel*, action heroines, dystopia, post-feminism, feminism, gender inequality, popular narratives, post-apocalyptic societies
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INTRODUCTION

The present dissertation aims at analysing the leading characters of Suzanne Collins’ the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and James Cameron’s and Charles H. Eglee’s *Dark Angel TV* series (20th Century Fox Television, 2000-2002) as post-feminist heroines. Therefore, both Katniss Everdeen and Max Guevara will be subject to investigation from a feminist perspective with the objective of determining whether they could be considered role-model heroines for our times or not. Due to the proliferation of action heroines in contemporary popular fiction that has taken place during the last decades, the number of examples that could be used to carry out the analysis of this enquiry is extremely high. “In the seventies women entered ... genres that until then had been thought of as ‘male’... The world of action and violence was no longer a man’s world” (Schubart, 2007: 5). Hence, the data sources that have served as the project’s pillars have inevitably been limited to the analysis of a trilogy and a TV series. Nevertheless, under no circumstances does this limitation affect the scope and relevance of this study and my conclusions, as the extraordinary technical complexity and the widespread popularity of both the *Hunger Games* trilogy’s and *Dark Angel*’s heroines turn these works into particularly suitable sources for this dissertation.

Moreover, apart from portraying exceptionally brave heroines, both the novels and the TV series are examples of dystopia, a genre that is particularly addressed to young-adult audiences and which is characterized by depicting futuristic and rotten societies. The places portrayed by dystopian works are defined by having great uncertainty and misery. They reflect chaotic systems where societal norms and gender roles are turned upside down, and which become perfect scenarios for the emergence of female leaders who can take control of the situation as they are no longer necessarily subjected to a patriarchal system. Indeed, many examples of dystopian works portray interesting heroines with outstanding qualities that sustain their heroic status. However, even in these cases where women seem to be granted a status of freedom and power, the heroines present fundamental weaknesses that undermine their heroic nature and discredit their potential to take leading roles. This ambiguity predominates in a vast range of contemporary works such as the ones selected for this dissertation, which belong to genres that were previously associated to men and where women are gradually standing their ground. Nevertheless, although female heroines have burst into ‘male’ genres and they seem to be successfully adapting to these new scenarios, much remains to be done as women are still not granted the same degree of strength and
independence as their male counterparts. Indeed, as Basinger suggests, when a women’s genre “is grafted onto, or fused onto, a genre that would be called ‘masculine’ ... there is a clear and brutal demonstration of how society and nature restrict women” (1993: 448).

Taking into account the topics that this enquiry will examine, I have structured the present dissertation into two main chapters. The first one, which is divided into 3 sections, is basically devoted to the contextualization of the emergence of the action heroine in popular narratives. In this section, a number of primary sources including comics, novels, movies and TV series are used to support the information provided. The first section of this chapter is concretely focused on the action heroine, giving special emphasis to the development of female characters in fiction throughout the last centuries and introducing the most remarkable heroines of all times. Afterwards, an introduction to the genre of dystopia is provided since, to gain an insight into the topic under analysis, it is necessary to become well versed in the genre that par excellence has allowed for the creation of exceptional female protagonists. This section centres specifically on its origins, as well as on the characteristics that define the genre. Moreover, several illustrative examples of films and novels that are set in dystopian backgrounds are included in this section. In the third section of this chapter, the works under analysis, the Hunger Games trilogy and Dark Angel, are presented in order to provide the reader with the essential information of each work before actually conducting a detailed analysis of the heroines in the following chapter. Altogether, the first chapter of this dissertation attempts to establish the relevance of action heroines in popular fiction throughout history, as well as to situate the texts under analysis and their generic affiliation. The second chapter of the dissertation is more practically oriented. Indeed, it is essentially devoted to the analysis of the post-feminist action heroine, firstly by means of an introduction to post-feminism and the way it has influenced the portrayal of action heroines in narrative fiction in the last decades; and secondly, through an in-depth analysis of Katniss Everdeen and Max Guevara, the protagonists of the case studies, in an attempt to determine their relevance as suitable heroines for our times.

To conduct this research I have combined the methodology of textual analysis with the theoretical framework of cultural and gender studies that purport to elucidate how cultural products reflect and determine our perspectives on gender roles. My main sources of information, from which I have extracted the basic conclusions of this dissertation, are the primary sources: the Hunger Games novels and Dark Angel. Following textual analysis, I have studied the ideas presented in these works selecting quotes that support my claims. This close
examination of the main primary sources – together with a general overview of a wide range of works including comics, novels, movies and TV series, paying particular attention to the way in which men and women are portrayed – has allowed me to observe how the media is still reluctant to advance progressive ideas regarding gender roles. All in all, in the light of the information obtained through the analysis of these products from a cultural and gender studies perspective, I have reached revealing conclusions about the presentation of women in the media. In sum, this research has contributed significantly to my knowledge of the presentation of action heroines in popular fiction and, apart from that, it has enabled me to determine to what extent women’s success is reflected in our post-feminist ethos which, on the one hand, suggests that feminism is no longer necessary as women have already reached social equality; but on the other hand, insistently attempts to convince them that their right place is not the world of action, but the domestic sphere.

Finally, I would like to remark that, due to the required length of this dissertation, the number of examples that I have used from the works under analysis is limited. However, the quotes have been carefully selected in order to ensure that the main ideas that I try to express are properly conveyed. Apart from that, an extensive body of reference works has been used to substantiate my claims. Some of the most useful texts that I have consulted to conduct this research are: *The Many Faces of Katniss Everdeen* by Valerie Estelle Frankel, *Action Chicks* edited by Sherrie A. Innes and *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* by Jennifer K. Stuller.
1. CONTEXTUALIZATION: SITUATING THE HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY AND DARK ANGEL

1.1 THE ACTION HEROINE

Action does not represent the woman’s life in films the way it represents the man’s. The ritual events of male films – taking an objective in combat, racing the bootleggers across the Canadian Border, withstanding the Indian raid – are defined by the man’s individual courage. The ritual events of female films – weddings, proms, births, and even the Happy Interlude – are defined by nature or society, and the woman is Bound by the rules. (Basinger, 1993: 20)

Throughout history, male and female domains have been highly divergent. Whereas men were basically connected with the public space, women had always been associated with the private sphere. In this light, men were the ones who spent most of their time outside home and who made use of their physical strength to earn a living. This more active lifestyle might be one of the reasons why a great number of popular genres have traditionally been reserved for men. Those genres encompass action/adventure, science fiction, the western, military/war fiction, martial arts stories or detective fiction, among others. The different movies and novels belonging to these genres were mostly created by men and for men. Consequently, it is obvious that the protagonists were fundamentally male characters. Indeed, action heroes are presented as successful masculine figures, able to overcome any sort of trouble both in physical and psychological terms. Thus, popular genres with male heroes as protagonists reassert traditional conceptions of masculinity, as well as the need for men-headed households in patriarchal societies.

On the contrary, women were supposed to enjoy genres that reaffirm traditional values which revolve around marriage and motherhood. However, they have recently included other associations that confirm stereotypes of femininity and show women’s lack of freedom in our contemporary world such as women’s desire of shopping and spending their own, or their husband’s money; or the possibility to access the labour market, albeit only in minor jobs. Hence, genres such as romance, romantic comedies, chick lit/flicks and melodrama are thought to be more appealing to them. These genres do increasingly focus on professional women with high-paid jobs but they still present love as more important than career success.
It was not until the last decades of the twentieth century when there was an increase of female protagonists in the hitherto ‘male’ world of action in popular narratives. This proliferation of action heroines is still augmenting, going hand in hand with women’s social achievements and suggesting a change in societal roles for men and women. Although the presence of action heroines in narratives is relatively recent, the first signs of tough women were found in the late 1800s’ dime Westerns. Those heroines were based on real women. The most well-liked ones were Calamity Jane, an adventurous woman who fought the Indians in the Far West; and Annie Oakley, an American, skilled shooter. Those early figures were the precedents for many brave female heroines (Iness, 2004: 2).

In the 1930s, the first female detectives appeared in US pulp magazines. They were Carrie Cashin, Violet McDade and Nevada Alvarado. Subsequently, female characters were also placed in the jungle. For instance, in the 1940s, Shenna was presented to the comic industry as the first heroic queen in Sheena, Queen of the Jungle (Fiction House, 1937-1938). This comic was so popular that many other heroic jungle-girls started to appear. Some of the most prominent jungle-heroine comics were: Camilla, Wild Girl of the Congo (Fiction House, 1940-1952), Kazanda (Fiction House, 1945), Princess Pantha (Better/Nedor Comics, 1946-1949) or Vooda, Jungle Princess (Ajax-Farrell, 1995), among many others. In the 1960s, a British TV series called The Avengers (ABC Weekend Television, 1961-1969) was extremely well-received by the audience. Although the protagonists were male characters, Dr. David Keel (Ian Hendry) and John Steed (Patrick Macnee), their female assistants were intelligent and assertive women. In fact, Mrs Emma Peel (Diana Rigg) was “a tough woman who was more than capable of taking on any man” (Inness, 2004: 3). More recently, popular female heroines appeared in the mid-1970s, in television series such as Charlie’s Angels (Spelling-Goldberg Productions, 1976-1981) and The Bionic Woman (MCA/Universal, 1976-1978). In the late 1980s, another blockbuster with a prominent action heroine was filmed. It was The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984), with the brawny character Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton). Another popular tough heroine who set trends since 1995 was Xena, the Warrior Princess in the eponymous series (Renaissance Pictures, 1995-2001) set in ancient Greece. In this series, two great female warriors, Xena (Lucy Lawless) and her unconditional friend and lover, Gabrielle (Renée O’Connor), fight against the injustices of their society (Iness, 2004: 231).

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1 The most popular action heroines introduced in this and successive parts of this dissertation are listed in the appendix, together with a brief explanation of their first appearances in fiction.
During the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, more and more female heroines appeared in popular narratives. In the field of films and TV series there are some that stand out, such as: Joss Whedon’s TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy Productions, 1997-2003) and its spin-off *Angel* (Mutant Enemy Productions, 1999-2004); James Cameron’s and Charles H. Eglee’s TV series *Dark Angel* (20th Century Fox Television, 2000-2002); Rob Bowman’s film *Elektra* (2005); Quentin Tarantino’s films *Kill Bill* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004); Simon West’s movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and Jan de Bont’s *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider The Cradle of Life* (2003); or Matthew Vaughn’s film *Kick-Ass* (2010). In the field of literature, there are also many remarkable brave heroines such as: Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy (2005-2007); Daenerys Targarien in George R. R. Martin’s saga *Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present); Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010); or Beatrice Prior in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013). The high popularity of these novels has resulted in film and television adaptations.

The figure of women in action films has changed dramatically during the last decades. First of all, they are no longer scared victims who hide behind the super-powerful male hero. Contrarily, they now integrate new characteristics such as courage and bravery that have allowed them to take on leading roles. Along these lines, they have abandoned their function as mere sidekicks in action films. Secondly, the conservative images of successful women represented as threatening femme fatales has also changed. Those unscrupulous, vengeful and manipulative women who used to smoke all day long and who used men for their dark purposes have turned into “highly acrobatic, cat-suited, and corset-wearing heroines who leap tall buildings in a single bound” (Manion & Ursini, 2006: 9). Contemporary heroines are deeply concerned with justice and fairness. Hence, they usually fight ghosts from the past related to gender inequality and make the offenders pay harshly. This is depicted in films such as *Sin City* (Quentin Tarantino, Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez, 2005) or *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995) (Manion & Ursini, 2006: 18).

This formidable invasion of action heroines responds to changes in society, since women have penetrated areas that were traditionally male – such as sports, the military or finances – and have, as a consequence, a higher public profile. There has also been a change in gender roles and men and women are supposed to be fit to perform the same tasks, so they can be able soldiers, policewomen or fire fighters as well as wives and mothers. The demands by feminists, together with an increasingly large female audience eager to see women in action roles, have
also influenced the incorporation of female heroines in popular narratives. However, writers and producers have tended to use less realistic genres – such as fantasy or science fiction and its subgenres – as arenas where to depict imaginings of heroic femininity. Since they take place in fictional locales and/or distant futures, they are ideal settings for female writers to explore women’s courage and power. Furthermore, because the stories do not take place in contemporary, real societies, they are less threatening for a potential male audience who may feel overwhelmed by women’s increasing ascendency in the public space in our real world. Dystopia is, therefore, a particularly interesting genre in this respect. In fact, it generally reproduces devastated societies in which there is the need of a leader to improve the situation that is presented. It is precisely in the middle of a chaotic background where those heroines can develop as characters and perform roles that were exclusively assigned to men in the past. For this reason, dystopia has become one of the main genres that allows for action heroines to develop.

1.2 INTRODUCTION TO DYSTOPIA

Dystopia is often regarded as a subgenre of science fiction, a literary genre characterized by the incorporation of scientific elements or technology in fictional scenarios that can be either set on the Earth or in space in future times (Silag, 2013; para. 2). Nevertheless, the borders of this genre are by no means rigid. Indeed, dystopia allows for characteristics associated with other genres such as comedy, tragedy or satire.

In order to understand dystopia as a genre, it is necessary to have a clear idea of what the concept of utopia stands for. It derives from the Ancient Greek ou topos (no place) and eu topos (good place). Darko Suvin defines utopia as “the construction of a particular community where socio-political institutions, norms, and relationships between people are organized according to a radically ... more perfect principle than in the author’s community” (2003: 188). Although Thomas More was the first author to use this term in his work Utopia (1516), the first society that is widely regarded as utopian is the one proposed by the philosopher Plato in his essay Republic (380 BC). Therefore, while utopia is an imaginary and perfect society, dystopia, from the Greek dis topos (bad place) can be regarded as its direct opposite (Milner, 2009: 827), thus becoming the dark side of utopia. In this light, the societies portrayed in dystopian works are characterized by being significantly worse than the author’s own society. The American academic and bibliographer Lyman Tower Sargent defines the concept of dystopia in his book
The Three Faces of Utopianism (1994) as follows: “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (1994: 9).

Indeed, these societies are generally dangerous and frightening places, characterized by being ruled by anti-democratic governments or totalitarian regimes that exert huge oppressive control over the population. Thereby, all dystopias provide a pessimistic representation of a corrupt and wicked society in which the protagonists, generally after an eye-opening experience, resolve to fight against all odds to improve the current situation in which they are immersed.

Even before the birth of the word ‘dystopia’ there was another word to represent the same concept. This word was ‘catatopia’, which comes from the Ancient Greek κακός, meaning ‘bad’. However, this term fell into disuse and the word ‘dystopia’ gained in popularity, standing in direct contrast to utopia. Although the concept of dystopia existed for many centuries, it was not until the twentieth century when it began to assume significant importance with regards to narratives. Indeed, “in the direction of popular culture, a more overt dystopian tendency developed within science fiction (sf) ... that appeared after World War II (1939-1945) and continues in the dystopian sf of recent years” (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003: 1).

However, it is proved that in general, when a movement or tendency reaches success a new opposite trend emerges, and this is precisely what happened to dystopia as a genre. During the 1960s and 1070s, a tendency to produce more optimistic writings appeared, which led to the major revival of utopianism since the nineteenth century (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003: 2). In the 1980s, however, this revival of optimism came to an end that resulted again in an increasing use of dystopian settings in narratives. As can be appreciated from this quote, “Western Civilization used to produce literary utopias, but in the past century of world wars, financial panics, murderous totalitarian regimes and nuclear threat, dystopias have outnumbered sunny projections by several orders of magnitude” (Bethune, 2012: para. 2).

In our twenty-first century, dystopian narratives feature prominently in Western literature since they provide an insight into the real ills of our own society as well as our fears about the future. They seek to depict a society hit by wars, terrorist attacks, poverty and economic distress. Moreover, these dystopian societies are characterized by lacking natural resources.
The human being has been producing an exorbitant amount of pollution that has resulted in extreme global warming and climate change that has finally led to the complete destruction of nature. Apart from that, the populations depicted in recent dystopias are ruled by governments that use terror policies aimed at increasing people’s fears and suspicions in order to manipulate them and prevent their uprising. Thus, the new dystopian works attempt to shed some light on the darker side of our century and the uncertainty of future times by emphasising the evil and corruption of leaders, as well as the misery and destitution in which the populations have to live.

As the production of dystopias has increased in the last century, there are lots of examples of dystopian narratives both in the form of films and novels. Some popular examples of dystopian films are the futuristic Alex Proyas’ *Dark City* (1998) and the Wachowski borthers’ *The Matrix* (1999), which share some interesting characteristics. *Dark City*’s main character, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell), awakes in a hotel, unable to remember anything about his life. As he seeks to unravel the mystery, he gradually discovers that he is not on planet Earth but on an island somewhere in space. Moreover, he stumbles upon a society dominated by the so-called Strangers who are performing experiments on some humans who have been transported to Dark City. Thus, they are not aware that they are living a false reality. This is also the case of *The Matrix*, where millions of people ignore that they are living in a virtual world. Indeed, the saga is set in a future time where the Earth is dominated by machines. They revolted against humanity and abducted the majority of the population, subsequently connecting them to a simulated reality called the Matrix, with the objective of extracting their bioelectricity. Thomas A. Anderson, alias Neo (Keanu Reeves), who is a computer programmer and hacker, realizes that he has been manipulated, and that his perception of reality has been induced by the machines. Hence, he struggles to save mankind from the control of machines.

With regard to novels, some remarkable works are George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). Orwell’s novel is set in 1984 in Airstrip One (which stands for Great Britain), a province of Oceania, one of the three states in which the world has been divided. The society depicted in Orwell’s novel is ruled by the tyrannical Inner Party, led by Big Brother, an omnipresent figure who epitomises absolute surveillance and totalitarianism. However, in this oppressed society, there is yet a flicker of hope. There is, in fact, a clandestine organization named The Brotherhood, which aims at overthrowing the central government. The novel’s main character, the middle-class Winston Smith, resolves to join the rebels after learning about the oppression by the government. Nevertheless, he
underestimates the level of ubiquity of the Inner Party and he is finally set a trap by some members of the Thought Police. After enduring extremely painful tortures during months, he is reverted to a state of submission and obedience, ultimately accepting the government’s doctrines and professing his admiration for Big Brother.

*Brave New World* is a complex novel that foresees the world’s future in terms of reproductive technology, sleep-teaching and psychological manipulation. In Huxley’s novel, the whole planet is ruled by a unified government known as the World State. Indeed, the society is perversely controlled with the purpose of preserving a utopian life-style, basically limiting the population to two billion people in order to ensure full access to resources for everybody. Consequently, natural reproduction is prohibited and children are created in hatcheries. Individual rights are utterly suppressed and the population, as in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, is under constant surveillance. In this repressive background the main character emerges. Bernard Marx, an outcast psychologist, realizes that the population’s convictions and beliefs are merely a product of sleep-teaching. Similarly to Orwell’s novel, his constant questioning and his rebellious behaviour result in the character’s regression to his former status of marginalization. In a nutshell, both novels convey the pessimistic message that an individual uprising against a tyrannical society is worthless, thus emphasizing the dystopian nature of these stories.

As previously stated, the genre of dystopia allows for the creation of formidable action heroines fighting against oppression in ravaged settings, so there is a wide range of dystopian films and novels that feature heroines. Indeed, many of the popular narratives which include action heroines mentioned in the previous section are set in dystopian backgrounds. There are many examples of dystopian kick-ass heroines. For instance, Scott Westerfeld’s saga *Uglies* (2005-2007) is one of them. It consists of a series of four novels: *Uglies, Pretties, Specials and Extras*. The action is set in a future time, where the Earth has risen from its ashes after bacteria infected petroleum, which resulted in the collapse of society. The new society, composed by hundreds of independent cities spread out across the globe, shares three universal values: equality, peace and sustainability. Hence, to ensure the population’s commitment, at age 16, teenagers must undergo plastic surgery to become ‘pretty’, which in truth is aimed at controlling and containing the population. After one of her friends’ escape, Tally Youngblood is proposed a deal: if she wants to become a ‘pretty’ she must find her friend and the Smokies, a community of runaways who oppose the government.
Another interesting dystopian heroine is Beatrice (Tris) Prior, the main character of Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) and its film adaptations, one so far (Neil Burger, 2014). The action is set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago, which is divided into five factions: Abnegation, Amity, Dauntless, Candor and Erudite. As in *Uglies*, the sixteen-year-olds must take an aptitude test that will assign them to one faction, though they have the final say and can decide to change factions. Born in Abnegation, Tris obtains uncertain results in the test, revealing divergent qualities indicating aptitude for three factions. She ultimately resolves to abandon her faction and joins Dauntless, where she should prove her skills and capabilities. Both stories provide amazingly powerful and strong heroines, who might be considered perfect role models for women due to their bravery and courage. However, in both cases, the main characters’ heroism is constantly questioned. Tally, for instance, betrays her friend by deciding to accept the government’s deal and, although she regrets her actions and tries to help the Smokies, she hides her real motivations till the end of the first novel, thus showing great weaknesses in terms of the ideal concept of ‘hero’, who should always be faithful to his friends and to a cause worth fighting for. In the case of *Divergent*, Tris is characterized by lacking physical strength and she is on the verge of being expelled from Dauntless. However, she receives help from one of the tutors, Four, who is interested in her and who Tris also likes. Moreover, though both heroines show a great degree of autonomy, there is a clear assertion of patriarchal values that reaffirm women’s constant need for men’s protection and help. Indeed, in both stories the protagonists fall in love with men from whom they receive support and stability.

*Divergent* and *Uglies* are probably some of the most popular young-adult dystopias with female heroines at the moment. But there are numerous other novels that provide kick-ass female characters that are worth mentioning. Some of them are: *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* written by Ambelin Kwaymullina (2012), the series of novellas *Silo* by Hugh Howey (2011-2013) or *The Glass Arrow* by Kristen Simmons (2015), among many others. Notwithstanding the high number of dystopian female-heroine narratives, this dissertation will focus exclusively on Collins’ the *Hunger Games* trilogy and Cameron’s and Eglee’s TV series *Dark Angel*. After introducing the novels and TV series, I will conduct an in-depth analysis of both female protagonists, Katniss Everdeen and Max Guevara, in order to reach conclusions about their relevance as post-feminist heroines.
1.3 DESCRIBING THE HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY AND DARK ANGEL

1.3.1 The Hunger Games Trilogy


The main action of Collins’ trilogy is set in a post-apocalyptic nation Known as Panem, which is geographically located in North America in an unspecified future time. Panem is a fictional nation that emerged from the ashes of the devastated North American states, Canada and Mexico. It is an inequitable country composed by twelve (formerly thirteen) districts that are condemned to misery and starvation, and which are ruled by the Capitol, the seat of the government. The Capitol is home to extravagant, superficial and materialistic citizens who, far from experiencing the effects of hunger, as is the case of the inhabitants of the districts, are only concerned about the pleasures of leisure, based on an extremely lavish fashion and on TV shows such as the Hunger Games. Panem is governed by a dictatorial President called Coriolanus Snow. Therefore, the society that is depicted in the *Hunger Games* trilogy is a clear example of dystopia.

It is in this desolate background where a 16-year-old teenager from district twelve, Katniss Everdeen, is presented to the reader when she volunteers to save her younger sister Prim from participating in the 74th edition of the Hunger Games. The games are both intended as retribution to remind the districts that they should remain submissive to the government after a former uprising that resulted in the destruction of District Thirteen, and broadcast as a TV show for the inhabitants of the Capitol. The aim of the games is clear: a total of twenty-four tributes (two per district) “will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins” (Collins, 2008: 21). Throughout the three novels, Katniss, a courageous teenage girl, struggles to save herself and her loved ones from the claws of this dispiriting society by showing astounding bravery and humanity. However, she not only has to contend with the external world and the circumstances she has to face, but also with her inner dilemmas that revolve around her feelings of affection for two
very different boys: sweet and homely Peeta Mellark and rebellious and independent Gale Hawthorne.

The *Hunger Games* novels are addressed to young-adult readers and they belong to the genre of science fiction, more specifically dystopia, with great doses of action and adventure. However, the highly addictive quality of the novels as well as the carefully selected symbols that they contain may explain why they have reached such an unexpected amount of adult readers. Indeed, the author states that her novels are highly influenced by classical literature. She explained in an interview:

> It’s very much based on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which I read when I was eight years old. I was a huge fan of Greek and Roman mythology. As punishment for displeasing Crete, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown into the labyrinth and devoured by the Minotaur. (Margolis, 2008: para. 1)

As the novels received such a huge positive reception a film adaptation was produced in the spring of 2011, by Colour Force Production Company. Collins herself collaborated with the adaptation by writing the scripts of the film. The adaptation has resulted in three films so far: *The Hunger Games* (Garth Ross, 2012), *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013), *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* (Francis Lawrence, 2014), and the forthcoming final part, that will be released in 2015: *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2* (Francis Lawrence, 2015).

**1.3.2 Dark Angel TV Series**

*Dark Angel* is a television series created and directed by James Cameron and Charles H. Eglee. Cameron’s initial idea was to make a film about the comic-book character Spider-Man but he finally decided to move to television and started to create the series *Dark Angel*. It was broadcast in the United States in 2000 and it was cancelled after two seasons due to surprisingly, given the quality of the series, low ratings. The series, filmed in Vancouver and British Columbia, is an example of science fiction and dystopia and also contains action and drama. It is also considered to be influenced by third-wave feminism due to the introduction of
a female super-heroine and to belong to biopunk\(^2\), a subgenre of science fiction concerned with the enhancing of the individuals by means of genetic manipulation (Quinion, 1997: para. 1). Very often, these fiction works depict the ills of wastelandish societies which are ruled by wicked totalitarian governments that use biotechnology to exert control over the population.

*Dark Angel*, like Suzanne Collins’ the *Hunger Games* trilogy, is set in a dystopian and post-apocalyptic setting located in Seattle, USA, from 2009 to 2020. The series narrates the story of a genetically enhanced or transgenic woman designed to be a super-soldier. In 2009, when she was only a 9-year-old child, she and eleven more transgenic children marked with a barcode in the back of their necks escaped from Manticore, a secret government institution devoted to the creation of perfect soldiers and assassins “designed to kill. Coldly...efficiently...and most of all...happily. All they need is a trigger” ("Shorties in Love", 1.16). The female protagonist, played by Jessica Alba, was number 452 of the X-5s, the first successful series of genetically enhanced individuals. They were characterized by having super-human strength and they were prepared for being killing machines; that is, they were not supposed to show psychological weaknesses or empathic feelings. After escaping from Manticore, the X-5 children fled to different destinations and tried to adapt to the real world.

The first season begins in 2019. The protagonist, in order to gain a sense of identity, calls herself Max Guevara. At the beginning she struggles to forget about her past and to hide her super-human qualities. Indeed, she lives in a shared flat with two friends, Original Cindy (Valarie Rae Miller) and Kendra Maibaum (Jennifer Blanc). She earns a living by working as a bicycle messenger for a courier company and sometimes stealing and selling valuable items. Her life, at the beginning, is quite unproblematic until she gets involved with Logan Cale (Michael Weatherly) a cyber-journalist obsessed with denouncing the injustices that prompt the decay of their society. He uses the alias Eyes Only to filter anonymous video-messages aimed at unmasking corruption. Max and Logan become a team in which she provides her physical strength and he uses his contacts and technological resources to fight injustice. Moreover, they begin a tortuous sentimental relationship. As well as helping Logan in his rebellion against the system, throughout the first season Max’s adventures revolve around the search of her eleven X-5s brothers and sisters who are periodically introduced in the episodes; while in the second season, she destroys Manticore facilitating the flight of all the transgenics

\(^2\) Biopunk is a subgenre of cyberpunk that in turn is a subgenre of science fiction. It describes societies that are set in futuristic backgrounds and that suffer the consequences of the biotechnology revolution and the discovery of recombinant DNA.
and consequently triggering a revolt that will supposedly lead to the creation of a better future for the population.
2. KATNISS EVERDEEN AND MAX GUEVARA: (POST-)FEMINIST HEROINES?

2.1 THE POST-FEMINIST HEROINE

Recent heroines that appear in TV series, films or novels, seem to enjoy total freedom of manoeuvre and to have broken free from men’s dominance. However, when closely examined, we discover a series of subtle conservative characteristics that define these heroines and that reveal that they are still constrained by patriarchal assumptions that curtail their actual role as heroines. Therefore, these female leading characters can be regarded as a product of our post-feminist ethos.

Post-feminism emerged as a reaction to second-wave feminism in the 1980s. It assumes that feminism is unnecessary since the new generation of women “no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already ‘arrived’” (Whelehan, 2000: 3). Thus, post-feminism undermines the importance of feminism since it is assumed it has already triumphed in our society as a political movement because women enjoy total freedom and gender equality. This complex discourse takes for granted, on the one hand, the importance of feminism as a movement that has provided women with full rights. However, it denies the need of keeping on with the fight against gender inequality since, according to post-feminist supporters, there is none. According to Susan J. Douglas, the media is the most powerful means to bombard the population with messages “of imagined power that mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women, images that make sexism fine, even fun, and insist that feminism is now utterly pointless – even bad for you” (2011: 6). In fact, feminist critics and commentators such as Susan J. Douglas, Imelda Whelehan, Diane Negra, Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters consider that women’s liberation is not complete in spite of their achievements in our Western world. Consequently, feminism is still necessary in order to expose the persistence of patriarchy in society and, very importantly, to offset the conservative messages found in the media, which may have made space for women as protagonists but still persistently tends to assert patriarchal assumptions about the roles women have to play.

If we analyse post-feminist action heroines – that is, those that we find in narratives produced in the last three decades – from a feminist perspective, we can see that they are portrayed as reluctant champions as most of them do not really enjoy the role that has been assigned to
them. Moreover, on many occasions these characters need men’s help to accomplish their missions, or even worse, they are emotionally dependant on men. Hence, the viewer or reader is told that women are not really made for these hard lives, as they cannot completely fit in the role of ‘the hero’. Female heroines, therefore, emerge as intruders in a world designed for men, and in these backgrounds they “maintain a status quo in which the women themselves cannot win the war, only wait for the men to win it for them” (Basinger, 1993: 477). These women’s involvement in heroic pursuits often results in the realization that their real mission is not saving the world but staying at home or finding contentment in love, marriage or a complete makeover of their appearance or of their priorities. As Diane Negra phrases the idea, “[o]ver and over again the postfeminist subject is represented as having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by ’coming home’” (2009: 5).

Moreover, although female heroines are supposed to challenge traditional gender-role expectations and undermine stereotypes, many of them are characterized by being extremely beautiful and sexy and by belonging to the middle-upper class. Apart from that, most of them are white and young females. In fact, their bodies are sexualised and, even though they are capable of great deeds of derring-do, their appeal comes from their physical attractiveness, and not so much from their physical skills that, in turn, are admired in their male counterparts – the muscular heroes characterized mostly by their physical strength and their ability to use violence to assert their power. As Mencimer observes, “[n]o doubt our action heroines have come a long way since Wonder Woman, but the feminist critics are right: Women are still only allowed to be violent within certain parameters largely proscribed by what men are willing to tolerate” (2001: 18). Having said that, there are also some brawny heroines in popular narratives that break with the assumption that heroines must be attractive and display their feminine bodies. Some clear examples of muscular heroines are Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) from the Alien saga: Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979), Aliens (James Cameron, 1986), Alien 3 (David Fincher, 1992) and Alien: Resurrection (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997); and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) from the films The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) and Terminator 2: Judgement Day (James Cameron, 1992). In the same way, some heroines have adopted the bad manners and rudeness associated with men. In any case, the way action heroines are presented has generated a lot of controversy. If they are extremely beautiful and have perfect bodies, this is often read as an indication that women are represented as sexual objects. However, if they are too rude and resort to kick-ass action, they are considered to mimic men’s behaviour and seen as men in drag. According to Rikke Schubart:
The female hero divides critics. Postfeminists welcome her as progressive and a sign of equality. From their point of view, her use of masculine violence and discourse signals the end of an outdated psychoanalytic taxonomy of male versus female. ... Feminist critics, on the other hand, perceive her as the opposite. In their view, she represents a backlash against feminism, and her plastic surgery is a sign of oppression. From this perspective Lara Croft is not a strong woman but as Germaine Greer has called her, a ‘sergeant-major with balloons stuffed up his shirt’. (2007: 6)

All in all, action heroines may have become icons of strength and determination, but they are not full-fledged feminist ideals since there are limits in the way they are presented that confirm patriarchal expectations. Katniss Everdeen and Max Guevara, two of the most popular heroines of our current times, are not an exception. Thus, although these characters have many positive features, they are also characterized by having a great number of weaknesses. An in-depth examination of the characterization of the protagonists of the Hunger Games trilogy and Dark Angel is provided in the following section.

Indeed, Suzanne Collins’ the Hunger Games trilogy and the TV series Dark Angel have many points of convergence with regard to the setting and the portrayal of the main characters. In both cases, the action is set in a future time in a devastated North America characterized by being an extremely ruthless and flawed society, thus turning the novels and the series into perfect examples of dystopia. In the Hunger Games trilogy the author provides a portrayal of an impoverished nation whose people must comply with the dictates of a totalitarian regime headed by a villainous leader; in Dark Angel an ignorant and poverty-stricken population is subtly manipulated by clandestine associations concerned with genetic experimentation.

In these ravaged scenarios two female characters strive to improve their societies. On the one hand, the Hunger Games trilogy’s teen protagonist Katniss Everdeen volunteers to save her little sister and ends up fighting for the sake of the whole Panem. On the other hand, Dark Angel’s Max Guevara channels her enhanced physical potential, originally designed for military purposes, to fight against corrupt institutions such as that of her own creators. Thereby, Katniss and Max can be regarded as post-feminist heroines in a context in which women’s strength and determination are apparently taken for granted and both men and women seem to enjoy the same status in spite of the restrictions that infringe on the liberties of all the inhabitants of the oppressive societies they inhabit. Indeed, they are independent, intelligent women with great fighting and survival skills but neither of them seem to find true happiness
in their heroic actions. In contrast, both of them show psychological weaknesses in many respects such as a constant need for men’s affection.

2.1.1 The Girl on Fire: Katniss Everdeen

Suzanne Collins has brought to life one of the most acclaimed heroines of our times, the leading character of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss Everdeen. Though the novels were originally written with a young-adult (YA) audience in mind, their real scope has been much broader. Collins’s trilogy has, indeed, become a phenomenon, reaching the top positions of the YA dystopias’ list starred by female characters. Katniss, the girl on fire, has become a referent for many adolescents and she is also a source of inspiration for many YA dystopian writers. However, the extraordinary reception of Katniss as a prototype of female heroism has by no means been a matter of luck or a simple trend. Indeed, she is an extraordinarily complex character who has many facets to show. She is, undoubtedly, a brave and courageous girl who takes care of her family by assuming the roles of her parents due to her father’s death and her mother’s psychological instability. Moreover, apart from trying to ensure the safety, security and stability of her family and close friends, she ends up fighting for social justice and she becomes the Mockingjay – the name given to a genetically-engineered bird whose image Katniss wears as a pin during the first Hunger Games she participates in and which becomes a symbol for those who are oppressed.

Nevertheless, the character’s heroic traits are not so clear-cut. In effect, there are many aspects about her personality that accentuate her weaknesses and that tinge her life with sadness and despair. Katniss is presented as an ordinary girl who is unable to express her emotions and who constantly needs male company. Apart from that, when she is in the hands of the Capitol she is apparently not better skilled than the other tributes, whom she must confront. She is, indeed, physically weaker than many of them as there are some districts, such as District 1 and 2, where girls and boys are trained to become tributes. They are known as career tributes and they are glad to volunteer to fight in the arena. Hence, for them the games represent a challenge that brings them the opportunity to achieve fame and glory and, at the same time, they engender pride among the population of their districts. In contrast, for most tributes the games are an added threat to their lives, together with the deplorable situation in which they live in their districts. Thus, for them the Hunger Games are by no means a cause for celebration but they represent another form of punishment as well as a pure manifestation of
the Capitol’s brutality. In comparison to the other tributes, Katniss’ only dexterity is limited to the use of a bow and arrows, a skill that she has developed as a result of many years of hunting. Notwithstanding these obstacles, it is precisely due to the representation of Katniss as a realistic heroine, who like everyone has strengths and weaknesses, that a strong bond is created between the character and the readers, who are able to empathise with her and to understand what she goes through.

All in all, there are many reasons that account for the ongoing success of Katniss as a heroine. As Valerie Estelle puts it in her book *The Many Faces of Katniss Everdeen*, “the series stars a powerful olive-skinned girl who can outrun deer, keep her family alive, and outwit the highest levels of government. At last, a heroine who’s far more than a love interest or sidekick has taken over pop culture” (2013: 1). Notwithstanding these aspects, Katniss is a post-feminist heroine who, in spite of being exceptionally brave, has many deep flaws that could be read as a message confirming that, still nowadays, even though creators have been making room for women in action, heroines are not allowed to fit into the genre comfortably. Hence, considering the above, an in-depth examination of the character is required so as to determine whether she can be actually considered an exemplary heroine. Along these lines, the first part of the analysis will focus on the positive aspects of the character that corroborate her validity as a heroine. Finally, left for the last part of the examination are the traits that, by contrast, invalidate her heroic actions and suggest that she is not made for such a manly world, which slips out of her hands.

One of the most distinctive qualities that characterize Katniss is her strong affection for her loved ones. Right from the beginning of the first novel, she expresses her nagging worry about the possibility that her little sister Prim is selected as a tribute. “I protect Prim in every way I can, but I’m powerless against the reaping. The anguish I always feel when she’s in pain wells up in my chest and threatens to register on my face” (Collins, 2008: 17). Indeed, there is little possibility for Prim to be chosen, as she is only 12 and this is the first time her name appears in the ballot box. Apart from that, there are many people, such as Katniss, that had their names added several times in exchange for tesserae since “[e]ach tessera is worth a meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person” (Collins, 2008: 15). However, luck is not on Prim’s side on the day of the reaping, nor is it on Katniss’, who after hearing her sister’s name coming out of the mouth of Effie Trinket, the escort of the District 12 tributes, she impulsively volunteers as a tribute. That courageous gesture speaks for itself, and allows her to gain the heart of the readers right from the beginning.
However, although Katniss’ main motivation throughout the trilogy is clearly to protect her sister Prim, she is often presented as a cold person who is usually unable to transmit positive emotions and whose heart is full of confusion and anger due to the unfair laws the inhabitants of the districts are subject to. Nevertheless, there are many moments when her actions are triggered by love. Indeed, her apparent toughness is just superficial. She is, in reality, a deeply sensitive girl who cares more for others than for herself, as can be appreciated from the following quote: “Prim. My mother. Gale. Madge. I think of them watching me from home. At least I hope they’re at home. Not taken into custody by Thread. Being punished as Cinna is. As Darius is. Punished because of me. Everybody” (Collins, 2009: 328).

As previously mentioned, throughout the trilogy, Katniss assumes the roles of breadwinner and family protector after her father’s untimely death in a mine accident and her mother’s subsequent collapse, which renders her useless and unable to exercise her role as a mother. Katniss’ relationship with her mother is, thus, cold, distant and full of reproaches, as she cannot stand her passive behaviour while her children could be starving were it not for Katniss’ efforts to provide food for the family. Katniss is, therefore, a mature and independent adolescent who has been forced to grow up too early due to family circumstances. The following example illustrates the complicated relationship between Katniss and her mother:

I didn’t trust her. And some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weaknesses, for her neglect, for the months she had put us through. Prim forgave her, but I had taken a step back from my mother, put up a wall to protect myself from needing her, and nothing was ever the same between us again. (Collins, 2008: 61)

As from the beginning Katniss scavenges for meat and plants from the forests to feed her family, when she volunteers as a tribute to save her sister, she knows that even then Prim is not safe unless her mother changes her attitude. That is why, moments before travelling to the Capitol, Katniss tells her that she cannot ‘disconnect’ again, and that she is the only person who can take care of Prim while Katniss is away. Moreover, she asks her best friend Gale to keep an eye on her family. However, the list of Katniss’ protégées not only includes her own family but she also feels responsible for the security of Peeta Mellark, the male tribute of District 12, and of 12-year-old Rue, the female tribute from District 11. With regards to Rue, Katniss sees her as her little sister and she develops a disinterested affection towards her. In fact, instead of banding with stronger tributes, she decides to form an alliance with Rue, the
weakest one. Nevertheless, Katniss fails to keep Rue alive and her death affects Katniss deeply. Despite this hard blow, she resolves to fight against the enemy so as to avenge Rue’s murder and prevent future injustices:

Prim...Rue...aren’t they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated? (Collins, 2009: 239)

Peeta is another extremely important person in Katniss’ life. He is the baker’s son from District 12. When Katniss hears his name being called by Effie on the day of the reaping, she knows that she will have to care for him. Although she and Peeta are not friends, 5 years earlier he saved Katniss’ life when she was almost unconscious on the streets and he gave her some burned bread that had to be thrown away. As Katniss knows very well, only one tribute can be proclaimed winner of the games and she would not like to kill someone to whom she owes her life. Apart from that, Katniss has a soft spot for vulnerable people, and Peeta is not precisely a strong and courageous person, as Gale is. Katniss admires Peeta for his pureness, since he does not want to be a contender in the Games, but wants to die being himself and is ready to give his life for Katniss. At the end of the Hunger Games in the first novel, Peeta and Katniss are the last tributes standing. However, they defy the Capitol by intending to commit suicide if both of them are not allowed to survive. Although they succeed since they have won the sympathy of the Hunger Games’ large audience by pretending to be star-crossed lovers, the Capitol conjures up a different version of the games designed to show Panem that there is no room for hope and that the Capitol should be fooled under no circumstances. In the second novel, they both have to participate in the Hunger Games again in a special edition made up of the last winners of each of the districts. This time, Katniss knows that only one of them will be able to survive and resolves to keep Peeta alive at all costs:

This time I don’t have even the slightest hope of return. Before my first Games, I promised Prim I would do everything I could to win, and now I’ve sworn to myself to do all I can to keep Peeta alive. I will never reverse this journey again. (Collins, 2009: 212)

Katniss is not only a caring and protective heroine. She definitely has characteristics that could be defined as traditionally male. In fact, she shows no interest in love affairs or, at least, she tries to avoid them. Although she finds herself involved in a love triangle between Gale and Peeta, she expresses a lack of interest in relationships. When Gale is presented as her best
friend and confident, Katniss makes it clear that there is nothing else beyond their friendship: “There's never been anything romantic between Gale and me. When we met, I was a skinny twelve-year-old, and he was only two years older, he already looked like a man” (Collins, 2008: 11). The same applies to Finnick Odair, a male victor from District 4 who is strikingly handsome. This is what Katniss says about him: “I can’t argue that Finnick isn’t one of the most stunning, sensuous people on the planet. But I can honestly say he’s never been attractive to me” (Collins, 2009: 236). Apart from this, she is not attracted by the Capitol’s impressive lifestyle, including extravagant dresses and colourful makeup. She is neither interested in looking beautiful on TV as she wants to be presented as she really is: “I can’t stand in a television studio wearing a costume and makeup in a cloud of fake smoke and rally the districts to victory. It’s amazing, really, how long I have survived the cameras” (Collins, 2010: 81). In contrast, she is a simple girl, not interested in trends or in attracting people, and she has definitely not the sweetness or courtesy that is sometimes expected from her. As can be observed from the following quote, Katniss takes pleasure in bothering Effie, who is scandalized by her rude manners: “So yes, I can handle a fork and a knife. But I hate Effie Trinket’s comment so much I make a point of eating the rest of my meal with my fingers. Then I wipe my hands on the tablecloth” (Collins, 2008: 52).

One of Katniss’ most interesting and surprising features that have turned her into a widely acclaimed heroine is precisely the fact that, under an appearance of a rude and cold girl, there is a kind-hearted person. However, she does not run the risk of being labeled a soft heroine, as her fondness and consideration for her loved ones are perfectly balanced with admirable strength. Indeed, she is endowed with a tremendous courage and is capable of enduring painful and dangerous experiences. As the trilogy develops, the character undergoes a remarkable evolution in terms of psychological strength. The first time that Katniss took part in the Hunger Games, she had to remind herself constantly not to show weaknesses in front of the cameras as sponsors do not like weak tributes: “I can’t show weaknesses at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pant leg odd at the knee and examine the injury more closely” (Collins, 2008: 209). However, in the last novel, her own concern is not just saving her own life, or even Prim’s and Peeta’s lives, but being a true heroine, the saviour of Panem.

After being rescued from the arena on the seventy-fifth Hunger Games in the second novel, Katniss is transported to District 13, which was supposedly destroyed by the Capitol after an uprising, and that now serves as a refuge and military base for the rioters who want to defeat
the central government. Katniss is brought there on purpose. In fact, she has a role especially designed for her. She must be the heroine of the rebels, the symbol that stands for everything that is wrong in Panem, the Mockingjay. Her whole family are with her and she decides that they have suffered enough and accepts to fight. As she is an essential figure to encourage the population and to keep their hopes alive, she is not allowed to put herself in dangerous situations. However, Katniss has grown up and she is now a brave woman who wants to be a heroine in every sense of the word. “I can’t stay here anymore’, I say numbly. ‘If you want me to be the Mockingjay, you’ll have to send me away’” (Collins, 2010: 214). After many difficulties – including Peeta’s brainwashing with the objective of killing Katniss since she has become a wild card the leaders of the revolution cannot control – she and some of her mates such as Gale, Peeta, Cresida and her cameramen, get to penetrate the Capitol. Katniss shows outstanding bravery and wants to reach her objective at all costs, killing president Snow and overthrowing the Capitol’s government: “Heart pounding, adrenaline burning through me, everyone is my enemy. Except Gale. My hunting partner, the one person who has my back. There’s nothing to do but move forward, killing whoever comes into our path” (Collins, 2010: 385).

However, despite the numerous aspects that could make Katniss a splendid and unique heroine, the character is flawed in many senses. Some weaknesses are clearly identifiable, whereas some others could be easily overlooked by the reader, or just not be considered important enough to warrant any attention. Those features, however, stand out when regarding Katniss Everdeen from a feminist perspective. One of the most evident weak points of the heroine is her lack of physical strength as compared to other tributes. Indeed, her physical injuries pose serious problems and limitations over her performance in the arena. One of the several situations in which Katniss is in a critical state can be found in The Hunger Games (2008). In this case, she is exhausted and extremely thirsty and she is certain that her death is close:

But by afternoon, I know the end is coming. My legs are shaking and my heart too quick. I keep forgetting, exactly what I’m doing. I’ve stumbled repeatedly and managed to regain my feet, but when the stick slides out from under me, I finally tumble to the ground unable to get up. I let my eyes close. (Collins, 2008: 198)
Besides, she even needs the help of sponsors who provide her with lotions to make her wounds heal faster: “My first gift from a sponsor! ... ‘Oh Haymitch,’ I whisper. ‘Thank you.’ He has not abandoned me. Not left me fend entirely for myself” (Collins, 2008: 219).

However, Haymitch’s and the sponsors’ is not the only help Katniss requires. Indeed, throughout the trilogy there is a constant need for male figures, especially Peeta and Gale, which undermines Katniss’ apparent strength and independence. Therefore, Katniss proves to be less self-sufficient and confident than she seemed, as the character reveals a desperate dependence on comfort from men. In the same way, this psychological need for men usually responds to her sense of loneliness and her deep fears. As an illustration, she is extremely frightened at night, as terrible nightmares disrupt her sleep: “Because I can’t handle the nightmares. Not without you, I think. They are sure to be dreadful tonight. But I can hardly ask Peeta to come sleep with me” (Collins, 2009: 217). The same applies to Gale. In fact as the trilogy develops, both Peeta and Gale compete for Katniss’ attention, and her feelings towards them are hopelessly confusing. She, for instance, muses, “I’ll need that and more to spill my guts to Gale today. But will he even come? If he doesn’t, I’ll have no choice but to risk going to his house in the dead of night” (Collins, 2009: 103).

Katniss’ fears are particularly visible from the very beginning, as the novels are narrated in the first person and the reader can explore the inner feelings of the character. Hence, it is obvious to the naked eye that Katniss is terribly frightened about the Hunger Games and, unlike most heroes, she does not show self-confidence or determination to win the games. As can be appreciated from the following example, Katniss is terrified and overwhelmed by the thought of facing the other tributes:

I’m nervous about the training. There will be three days in which all the tributes practice together. ... The thought of meeting the other tributes face-to-face makes me queasy. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, but my appetite is gone. (Collins, 2008: 101)

Moreover, apart from these physical and psychological weaknesses, the character has one more trait that might be regarded as one of the liabilities that prevent Katniss from being a full-fledged heroine. From the word go, her lack of determination when it comes to taking part in the games is glaringly apparent. Nevertheless, the society which is portrayed in the novels is so vile, and the Hunger Games are such an abomination, that Katniss’ unwillingness to display
her attitudes as a heroine can be regarded as a natural response to the situation, instead of a flaw. Another argument in favour of Katniss’ disinclination to take part in the games is that the adversaries are precisely innocent people who are simply, like herself, puppets in the hands of the Capitol. However, in the third part of the trilogy, *Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss’ attitude remains the same whereas the enemy is now the Capitol and not her equal fellows. To start with, the fact that she becomes the Mockingjay, the leader of the rebels, makes sense given her popularity based on her capacity to survive the Hunger Games. But it should be taken into account that she has not decided it herself. Indeed she is part of a deliberate plan designed by Plutarch and President Coin, the self-appointed leaders of the rebels, not just to defeat the Capitol, but to become the rulers of the new world they expect to build after President Snow has been defeated. In this light, Katniss becomes again a marionette, though this time on the supposedly rightful side.

Therefore, at the beginning of the last novel Katniss could display her heroic abilities and focus on saving the innocent people from Panem from the grips of the Capitol, as her family and friends are already safe and sound. However, she is reluctant to take part in the mission she is entrusted with and she wonders if this is what she should do. The following example illustrates Katniss’ lack of willingness and her poor courage when she has to be a role model for the others:

> Is there any point in doing anything at all? My mother, my sister, and Gale’s family are finally safe. ... Of course I hate the Capitol, but I have no confidence that me being the Mockingjay will benefit those who are trying to bring it down. How can I help the districts if every time I make a move, it results in suffering and loss of life? (Collins, 2010: 13)

At last, Katniss decides to be the Mockingjay and to fight Snow and his government. Nevertheless, what moves her to make such a decision is not precisely her eagerness to save Panem, but her desperation to save Peeta from Snow. Indeed, she agrees to be the Mockingjay if Coin guarantees that Peeta, who has been made a prisoner, will be rescued together with the other tributes that were caught by the Capitol, and that there will be no reprisals for Peeta’s open opposition to the rebels’ actions, which are depicted as increasingly oriented to guarantee Plutarch and President Coin’s leadership. Apart from that, she asks for some privileges such as free time for hunting with Gale. In a nutshell, although she finally resolves to be the leader of the rebels, the feelings that condition her decision are by no means heroic but selfish, as she only agrees to fight the Capitol when Peeta is rescued and by her side. In turn,
she distrusts the rebels as much as the Capitol: “I will need to repudiate them. But the truth is, I don’t trust the rebels or Plutarch or Coin. I’m not confident that they tell me the truth” (Collins, 2010: 127).

One more feature that contributes to undermine the image of our heroine is her frailty concerning her feelings. Indeed, the *Hunger Games* trilogy has an ingredient that is apparently essential in female-led stories but that is not a must in action films or novels with male protagonists: love. From the first novel, Katniss finds herself in the middle of a love triangle between Peeta and Gale. Though she claims that she is not interested in love, her feelings and actions speak louder than words. Gale is the first male character that is presented as having a close relationship with Katniss. Despite her insistence that there is nothing romantic about them, it is clear that Gale wants something more than a friendship with Katniss. In fact, the day before the reaping he suggests that they could run away together. Katniss gives him a negative response that has to do with their responsibility to take care of their families. Moreover she expresses her bitter opposition to have children in future times:

‘I never want to have kids,’ I say.
‘I might. If I didn’t live here,’ says Gale.
‘But you do,’ I say, irritated. (Collins, 2008: 11)

When Peeta is introduced, it is clear that his qualities are in direct opposition to Gale’s. As their names indicate, Gale is a strong and determined person, he knows who the enemy is and he has a formed ideology. Peeta, on the contrary, has more temperate and feminine qualities. He is the baker’s son and his work in the bakery has to do with decorating cakes. Katniss is therefore confronted with two completely different men: a masculine figure who represents courage and strength, and a sensible and vulnerable figure who defends the power of words over fighting. Despite Katniss’ contradictory feelings towards them, her inclination towards Gale is evident, as her attachment to Peeta is a mere farce imposed by the Capitol to justify that two tributes have won the games. As Katniss observes, “I’ve ignored Peeta and flaunted my preference for Gale’s company before the whole district. And by doing so made it clear I was, in fact, mocking the Capitol. Now I’ve endangered Gale and his family and my family and Peeta, too, by my carelessness” (Collins, 2009: 31).

However, from the beginning it is obvious that Katniss will have mixed feelings about both of them. One interesting reflection that Katniss makes about Peeta foreshadows deep inner conflicts in relation to her feelings: “A kind Peeta Mellark is far more dangerous to me than an
unkind one. Kind people have a way of working their way inside and rooting there. I can’t let Peeta do this” (Collins, 2008: 56). Indeed, it is not until the third novel when there is a clear inclination towards Peeta instead of Gale. When Peeta is rescued and taken back to District 13, Katniss learns that he has been brainwashed with the aim of killing her. It is precisely then when she realizes how much she loves him. On the contrary, her relationship with Gale grows cold as his thoughts have radicalized to an extent that Katniss cannot bear anymore. For instance, he would not mind sacrificing innocent people in order to accomplish a mission that is supposed to be beneficial for the whole community. What for him, at the beginning, were just thoughts, now are musts that have to be put into practice. Gale, indeed, is the character that shows the greatest level of commitment with the rebels: “Back in the old days, when we were nothing more than a couple of kids hunting outside of 12, Gale said things like this and worse. But then they were just words. Here, put into practice, they become deeds that can never be reversed” (Collins, 2010: 229).

This estrangement between Katniss and Gale foreshadows the events that will take place next. At this stage, Katniss has already chosen Peeta’s sensibility over Gale’s insurrection, and although she is committed to kill President Snow due to all the pain that he has caused to her and her loved ones, the rejection of Gale’s behaviour reveals her fake heroic nature, which, ironically, turns Gale into the perfect prototype of hero. He is, indeed, the one who really believes in what he does and who is really concerned about improving Panem, and not Katniss. Moreover, the massacre of a vast number of children, including Prim, in front of President Snow’s house, just when Katniss was about to fulfill her mission to kill him, renders her completely devastated and dysfunctional. After this traumatic episode, her relationship with Gale is totally terminated, as Katniss contemplates the possibility that the bombs that have killed her little sister could have been designed by him, tough he ignored the destination of the bombs he designed.

These series of flaws and insecurities that accompany the character throughout the trilogy lead to a somehow predictable, though discouraging, finale. Katniss, who at the beginning was presented to the reader as a clever and strong person, who protected and fed her family, has become a resigned woman, confined at home in Victors Village, back in District 12. However, she is not alone. Indeed, she lives with Peeta, with whom she finally decides to have children, although one of the first things that the reader learns from Katniss is her opposition to raise children in such a dystopian society:
It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly. When I first felt her stirring inside of me, I was consumed with terror that felt as old as life itself. Only the joy of holding her in my arms could tame it. Carrying him was a little easier, but not much. (Collins, 2010: 437)

In a nutshell, Katniss ends up being everything she did not want to be. She is not the heroine of this story anymore, as this role has been taken by Gale, who is working in District 2 struggling to defend his ideals:

‘District two. Got a fancy job there. I see him now and again on television,’ she says. I dig around inside myself, trying to register anger, hatred, longing. I find only relief. (Collins, 2010: 431)

All in all, we are confronted with an ambiguous ending, as Katniss has survived to two Hunger Games and has become the leader of a revolution, but in the end she seems to conform to her situation and even accept that her home is her true place. In this light, if the reader does not read between lines, he or she may overlook the implications of having Katniss confined at home while her male friend is performing the tasks that should have been assigned to her, as she is the heroine of the story. To conclude, one can infer that such a controversial ending suggests that women are still not prepared to irrupt into ‘male’ genres such as action, and that if they do so, they might face dreadful consequences. Not surprisingly, Katniss is not only confined at home, but she is also badly disfigured because of her involvement in the revolt against the Capitol. Indeed, at the end of the story, our heroine is now unsightly and conforms to a domestic life as Peeta’s wife and mother of his children.

2.1.2 A Dark Angel for Troubled Times: Max Guevara

Max Guevara, the protagonist of Dark Angel TV series, is a post-feminist character who, in the same way as Katniss, has obvious heroic qualities but also shortcomings which compromise her standing as a heroine. As a matter of fact, the character shares many similarities with Katniss considering their strengths and weaknesses. However, there is a fundamental difference that makes these characters essentially distinct. Max Guevara, unlike Katniss, enjoys superhuman strength as she is a genetically-enhanced soldier. Therefore, her key strategy when it comes to fighting injustice is simplified in terms of physical violence. Considering that the most remarkable feature of the traditional action hero is precisely physical strength, this
ability contributes to bringing Max closer to the prototype of the perfect heroine, or at least to making her more like her male counterparts who base their success in the action/adventure genre on their ability to use violence effectively. In this way, Max is placed at the top of the list of the most extraordinary kick-ass heroines together with characters such as Xena and her partner Gabrielle, Lara Croft or Elektra. Another positive feature that defines Max is her caring nature. In fact, despite having been genetically manipulated with the objective of creating an impassive soldier and murderer, one of her basic motivations is to protect her friends and brothers and sisters from the deadly threats of her rotten society, even if this means putting her own life in danger.

Logan, a paraplegic freedom-fighter who works from his house to defeat injustice using the alias Eyes Only, is one of the first persons whose life is saved by Max. Indeed, in the pilot he is attacked after uncovering a case of corruption. He is successively transported to the hospital where he lies unconscious, in bed. Max visits him and due to her vision abilities she discovers a shooter who is about to finish his job with Logan. Max, very calmly, moves Logan’s stretcher out of the room while pronouncing these words, with which she expresses her gratitude for letting her keep a valuable statue she was trying to steal from him and which accounts for her decision to save his life:

I probably ought to let him just finish the job. At least then more innocent people won’t get kicked on account of you being a bored rich kid. On the other hand, you did lay that statue on me, which I was able to fence for a couple of bucks. I’ve been wanting to buy myself a new motorcycle. (“Pilot”, 1.1)

Apart from that, she professes unconditional love and devotion for her transgenic brothers and sisters and she does everything in her power to ensure their safety and security. In season 2, Joshua (Kevin Durand), a new character who is going to become one of Max’s closest friends and allies, is introduced. He is also a product of Manticore’s experiments as he has canine DNA in his genes, thus making him physically similar to a dog. When he escapes from Manticore with Max’s help, he has to hide, as his physical appearance would spread fear among the population. When Max hears that a strange creature with dog features has been found, she figures out that they refer to Joshua, and she struggles to locate him. After finding Joshua, she provides him with a safe house and visits him every day to ensure that he has everything he needs. In fact, a strong bond is created between these two characters and the tenderest side of Max is revealed to the viewer. Joshua is, as Max calls him, her little ‘fella’, a vulnerable
outcast who has rekindled Max’s positive emotions. In the following example from season 2, it is clearly visible that Max wants to protect him, even if it means visiting him every day so that he does not feel lonely:

Joshua: I can’t be with upstairs people. I don’t want to be alone anymore.
Max: You won’t have to be alone. I’ll come everyday.
Joshua: You come, then you go, then I’m alone. I’m tired of being alone, Max.
Max: If you go to Terminal City, I won’t be able to protect you. ("She Ain’t Heavy", 2.19)

As the series develops, the character of Max undergoes an amazingly positive transformation as, at the beginning, she shows no interest in being involved in issues that could put her into trouble and that could involve her capture and return to Manticore. Nevertheless, eventually, Max’s concern about injustice increases, as she sees how her close friends suffer the consequences of the decayed society where they live. Therefore, Max not only ends up struggling to improve the distressing situation in which they are immersed, but she also wants to reach a state of social equality, where her transgenic brothers and sisters are no longer regarded as a threat to mankind, but as a part of it. Despite the surprising cancellation of the series after the second season, which let the series without a final resolution and in suspense, Max is shown as fully positioned with the transgenics and it can be inferred that she will fight until their rights are guaranteed. These are Max’s final words:

Where are we gonna go? ... Aren’t you tired of living in darkness? Don’t you want to feel the sun on your face? To have a place of your own where you can walk down the street without being afraid? They made us and, ... [i]t’s time for them to face us and take responsibility, instead of trying to sweep us away like garbage. ("Freak Nation", 2.21)

However, in spite of her qualities and development throughout the series, there are aspects that undermine Max’s stature. Indeed, in the same way as Katniss, Max is far from being a full-fledged heroine. One of the first pieces of information that the audience learns about Max is related to the way she lives. As Max lives in a dystopian post-apocalyptic society where job opportunities are very scarce, she has no option but to work at a courier service and tolerate her arrogant boss, Normal (J.C MacKenzie), in order to earn a living. However, she takes advantage of her abilities to steal valuable objects, which she then sells in the black market. Thus, the first impression that our heroine gives to the viewer leaves much to be desired, as
she is portrayed as a carefree thief. Moreover, at the beginning she seems to be only concerned about not being caught and she shows no particular interest in confronting injustice or improving the deplorable situation of her society. As Lorna Jowett observes: “Max is recognizably the pragmatic, amoral thief who cares only for her own gain … She initially assists Logan because a friend of [hers] died on account of the villain of the week (Pilot), in other words, for personal, not political reasons” (2005: para. 23). In fact, in the pilot episode, when Logan learns that Max is endowed with extraordinary abilities he suggests that she could be of great help for Eyes Only’s missions. However, Max’s response is a direct refusal:

Max: Personally, I’m more interested in going fast on my motorcycle than giving myself a headache over stuff I can’t do anything about. Logan: You accept the way things are… you’re an active participant in making them worse. Max: Is the social studies class over for today? (“Pilot”, 1.1)

Therefore, from this extract it can be concluded that Max is not interested at all in the misery that ravages her society, so it is Logan who emerges as the true good-natured person who devotes his time to ameliorate the situation even though he comes from a privileged, moneyed family and gets involved in the fight against injustice just because he thinks it is the right thing to do. Apart from that, he is also the one who teaches moral lessons to Max and who tries to convince her of using her special skills for a good cause. In this sense, Max has no real devotion to heroic actions and, although she is finally convinced to use her abilities to defeat the enemies, there are many moments in which her attitude is totally unsatisfactory. For instance, on many occasions Max puts her own interests before the good of society, thus giving a negative image of herself as a lazy and careless person. A remarkable occasion on which Max’s selfishness is clearly visible is when she accepts to help Logan only in exchange of information about the location of her missing brothers and sisters. It is certain that her commitment to save her family could be regarded as heroic but, as it is the only reason why she consents to help others, it might also be regarded as egoistical:

I knew it. I always knew Zack was out there somewhere, but you know, just my luck this guy Logan had to be the one to find him. Now he figures out I’m going to go and do the right thing because I owe him. Like I even care. (“Pilot”, 1.1)

However, Max’s self-interest does not end here. As in the Hunger Games trilogy, in Dark Angel there is also a dose of romanticism. As a matter of fact, our protagonist falls in love with Logan, with whom she initiates a complicated and stormy relationship. During the first season, Max
constantly expresses her discontent when Logan gives priority to his missions instead of taking care of their relationship. Hence, once more, it is Logan who has the initiative to involve her in heroic missions, whereas Max would like to have a more ordinary romantic relationship. As an example, in episode 13 of season 1, “The Kidz Are Aiight”, Max tries to spend time with Logan and she proposes to have dinner together. He, tough, is too busy for that:

Max: Got a half a Poulet Chez Cale... some leafy green stuff... mashed potatoes. What do you say we have that dinner? Promise I won’t bail on you this time.
Logan: Uh... I have to take a rain check. I’ve got some work to do.
Max: Oh, okay.
Logan: You can take it with you, if you want. (“The Kidz Are Aiight”, 1.13)

Scenes like the previous one are recurrent during the first season, implying that Max fears her relationship with Logan is going nowhere. In episode 16: “Shorties in Love”, Logan tries to apologize for his apparent apathy but, at the same time, he emphasises that his priority is to improve his society in his role as Eyes Only:

Logan: It’s worth nothing – while you’re right, my mission is saving the world, it doesn’t mean that I don’t worry about you.
Max: Worry accomplishes nothing. But it’s nice to know that you think of me as more than your own private cat burglar. (“Shorties in Love”, 1.16)

As previously stated, the most astounding ability that makes Max special is her extraordinary physical strength. Nevertheless, it is suggested that Max would not be able to perform her role as a heroine alone without Logan’s experience as a hacker that allows him to obtain valuable information in an immediate way. Indeed, they complement each other: Max contributes with her enhanced strength and Logan provides her with the essential motivation to carry out the missions as well as with the necessary information of the suspects. Thus, they are presented as a team that would probably not succeed if they worked separately, as Max’s concern about social injustice was inexistent at the beginning of the series and because Logan’s disability prevents him from taking part in dangerous activities. In any case, taking into account that Max needs the help and motivation of his partner, who is precisely a man, once more the adequacy of Max as a stand-alone heroine is called into question.

However, notwithstanding the obvious similarities between both Max and Katniss with regard to men’s help, or even concerning their need of male’s affection, there is an essential
difference between the novels and the series. Indeed, in spite of Max’s list of weaknesses, which contribute to present her as a defective heroine, *Dark Angel’s* peculiarity lies in the characterization of the female characters that appear in the series, presented as having a strong personality and who do not follow the standards of traditional women. For instance, Max’s best friend, Original Cindy, is a lesbian who supports Max in every aspect of her life, even when she discovers her true origins. However, even if the female characters of the series stand out due to their brilliance, their roles are still too peripheral. Apart from Original Cindy, Kendra Maibaum is another significant character who appears in season 1, leaving after initiating a relationship with a cop. Kendra is a coffee-addict who has weird jobs related to translation and barter. She and Original Cindy are Max’s flatmates and best friends. Consequently, unlike the *Hunger Games* trilogy, *Dark Angel* provides a strong sense of female comradeship that stresses women’s capacity to create strong networks of female friendship instead of depicting women as rivals, often fighting for the affection of an interesting male character.

All things considered, in comparison to Collins’ trilogy, *Dark Angel* appears to convey a stronger hope-filled message in terms of women’s equality. Apart from presenting other daring characters such as Kendra or Original Cindy, Max is a powerful woman who is similar to the invincible traditional heroes, as she possesses extraordinary skills such as physical strength, agility, accelerated healing, an immune system, knowledge of martial arts and enhanced vision. However, after watching the whole series, I have a conflicting opinion about the implications of Max’s enhanced qualities. While at first glance this could be regarded as a positive aspect, the fact of having a genetically enhanced heroine might imply that this role could not be assigned to an ordinary woman. Hence, the audience may assume that if even a superwoman such as Max has an extended list of weaknesses, what would happen if she did not have her enhanced abilities? In this sense, the main positive trait that contributes to Max’s heroism is now thrown into question, and it can become precisely one of the aspects that makes audiences have doubts about Max’s role since she is a heroine only because she has been engineered to become one.

Having said that, due to the cancellation of the series after two seasons, it is not possible to figure out if Max will finally take control of the whole situation and ultimately become the undeniable, true heroine of the story. Nevertheless, the ending of season two foreshadows a promising future regarding Max’s success as the heroine of the series. In the last episode, “Freak Nation”, the character has already regained importance, as the situation requires
physical actions and Logan, because of his physical handicap, obviously cannot contribute actively in this sense. Thereby, Max is now the true face of the revolution and of the transgenics. She is the one who has given them the opportunity to fight for their rights and, very importantly, she has showed them that there is a life outside Manticore and that they have endured an unspeakable injustice. Therefore, none of them is now willing to continue paying for the mistakes and the cruelty of their creators. They claim for their right to have a place in society and Max will struggle to accomplish that. Hence, in contrast to the distressing situation in which Katniss finds herself at the end of the novels, in Max’s case, there is hope that foretells a more optimistic future.

As Jennifer K. Stuller points out in her book *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, “Max’s love for her family helps her evolve from a pouty, jaded, uber-sultry, and understandably self-protective girl to a courageous leader – a superwoman” (2010: 97). Hence, to conclude with this chapter it is important to note that Max’s degree of success or failure as a heroine is not as easily to be established as is Katniss’, who is not allowed to lead the revolution at the end of the trilogy. If we consider Max’s performance throughout the series, and taking into account that the final episode is not the ending of the story, we can conclude that her weaknesses and strengths are closely balanced. However, while Max enjoys superhuman abilities, Katniss is a more realistic character since she relies on her abilities learnt after years of scavenging for food to provide for her family. However, from this study we can reasonably infer that both heroines are by no means completely satisfactory. On the one hand, Collins sends her heroine home and gives the leading role to her friend Gale, letting the readers deduce that a woman can perform heroic tasks but she is not a born-leader. On the other hand, although Max’s evolution seems to be more satisfactory, the series may lead to the assumption that, for a heroine to succeed, she must possess extraordinary abilities, which, after all, she is reluctant to use to help society at first and only does so in the end with Logan’s encouragement and support.
CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration my study of action heroines and the information obtained from the analysis’ section, a number of conclusions can be drawn. One of the most relevant ideas that could be extracted from the present dissertation is that, in our post-feminist society, there has been a proliferation of action heroines in genres that were previously associated to men and which used to provide male protagonists. These genres include action, science fiction, the western, military stories, martial arts narratives and detective fiction, among others. The increase of female leading characters in such genres is a response to women’s ascendency and achievements in society. Indeed, “[w]ith changes in women’s real lives came changes in popular imagery. No longer could women be represented in the same stereotypical ways as they had been in the past” (Iness, 2004: 6).

However, most genres in which women take the lead in action parts are characterized by depicting fictional societies, usually dystopian, where societal norms and roles have changed or disappeared. From this, it can be inferred that creators are uncomfortable with women in action roles in more realistic contexts, so their leadership can only take place in futuristic backgrounds. Hence, it is obvious that there is a glaring inconsistency in the messages provided by popular narratives. Indeed, fiction reflects women’s successes and the fact that they have apparently achieved gender equality by allowing women to penetrate ‘male’ genres. However, there is an underlying discourse that suggests there is no room for women in a man’s world. Apart from that, even though heroines share characteristics with the traditional figure of the hero, women are by no means exemplary heroines. Indeed, they are characterized by being flawed and, usually, they do not enjoy their roles as heroines. Furthermore, as Jennifer K. Stuller reflects in her work Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors (2010), females continue to be presented as side-kicks since action genres are still fantasies of male empowerment:

[A]lthough women’s roles have evolved, and in fact, female and male roles have changed, modern hero stories, like those of classic world myth, continue to focus on male experience and fantasy; ... women in these stories continue to fill the supporting roles of mothers, wives, temptresses, and goddesses. Additionally, because heroism is often confined to power fantasies, there is little room for female experiences to be considered heroic. (2010: 4)
Thus, fiction – even genres such as science fiction and dystopia that have incorporated outstanding female characters – still promotes the idea that women’s true place in society – where they can stand out and carry out their duties – is to be found in the domestic sphere and not in the public space. Thereby, popular narratives are impregnated with false impressions of gender equality, giving women more pre-eminence than in the past but still reinforcing the idea that the action domain is not women’s real turf. This could suggest that our still patriarchal societies feel threatened by the advance of women. As Jane Donawerth states in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, “females in dominant positions embody anxieties about possible social change that threatens what the author perceives as a ‘natural’ order” (2003: 31).

This enquiry has attempted to demonstrate these aspects by means of the analysis of two contemporary heroines that have set trends in our present society: Katniss Everdeen and Max Guevara. Thereby, an in-depth analysis of Collins’ trilogy and *Dark Angel* TV series has been conducted so as to determine whether their heroines challenge or not the tendency to limit female characters’ heroic status and the concomitant message that women’s roles are essentially domestic. After having conducted the analysis, and on the basis of the results obtained from the scrutiny of the novels and the TV series, it can be assumed that the conclusions corroborate all the previous points, as both heroines present numerous discouraging weaknesses.

At first sight Katniss and Max might seem strikingly different heroines, as Max is a genetically-enhanced super solider characterized by having exceptional physical strength, whereas Katniss is a mundane heroine who is physically limited. However, they have many things in common that are worth mentioning because these characteristics contribute to turning them into imperfect leading characters. First of all, both Katniss and Max lack initiative to take the heroic roles that have been assigned to them and, apart from that, both consent to be the heroines of the stories due to personal motivations. For instance, Katniss resolves to fight the Capitol in an attempt to keep her little sister and her loved ones alive, but she is not actually concerned about the fate of the whole society. In the case of Max, she agrees to help Logan to fight injustices in exchange for information about the whereabouts of her transgenic brothers and sisters. Hence, although both heroines profess unconditional love for their loved ones, their real motivations to take the roles of heroines are not completely altruistic. Indeed, Max is constantly portrayed as a lazy girl with priorities that do not involve saving the world and who is always complaining when she has to accomplish a specific mission.
Another common characteristic that undermines the heroic nature of these heroines is the need for male characters to help them when push comes to shove. Indeed, Max is always helped by Logan, the one who is really concerned about the ills of his society and who wants to change the situation. In fact, Logan only needs Max due to her extraordinary physical qualities as he is in a wheelchair. In the case of Katniss, when she is in the Hunger Games arena, she is the bravest one of her district. However, she needs to be comforted by Peeta as she is psychologically weak and has terrible nightmares. Moreover, in both stories we can find the ‘essential’ ingredient of any genre addressed to women: love. In fact, the heroines live a romance with male characters that end up being the ones who have truly heroic characteristics. In the case of Max, she falls in love with Logan and, although the feelings are apparently shared by him, his priority is to save the world, whereas Max gives more importance to their romance. In the case of Katniss, she finds herself in the middle of a love triangle between Gale and Peeta, two extremely different boys. In fact, Gale supports the need of a revolution whereas Peeta is a weak boy who does not believe in violence as a means to an end. Unsurprisingly, Katniss finally resolves to opt for the more sensitive Peeta. Indeed, “[h]er ultimate decision to remain with Peeta is presented as a default and self-serving one, with Gale predicting that Katniss will make the decision to ‘pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without’” (Lane, Taber & Woloshyn, 2013: 156).

Notwithstanding the characteristics that both characters share, Katniss and Max are also different characters. As a matter of fact, after reading the novels and watching the TV series, the impression that is left on the audience or readers is completely different. With regards to the ending of Collins’ trilogy, it can be concluded that there is an overwhelming triumph of patriarchy and traditional values as the main character is finally confined at home, taking charge of domestic duties and raising children. In turn, the heroic role is given to Katniss’ former friend Gale. As Vera Woloshyn, Nancy Taber and Laura Lane argue in their article “Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games” (2013):

The Hunger Games trilogy, despite ostensibly representing Katniss as strong, independent and, in need of no man, returns to mirror ‘the traditional tales [that] do equate feminine power with being unwomanly if not inhuman. They tell us that it is not natural for a woman to be active or powerful’. What is demonstrated as ‘natural’ ... is Katniss’ eventual submission to a heteronormative order that positions women as belonging to the home. (2013: 158)
In light of this, one can conclude that Collins’ trilogy provides a discouraging ending, as everything that Katniss has achieved in her fight against the Capitol finally comes to nothing as she becomes a wife and a mother, what she did want to avoid at all costs at the beginning of the first novel. Concerning *Dark Angel*, however, the ending is much more promising. Max finally achieves her goal – saving her transgenic equals – and seems to be committed to the fight against injustice. Nevertheless, although I have to base my conclusions on real evidence, probably if the TV series had not been cancelled after the second season, the ending would have been much more similar to the one provided in the *Hunger Games* trilogy. I take the liberty of drawing attention to this point because both heroines’ characterization follows a similar pattern and because, as in the case of Collins’ novels, there is an important male character, Logan, that is as close as Max, if not more, to being the true hero of the story.

All in all and to conclude, conducting research on post-feminist action heroines in dystopian backgrounds has allowed me to gain an insight into a field that was unknown to me and that has contributed significantly to broaden my knowledge and my educational background. This dissertation has allowed me to observe that our contemporary society is still not prepared to produce full-fledged heroines in fiction, at least in dystopia for young-adult audiences, as our society is still dominated by conservative trends that fail to acknowledge real gender equality.
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Films


Novels


TV Series


**SECONDARY SOURCES**

**Print**


**Webpages**


ANNEX

LIST OF AMAZON HEROINES

1. Annie Oakley
   Annie Oakley (1860-1926) was an American sharpshooter whose talent allowed her to have a starring role in *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* show (1885). From then on, she became one of the first ‘superstar’ women of the United States, and her name started to appear on stage, in literature and on screen. Some of the novels in which Oakley was represented are: *The Secret Annie Oakley* (1983) by Marcy Heidish, *A Shooting Star: A Novel about Annie Oakley* (1998) by Sheila Solomon Klass, and the contemporary fictionalized version of Oakley in the post-apocalyptic novel *The Cartographer’s Handbook* (2013) by Alex Shaw.

2. Beatrice Prior
   Beatrice (Trice) is the main character of the *Divergent* series of novels written by Veronica Roth. She is a courageous sixteen-year old girl who does not have the abilities that the members of her faction are expected to have: selflessness. After taking a stimulation test, she learns that she is divergent; that is, she has abilities that are associated to more than one faction. Even though being a divergent is very dangerous, as they are thought to be a threat for the government, Beatrice decides to follow her heart and chooses to be transferred to Dauntless. There, she shows enormous physical and psychological strength, as well as capacity to overcome challenges.

3. Buffy Summers
   Buffy Anne Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) is the main character of Joss Whedon’s movie *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), and the TV series of the same name (1997-2003). In the TV series, Buffy is a slayer chosen to fight against evil forces such as vampires or demons. She is endowed with extraordinary strength and the ability to heal easily, among many other qualities.

4. Calamity Jane
   Martha Jane Canary-Burke (1852 - 1903) was an American frontierswoman and explorer, famous for fighting the Indians. A film entitled *Calamity Jane and Sam Bass* was released in 1949. Calamity Jane was interpreted by Yvonne De Carlo. Moreover, in 1953, another film called *Calamity Jane* and directed by David Butler was released. With regard to literature,
Calamity Jane was a significant fictional character in the Deadwood Dick series of dime novels dating from 1877. Edward Wheeler portrayed her as a wild heroine from the north, though the character’s adventures are thought to be mostly fictitious. Since then, she appeared in many novels such as Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* (1964), Larry McMurtry’s book *Buffalo Girls: A Novel* (1990) or Natalee Caple’s *Calamity’s Wake* (2013).

5. Camilla Jordan

Camilla is a fictional character that appeared in *Jungle Comics* (Fiction House) from the 1940s to the 1950s. She was a pioneer in wearing a zebra-skin bikini. She was portrayed as an immortal leader of a lost kingdom and who stands out for being extremely agile and attractive.

6. Carrie Cashin

Carrie Cashin was an attractive, hardboiled detective of pulp magazines created by Theodore Tinsley. She appeared in the *Crime Busters* magazine in 1937 and in the *Mystery Magazine* in 1939. She worked with her male partner Aleck Burton, her muscular boss, but she was the real protagonist and the intelligent one, who used her feminine wiles to succeed in a dangerous world.

7. Daenerys Targaryen

Daenerys Targaryen is a fictional character from the series of novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* written by George R. R. Martin. She also appears in the TV adaptation *Game of Thrones* (Home Box Office, 2011- present), played by Emilia Clarke. Daenerys is one of the most important characters of the novels. She is the only daughter of Aerys II Targaryen and queen Rhaella. She is a slender, platinum-blond girl. Moreover, she is one of the most complex characters as she undergoes an extraordinary evolution throughout the novels. She is presented as an innocent and frightened girl and she ends up being the *Khaleesi* of the Dothraki people. Thus, she acquires a daring personality which makes her a suitable and fair queen.

8. Elektra

Elektra is the main character of the film of the same name, directed by Rob Bowman and released in 2005. Elektra (Jennifer Garner) survives from a near-death experience and she wants to avenge her parents’ murder. Thus, she becomes a professional assassin and tries to protect a young adolescent with whom she feels empathy.
9. **Ellen Ripley**

Ellen Louise Ripley is a fictional character who appeared in the *Alien* film series (1979-present) and played by Sigourney Weaver. She is a remarkably well-received character, famous for having challenged gender roles as she has burst as a heroine into the ‘male’ world of action, science fiction and horror genres.

10. **Emma Peel**

Emma Peel is a fictional character who appeared in the British adventure TV series *The Avengers* (1960s), in the South African radio series *The Avengers* (1971-1973) and in the film version of the same name, released in 1998. Emma Peel was a spy who had many abilities such as mastering martial arts. Moreover, she has a broad knowledge in the fields of chemistry. After her husband’s disappearance and presumed death, she started working with Steed.

11. **Gabrielle**

Gabrielle is a fictional character played by Renee O’Connor in the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). The character undergoes an amazing transformation throughout the series as she is presented as a farm girl who lives in a village called Potidaea and ultimately becomes a full-fledged warrior. After meeting Xena, she expresses her wish to join her in her journey and to become her travelling partner. Eventually, she becomes her lover. Apart from that, she has surprising skills. Indeed she likes to tell stories and has musical abilities.

12. **Katniss Everdeen**

Katniss Everdeen is the leading character of the *Hunger Games* trilogy written by Suzanne Collins from 2008 to 2010. She is a 16-year-old adolescent form one of the 12 districts of Panem, a post-apocalyptic society located in our contemporary North-America. After volunteering to take her sister’s place in the 74th Hunger Games, she struggles to survive and to keep her family and friends alive. As the novels develop, she tries to defeat the oppressive government that rules her society and to improve the situation in which the population is immersed.
13. Kazanda
Kazanda is a jungle queen who lived on a lost continent which was inhabited by rare civilizations and strange creatures that was eventually discovered by Westerners. Her first appearance was in Ranger Comics in 1945, published by Fiction House. She had some abilities such as telepathy and she could also ignite fires.

14. Lara Croft
Lara Croft is a fictional character who appeared in the video game series Tomb Raider as well as in the film of the same name released in 2001. The main character is played by Angelina Jolie in the film adaptations. She is characterized by being outstandingly beautiful and athletic.

15. Lisbeth Salander
Lisbeth Salander is a fictional character created by Stieg Larsson. She is the main character of the award-winning Millennium trilogy. She has had a traumatic childhood and is currently a computer hacker under the name of ‘Wasp’. In the trilogy, Lisbeth investigates crimes along with the journalist Mikael Blomkvist.

16. Max Guevara
Max Guevara (X5-452) is the leading character of the TV series Dark Angel (2000-2002). She is a beautiful, genetically-enhanced female soldier who, as a child, runs away from Manticore, a covert governmental facility where she was created. After that, she settles in a post-apocalyptic Seattle and earns a living by working and stealing valuable things using her abilities. There, she meets Logan, a computer hacker who seeks to uncover the truth about their corrupt and rotten society.

17. Sarah Connor
Sarah Jeanette Connor is a fictional character who appeared in the TV series: Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles, and in the first two Terminator films: The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) and Terminator 2: Judgement Day (James Cameron, 1992). She was working as a waitress before a Terminator robot harassed her and tried to kill her. Her mission in the films is to fight against the machines that rule the world and destroy them. The character was played by Linda Hamilton in the films and by Lena Headey in the TV series.
18. Shenna

Shenna is the fictional comic heroine who appeared in the comics named *Shenna, Queen of the Jungle* first published in 1938 by Fiction House. She was an orphan who learned how to survive in the jungle. She had many remarkable abilities such as the gift of communicating with animals. Moreover, she could fight with knives, spears and bows. Apart from that, she could also shape-shift with animals by establishing direct eye contact with them.

19. Tally Youngblood

Tally is the leading character of the *Uglies* saga. She is a fifteen-year-old girl who is about to undergo a surgery to become a ‘pretty’. However, the character betrays her friends in a selfish act, and when the others discover that she is a traitor that has not been sincere to them they reject her, and even herself cannot stand the feeling that she has caused pain to many people. Finally, as the rebels have a cure that is supposed to reverse the effects of the ‘pretty’ brain surgery but they have no test subject, she volunteers to be the first participant of their experiment as a way to remediate the harm that she has caused. Hence, she is finally presented as a courageous and good-natured girl who does not hesitate to do the right thing in spite of her previous mistakes.

20. Violet McDade & Nevada Alvarado

Created by Cleve F. Adams, Violet McDade is considered the first hardboiled lady private eye. She was a tough, fat lady who became a private detective. She always appeared with her partner and narrator, Nevada Alvarado, a slim lady. She starred in a dozen novelettes in 1935, in the pulp magazine *Clues Detective Stories*.

21. Vooda

Vooda, the jungle princes, is another jungle heroine who struggled to protect her home from external threats and invaders. She was also known as El’nee, Alani and South Sea girl. One characteristic that defines her is that she had a domesticated leopard and she always carried a spear. Her first appearance was in 1955 in the *Seven Seas Comics*, though she also appeared in *Vodaa* and *Golden Age Greats Spotlight*.

22. Xena

Xena is the main character of the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). She was also the leading character of subsequent comic books of the same name. Her first
appearance, though, was in the TV series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999). The character of Xena was interpreted by the actress Lucy Lawless. In *Xena: The Warrior Princess* series, she is a fierce warrior who fights against tyranny and who seeks to protect the innocent and weak ones. Along her journey, she meets Gabrielle, a farm girl who joins Xena in her travels and with whom she has a relationship. The series is characterized by having mythological characters such as Zeus, Aphrodite, Ares, Poseidon, among others.