

# Learning to Love: Gendered Romance and Representation in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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## Abstract

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Young Adult (YA) fiction is a remarkably ubiquitous genre that has flooded the literary market in the last several decades. This genre may have a particularly potent effect on the conceptualization of personal identity for developing adolescent readers, and it may also influence general cultural norms surrounding constructs such as gender. If gender can be considered as performance, and if gender performance acts in real life enforce a gender binary via repetition and exposure, then performance acts in literature do the same as models of what society is or should/should not be. Romance, which functions as a cornerstone for YA literature, is one of the places in which gendered behaviors are most explicitly demonstrated—and within romantic situations, readers find either healthy models or harmful stories. Without multiple stories to choose from and imitate in performance, readers may find themselves enacting deeply problematic gender roles in their real lives and relationships.

This study includes analyses of three novels: *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Looking for Alaska*. The analyses serve as a starting point for assessing what kinds of social discourses about gender and romance are being presented in highly-popular contemporary YA literature. The study uses the tools of literary theory, pedagogical and psychological research, close-reading analysis, and a newly-proposed method of gathering descriptive summary statistics in books.

Young Adult novels, whether through purposeful agenda or mere convention, offer cues to readers about what behaviors and expectations are assigned to different social identities. If we accept that observed social constructions (even those observed in fictional contexts) influence real-world behaviors and beliefs, then YA novels may prove to be powerful agents in producing prototypes of larger cultural norms.

# **SECTION I: Literature Review, Background, and Methods**

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## Introduction

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The term “Young Adult literature” was first coined in the 1960s to describe literature that was targeted at readers roughly between the ages of 12-19, though examples of the genre stretch much further back than this (Cart). A number of other qualifiers can be applied in the attempt to reach a definition of YA literature, but Cart suggests that its most defining characteristic is the way in which it serves its readers: “much of its value cannot be quantified but is to be found in how it addresses the needs of its readers... young adults are beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing.”

Though it is the case that the genre has at times been dismissed by academic communities for having less literary “merit” than those texts which fall into the category of capital-L “Literature”, Miller and Slifkin propose a sound argument for why we ought to consider many pieces of YA literature to have merit similar to even classic works such as those of Shakespeare. They suggest that “similar literary quality” can be found between the canon and YA literature based on the presence of: “various levels of interpretation”, text complexity, multiplicity of narratives and thematic elements, and good writing form (Miller and Slifkin 7). For these reasons and more, it is increasingly important for Young Adult literature to be taken up seriously as a genre worthy of attention.

The most important reason why we ought to consider YA more carefully, however, is linked to its mass appeal. Its pervasive presence in popular culture is hard to ignore, as billion-dollar franchises churn out products including everything from movies to posters to tee-shirts to dolls. If American society is entirely soaked through with YA literature, then it stands to reason that the genre might be an important tool in understanding and producing American culture.

A cursory glance at bestseller lists can confirm the massive scale of the YA empire. Books from the *Twilight* series took the top four positions on *USA Today's* 2009 top-100 bestsellers list, and remained in the top 50 throughout 2010. *The Hunger Games* came in at #14 in 2009, and then the trilogy rose to spots #2, #5, and #7 in the following year. By 2012, the trilogy had made its way into the #2, #5, and #6 spots. *Looking for Alaska* by YA-titan John Green is a slightly lesser-known novel, but the author is responsible for massive blockbuster books-turned-movies such as *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*. *Looking for Alaska* still managed to reach the #4 spot for nearly 20 weeks on The New York Times 2012 bestsellers list, and Green announced in June 2014 that the book is being made into a film.

These books represent a sizeable percentage of the most successful YA books in the last decade. *Twilight* lends itself to being the quintessential teen romance novel with a supernatural twist. *The Hunger Games*, on the other hand, is celebrated for the presence of its supposedly strong female lead. Finally, *Looking for Alaska* provides a male protagonist in a genre that is often targeted at teenage girls instead of boys. Each book holds an important position in the American literary scene, and each has immense influence upon both youth and adult readers.

I can personally attest to the incredible effect of these books in the lives of their readers, as I spent the better part of my teenage years locked up in my bedroom with various selections from the YA genre. As a thirteen year old I was swept up in the frenzy surrounding the *Twilight* books, and consequently spent a year of my life penning online 'fanfiction' (a genre of fan-produced writing that utilizes characters from popular media). I was dedicated enough to the task that I amassed a few hundred subscribers and wrote some 50,000 words in total, and the faces of the men of *Twilight* looked down upon me fondly from posters on my bedroom wall as I typed.

However, Edward was hardly my only interest—I genuinely felt myself to be in love with characters from various books more often than I care to admit.

It took me years to understand that Edward was hardly Prince Charming. By the time I entered college and began studying to be an English teacher, I had discovered that the models for gender and relationships presented in *Twilight* and its contemporaries could be dangerously oppressive at their worst and heteronormative at their best. When I started to notice my own teenage students becoming as wrapped up in Young Adult romances as I'd been, I started to wonder how I could help them understand the biases and invisible systems of social hierarchy at work within the seemingly-harmless pages of their choice novels.

I soon realized that my desire to find ways to help them become better critical readers had higher stakes than simply helping them break out of their herd-like mass adoration for fictional heroes. I encountered reader-response and transactional reading theory early on in my teacher education, and the implications of such concepts left me nervous for my students. The originator of reader-response theory stated that “‘meaning’ does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text” (Rosenblatt 1369). This meant that my students, much like myself at their age, were making their own meaning from texts by interacting with them on a personal and affective level. As I well knew, the transaction of material between reader and text tends to lead to very real responses on the part of readers.

This, of course, isn't particularly innovative. It is not a new idea that literature, in its portrayal of customs and culture, plays a definitive role in both reflecting and producing social behaviors. As readers digest the sociocultural information lying just beneath the surface of most texts, both explicit and implicit suggestions enter their minds about how society is structured and

what this means for their own identities. As I was mostly concerned with the material presented in romantic YA literature, I found myself chiefly interested in the urgent question of how literature might influence one's development of gender and sexual identity.

Theorist Judith Butler imagines gender as being *performed*; that is to say that gender exists only as a set of outward behaviors. These outward behaviors, which are typically imitations of other observed gender performances, tend to reinforce preexisting ideas about gender. As Butler explains, "performance is affected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame. Understood in pedagogical terms, the performance renders social laws explicit" (526). If performance acts in real life enforce a gender binary via repetition and exposure, then performance acts in literature do the same as exemplary models of what society is, and what it should or should not be.

The Western conception of gender is fundamentally binary: each gender is defined in terms of its opposite. Mary Klages, an expert on literary theory, notes that "poststructuralist feminist theory sees the category or position 'woman' as a part of a binary opposition, 'man/woman', in which 'man' is the favored term" (96). Klages goes on to explain that the role of feminist theories is to deconstruct binaries related to this divide between male and female.

If the genders are binary, then places where genders interact are highly effective in showcasing the contrast between each half of the binary. Romance, therefore, becomes a highly useful moment of definition for each gender. Sara Day proposes in her book, *Reading like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, that "young adult novels are among the most popular and powerful cultural representations of teenage relationships" (Day 69). As characters within these novels behave in romantic contexts, they perform different roles

contingent upon their established notions of gender identity—and this is especially true in heteronormative and cisgender settings that do not seek to resist traditional gender roles. The ubiquity of romance in the YA genre means that readers are offered bountiful opportunities to examine how genders interact with each other and how gender expression is differentiated within romantic situations. Gender examples presented in literature are then held up as endorsements of and instructions for real-world gendered behavior.

While both men and women respond to romantic presentations of gender, female-identified persons hold particularly high stakes in the performance of gender in the media. As explained earlier by Klages, the ‘male’ half of the gender binary is favored, as evident by its alignment with other stereotypical binaries (96). If ‘man/woman’ is a binary, then a binary such as ‘strong/weak’ would be assigned with ‘weak’ correlating with ‘female’, and ‘strong’ correlating with ‘male’. The same can be said of traditional gender binaries such as: ‘leader/follower’, ‘dominant/submissive’, ‘positive/negative’, and even ‘Self/Other’ (Klages 96).

If feminist theory seeks to erase the boundaries of these binaries, then an obvious place to begin is with mass media; it is, after all, the easiest channel through which one can get ideas out to large populations. Literature provides a multiplicity of opportunities for readers to enforce, resist, or even negotiate the binary. The opportunity for both male- and female-identified readers to view themselves with new identities that resist patriarchal paradigms can undoubtedly promote major transformations in our social patterns as diverse variations of meaning and identity emerge. Powerful performances of gender expression in literature that reject traditional roles give readers a framework in which to enact their own new performances and allow them to blur the boundaries of the gender binary.

In summation, YA literature must be seen as a potent tool by which hegemonic social constructions of gender can either be sustained or reconstructed. Because of the possibilities for anti-oppression that exist in YA literature, it is desirable for the genre to showcase positive representations of many genders within equitable, healthy relationships. If these representations do not already exist, then it is critical that readers are equipped with tools to make them critics capable of rejecting oppressive models. This study therefore seeks to establish a basic understanding of some gendered roles as presented in highly-popular YA for the primary purpose of encouraging educators to incorporate critical literacy into their classrooms.

## Reading YA Critically & Using Summary Statistics to Describe the “Gender Landscape”

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Because these YA books can be so formative in constructing readers’ understanding of the world around them, it is obviously necessary that they reflect healthy relationships and gender roles. For young women, this is a doubly important task as they are bombarded with media that tells them that (heterosexual, cisgender, and typically white-centric) romance should be their principle concern while their male counterparts are allowed other interests and options. As Younger argues, “YA romance novels might seem an unlikely locus for social change...[but] some novels provide young women an important space in which to reimagine the meaning of romance” (Younger 77). This reimagining of gender roles and the “meaning of romance” is an urgent concern. With nearly 1 in 5 American women and 1 in 59 men reporting that they have been raped at some point in their lives according to the 2014 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, both men and women desperately need to visualize and practice healthy relationships. For teens, this need is even more urgent as nearly half (40.4%) of female victims experienced their first rape before the age of 18, and more than a quarter (28%) of male victims experienced rape before the age of 10.

Though YA lit does not always provide positive modeling, it does provide the opportunity for readers to learn to criticize the models presented. There are also possibilities for multiple interpretations of most texts, and the presentation of complex issues in highly-accessible YA novels could prove to be catalysts for discussion and change among large populations. Critical literacy is a mode of educational reading practice through which young readers can be taught the skills they need to effectively understand and challenge the social cues presented to

them in literature and in the real world. Critical literacy attempts to accomplish the following four aims: “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys 382). Each of these four goals are highly necessary and timely if students are to be well-equipped as agents of change who can understand oppressive systems.

But understanding systems of oppression is not enough. Garcia, an educator who writes about disrupting hegemony with classroom practice, notes that “A critical pedagogy is one that engages youth in dialogue... Through developing an understanding of the societal forces that suppress individual agency, a critical consciousness is one that allows youth to take action against these forces” (Garcia 99). Youths can be empowered not only to question social hierarchy through critical literacy, but they can also be introduced to modes of social activism and inspire change.

Garcia later quotes Appleman (2000) to explain how feminist theory can contribute to his vision of critical literacy practice: “...feminist theory can transform students’ reading—how students view female characters...how students evaluate the significance of the gender of the author...and finally, and perhaps most important, how students read the gendered patterns in the world” (Garcia 77). Indeed, feminist theory is a good place to start looking for questions and strategies that contribute to the practice of critical literacy if we are looking to challenge gendered oppression. Classic feminist theory typically asks questions such as the following:

- “What is the gender of the author? What influence does the historical context (s) have in interpreting or analyzing the work?”
- How are women or girls depicted in the work?

- Are the important women characters three dimensional, or round, not stereotypes?
- What is the novel's point of view? How well is a woman's point of view represented in the narrative?
- In the novel's historical context, how does patriarchy function in the society of the novel's setting? Are there discernible biased points of view regarding women's role in society?" (Latrobe 191)

In addition to the above questions, which will certainly prove useful in evaluating YA lit, Kathy Latrobe (a widely-published expert on youth and American literatures) offers an adjustment on the questions in order to remain highly-relevant to YA novels. Her proposed questions include the following:

- "Do societal gender expectations and stereotypes cause conflict or limit the character's range of options?
- Does the character think critically to reconcile real experiences with gender expectations?
- Does the character demonstrate independence (from gender expectations) in making decisions? If so, does the character pay the social price?
- Does the character achieve acceptance from other characters and self?" (Latrobe 192)

Beyond utilizing the broad set of guidelines provided by critical literacy and feminist theory, I became preoccupied at the beginning of this study with the idea of finding a way to consider not only gendered behavior in literature, but also gendered representation itself. After coming across the Bechdel Test for gender representation in films, an interesting idea thought occurred to me: why not test representation in literature too?

The original Bechdel Test was inspired by a 1985 installment of Allison Bechdel's comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. One of the women in the strip mentions that she has specific criteria for deciding which films she will watch: "one, it has to have at least two women in it...who two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man." Though the strip was clearly satirical, actually using the method to test films proved to be quite revealing. The minimum bar for gender representation was set relatively low by the comic strip, and yet many films failed, ultimately revealing how grossly underrepresented women are in films.

I propose that a brief set of questions drawing upon the Bechdel Test might be devised to help readers visualize the gender landscape of literary works. For the purpose of this study, the *gender landscape* can be defined as a quantitative summary of the ways in which genders are represented and treated differently within texts. With a set of questions to guide one's reading, it should be possible to establish a simple summary of some ways in which gender is presented within a text and to use this summary to support further literary analysis.

Because this evaluative system is appearing within this paper for the first time, I will refer to it for now as the Selcer Method. As the focus of this study is analyzing gender specifically within the context of romance, the method will focus heavily on tracking romantic attachments. It should be noted that the books selected for this study present only heterosexual, white, cisgender relationships, meaning that I will not be able to examine any other types of romance throughout the duration of this particular study. I do believe, however, that the questions could be modified to track nearly any identity.

The following questions are humbly offered to produce a dataset showing gendered representation:

**Data Collection Questions:**

1. (A) How many named female characters are there in the text versus named male characters? (B) How many named, speaking females are there compared to named, speaking males?
2. (A) Of the named characters, how many females have clear romantic attachments? How many males have clear romantic attachments? (B) How many males and females have implied attachments, or ambiguous attachments? (C) How many characters have no mention of romantic attachments? (D) How many characters have named romantic interests?

**Guiding Questions for Further Analysis:**

3. How many female characters have some kind of personality development unrelated to their romantic interests? How many males have personality development unrelated to their romantic interests?
4. For texts with female protagonists: How frequently do two or more named female characters have a dialogued conversation with each other in which a romantic interest is not referenced? For texts with male protagonists: How frequently do two or more named male characters have a dialogued conversation in which a romantic interest is not referenced?

In the proposed method, the first criterion can be assigned scaled numerical values. In Criteria 1(A), a perfect score would mean that the number of named females and males was equal, and in Criteria 1(B) a perfect score would mean that there was an equal number of

speaking females and males. A perfect 50% to 50% split of gender on either criteria would warrant a score of 100/100 in that criteria because this would represent the most equitable scenario possible.

Scores would then decrease from 100/100 according to how large the difference between the percentages of each gender in relation to total number of characters was. For example, if there were 17 named females in a book and 13 named males for a total of 30 named characters, 57% of the characters would be female and 43% would be male. This is a 14% difference, which would translate to a 14 point deduction on the 100-point scale, for a score of 86/100 in Criteria 1 (A). Accordingly, a book with 30 named male characters and 0 named female characters would have a score of 0/100 in that category. An example evaluation of a fictional text (we'll call it *Blue Café*) is below.

Criteria 1 (A): Score 80/100

<b>Named Female Characters</b>	10 (40% of named characters total)
<b>Named Male Characters</b>	15 (60% of named characters total)

60% - 40% = 20%, so there must be a 20 point deduction from the potential score of 100

Criteria 1 (B): Score 72/100

<b>Named, Speaking Female Characters</b>	8 (36% of named, speaking characters)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters</b>	14 (64% of named, speaking characters )

64% - 36% = 28%, so there must be a 28 point deduction from the potential score of 100

Criteria 2 would function slightly differently from Criteria 1. The romantic attachment criteria must use proportions instead of flat numbers—that is to say, we should evaluate romantic attachments in terms of the percentage of characters with romantic attachments compared to total characters. In Criteria 2 (A), the perfect score (which would be based on exactly equal treatment of genders) would mean that each gender had the same proportionate percentage (rounded) of

romantically-involved characters. If a book had 17 named females (15 of which had romantic attachments) and 13 named males (8 of which had romantic attachments), then the proportions would be 88% of females with romantic attachments and 62% of males. To calculate a score, we need only subtract the difference between these two percentages. In this case, the score for Criteria 2 (A) would be 74/100. Below is the continued evaluation of *Blue Café*.

Criteria 2 (A): Score 67/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	6 out of 10 total named females (60%)
<b>Named Male Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	4 out of 15 total named males (27%)

$60\% - 27\% = 33\%$ , so there must be a 33 point deduction from the potential score of 100

Criteria 2 (B): Score 93/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	2 of 10 total named females (20%)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	4 of 15 total named males (27%)

$27\% - 20\% = 7\%$ , so there must be a 7 point deduction from the potential score of 100

Criteria 2 (C): Score 74/100

<b>Named Female Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	2 of 10 total named females (20%)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	7 of 15 total named males (46%)

$46\% - 20\% = 26\%$ , so a 26 point deduction from the potential score of 100

Criteria 2 (D): Score 73/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Specified Romantic Interest</b>	8 of 10 total named females (80%)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters with Specified Romantic Interest</b>	8 of 15 total named males (53%)

$80\% - 53\% = 27\%$ , so a 27 point deduction from the potential score of 100

The goal of this method is to reflect general trends and render the gender landscape more visible. The system does not discriminate whether gender is unequally skewed in favor of males or in favor of females, but only that it is skewed. It should also be taken into account that exactly equal distribution of each gender in each criteria does not necessarily ensure fair or favorable treatment of the genders. Finally, the method may not be useful or logical in all scenarios. If a YA novel is set at an all-boys private school, examining gender representation distribution may not be useful. If a YA novel has only three characters, then the dataset may be too small to provide any conclusive information.

The last two of criteria, (3) and (4), are not actually used in the scoring system. Criterion (3) is not used in the system because it is too subjective, but it can be used very productively as a guiding question for close analysis of characters and their roles. Criterion (4) is not included in the scoring system because it is meant to help collect data about the relationships of a gender to itself; my primary purpose for including this criteria is to examine the ways in which platonic male and female relationships/friendships are constructed differently within YA romance.

The combination of this method with theory, critical analysis, and close-reading should provide a robust and round critique of how gender and gendered romance are constructed in the three novels chosen for this study. I advocate that the Selcer Method never be used on its own as an end analysis, but is rather used to support other types of literary analysis as modeled in the following pages.

## **SECTION II: Analysis of *Twilight***

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## USING THE SELCER METHOD TO DESCRIBE THE GENDER LANDSCAPE IN *TWILIGHT*

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### Criteria 1 (A): Score 72/100

<b>Named Female Characters</b>	14 (36% of named characters)
<b>Named Male Characters</b>	25 (64% of named characters)

Named Females: Alice Cullen, Bella Swan, Victoria, Samantha, Amber, Ms. Cope, Lauren, Angela Weber, Jessica Stanley, Rosalie Hale, Renée, Esme Cullen, Rachel Black\*, Rebecca Black\*

Named Males: Laurent, Charlie Swan, Eric, Tyler Crowley, Billy Black, Jacob Black, James, Mike Newton, Edward Cullen, Phil\*, Marcus\*, Caius\*, Aro\*, Harry Clearwater\*, Mr. Mason, Mr. Banner, Emmett Cullen, Coach Clapp, Conner, Jasper Hale, Carlisle Cullen, Lee Stephens, Ben Cheney, Sam, Mr. Varner

\*Does not actually appear in this book, but name is mentioned.

### Criteria 1 (B): Score 80/100

<b>Named, Speaking Female Characters</b>	10 (40% of named, speaking characters)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters</b>	15 (60% of named, speaking characters)

Named, Speaking Females: Alice Cullen, Bella Swan, Amber, Ms. Cope, Lauren, Angela Weber, Jessica Stanley, Rosalie Hale, Renée, Esme Cullen

Named, Speaking Males: Laurent, Charlie Swan, Eric, Tyler Crowley, Billy Black, Jacob Black, James, Mike Newton, Edward Cullen, Mr. Mason, Mr. Banner, Emmett Cullen, Jasper Hale, Carlisle Cullen, Sam

### Criteria 2 (A): Score 74/100

\*\*Marcus, Caius, Aro, Harry Clearwater, and Rachel Black are not included in any of the sections of Criteria 2 because they do not actually appear in this book and there is no information given about their romantic status until later in the series. Phil and Rebecca are included in Criteria 2 (A) because their marital status is clearly stated.

<b>Named Female Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	7 (50% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	6 (24% of named males overall)

Named Females with Clear Romantic Attachments: Alice Cullen, Bella Swan, Jessica Stanley, Rosalie Hale, Esme Cullen, Renée, Rebecca (Black)

Named Males with Clear Romantic Attachments: Mike Newton, Edward Cullen, Phil, Emmett Cullen, Jasper Hale, Carlisle Cullen

Criteria 2 (B): Score 99/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	3 (21% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	5 (20% of named males overall)

Named Females with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: Samantha, Lauren, Angela Weber

Named Males with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: Conner, Lee Stephens, Ben Cheney, Eric, Tyler Crowley

Criteria 2 (C): Score 81/100

<b>Named Female Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	3 (21% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	10 (40% of named males overall)

Named Females with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Ms. Cope, Victoria, Amber

Named Males with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Charlie Swan, Billy Black, Jacob Black, Laurent, James, Mr. Mason, Mr. Banner, Coach Clapp, Mr. Varner, Sam

Criteria 2 (D): Score 73/100

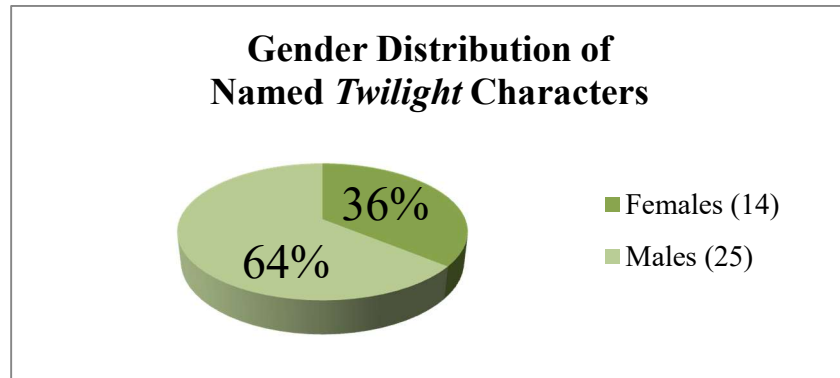
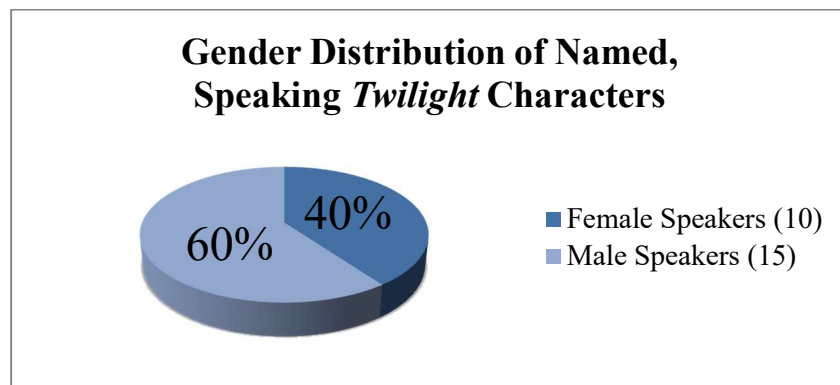
<b>Named Female Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	11 (79% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	13 (52% of named males overall)

Named Females with Specified Romantic Interests: Alice Cullen, Bella Swan, Samantha, Amber, Lauren, Angela Weber, Jessica Stanley, Rosalie Hale, Renée, Esme Cullen, Rebecca (Black)

Named Males with Specified Romantic Interests: Charlie Swan, Eric, Tyler Crowley, Jacob Black, Mike Newton, Edward Cullen, Phil, Emmett Cullen, Conner, Jasper Hale, Carlisle Cullen, Lee Stephens, Ben Cheney

**TWILIGHT'S GENDER LANDSCAPE: RELATED FIGURES**

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Fig. 1 (A): Gender Distribution of Named *Twilight* CharactersFig. 1 (B): Gender Distribution of Named, Speaking *Twilight* Characters

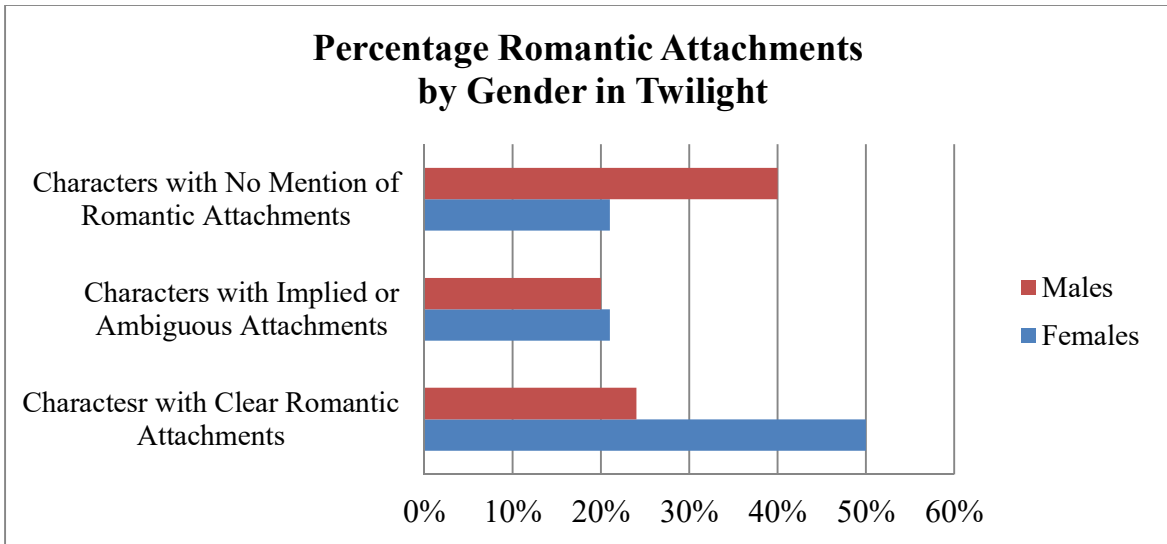


Fig. 1 (C): Percentage Romantic Attachments by Gender in *Twilight*

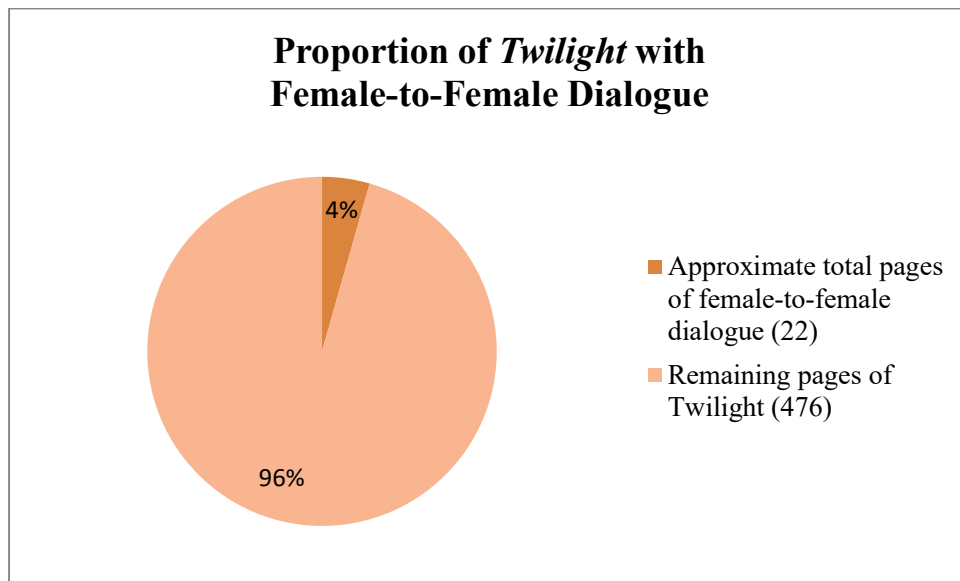


Fig. 1 (D): Proportion of *Twilight* with Female-to-Female Dialogue

## **DISCUSSION OF THE SELCER METHOD AS APPLIED TO *TWILIGHT***

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Even a precursory glance at the datasets of *Twilight* raises some serious questions. When the actual human world reflects a nearly 50-50 split of men and women, it seems alarming that a literary world could present only 36% of its named characters as women (next to a much larger 74% for men) and have the difference go largely unnoticed. Perhaps in a novel set in an all-boys school, or a text focusing on the relationships built between an all-male basketball team, this type of distribution would be reasonable. But in a book targeted primarily at young teen girls with a teen girl as the protagonist, it may at first seem strange that the book would have twenty-five named characters compared to fourteen females. However, the distribution of male characters in comparison to female characters feeds into a normative sense of which gender seems to be more important in general—that is to say that as a trend, males have larger roles in terms of the progressing action of *Twilight*. Beyond that, the overrepresentation of males may suggest that teenage girls (the target audience of the book) are overall more interested in males than in females, further perpetuating the stereotype that young girls are largely preoccupied with romance and the roles of men in their own lives.

But a lack of equity in numerical representation of each gender is hardly the only offense of *Twilight*. The level of romantic involvement created for each gender is also hugely unequal. While 50% of the named female characters have explicitly stated romantic attachments and relationships, a mere 24% of males share the same status. What is more, the 50% of females in the book who are in relationships clearly serve more important roles and are featured more heavily throughout the action of the book. In fact, out of the ten speaking female characters, six are describe explicitly in terms of their relationships. The other four speaking females (Lauren,

Amber, Angela, and Ms. Cope) play relatively minor roles; and yet three out of four of these females have named romantic interests even if they aren't actively involved in relationships. That means that nine out of the ten speaking females in the book are given clear romantic interests or attachments.

The only three female characters who have no mention of romantic engagement have virtually no significant character development within the book. These three females are: Ms. Cope (who works at Bella's school and has only two or three lines of dialogue), Victoria (a member of the trio of nomadic vampires, mostly just referred to as 'the female'), and Amber (who works as a waitress in Port Angeles and appears in just one scene.) Cope is merely a background character; Victoria is revealed to be in a serious relationship with James the vampire hunter in the sequel to *Twilight*; and Amber's entire description focuses on how she is attracted to Edward.

On the other side of the gender divide, there are ten named males in the book without mentioned romantic attachments. Four of these characters are male teachers at Bella's school (intriguingly, all of Bella's named teachers are male and the only named female staff member at the school is a secretary) and play no significant role in the book. Sam, a teenager from the La Push reservation, also has no mentioned romantic attachments and plays no major role in the first book of the *Twilight* series. Laurent, one of the nomadic vampires in James's trio, has a limited role as well. However, the other four males in the book who have no mentioned romantic attachments have large roles throughout the book. Charlie Swan, Billy Black, Jacob Black, and James go the entirety of the first book without having any revealed romantic engagements. It is, however, revealed later that James was linked with Victoria and it is implied that Jacob may have some interest in Bella. Regardless, when compared to the roles offered to uninvolved

female characters, the unattached boys have both greater numbers and greater presence throughout the novel.

Of the fifteen named, speaking male characters in *Twilight*, only nine are either involved in romantic relationships *or* are given a specified romantic interest. Compare this to the larger proportion of female characters:

<b>Named, Speaking Female Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments <u>or</u> Specified Romantic Interests</b>	9 (90% of named, speaking females overall)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments <u>or</u> Specified Romantic Interests</b>	9 (60% of named males overall)

What does this disparity mean? While only one named, speaking female has absolutely no romantic interest indicated, there are six named, speaking male characters without romantic interests. This dissimilarity is comparable to Criteria 2 (D), wherein nearly 80% of named females have specified romantic interests compared to 52% of males.

Why do nearly all females, and all important females, have romantic development when males do not? What is the implicit social statement being made about female identity by representations such as this? It would seem to suggest that there is something crucial to female identity dependent upon romantic male interests. Males, on the other hand, seem perfectly able to exist as rounded characters independent of romantic interest in—and perhaps even interaction with—females. The suggestion seems to be that men are inherently more independent and less preoccupied with romance than females.

The hypothesis that *Twilight* presents men as more essential in women's lives than women are in men's lives is well-supported with an examination of relationships throughout the

novel. While Bella has numerous and varying important relationships with males (Charlie, Mike, Edward, to name just a few), she really only seems to have four females with which she has any relationship. Angela Weber is a casual friend, and there is only one written dialogue between Bella and her in the entire book; Alice Cullen is a potential friend to Bella, but their relationship is not developed significantly in the first book of the series. Bella only has speaking dialogue with her mother, Renée, a few times throughout the book. Yet each of their dialogued conversations are about romantic male interests: first, Renée's husband Phil, and later on, Edward. That leaves only one female friend for Bella: Jessica Stanley. However Bella seems to have no substantial friendship with her—she even seems to dislike Jessica most of the time.

In the entire 498-page book, there are a total of fourteen dialogues between two female characters. These dialogues are qualified by the absence of a male character's participation in the conversation. Two of these are the aforementioned conversations between Bella and Renée; one is a conversation between Bella, Jessica, and Angela; one is between Bella and Esme; two are between Alice and Bella; and the rest are between Bella and Jessica. Of the fourteen female-to-female conversations, not a single one of them goes without one of the females bringing up a romantic male interest at some point in the discussion. The proportion of pages with female-to-female dialogue compared to the rest of *Twilight* is represented in Figure 1-D.

It seems bizarre that in a book with a female character as the protagonist, only fourteen conversations would occur between her and other females. It seems even more bizarre that none of these conversations would occur without some mention or discussion of a romantic male interest. The social implication to young readers is clear: girls' relationships with each other are almost exclusively focused upon males and romance.

The proportion of romantically-involved females coupled with a lack of value for female actions and relationships independent of males signal to readers that men are the most important priority in a woman's life. The gender landscape in *Twilight* is grossly preferential to males in terms of varied and plentiful representations. Beyond that, the implicit suggestions that female identity and interests are dependent upon males sets a dangerous and bigoted social precedent.

While the Selcer Method gives an interesting new take on gender as well as an introductory foundation for analysis, it cannot possibly capture all of the nuanced expressions of gender within a work. The following section will go into further detail and analysis of the expectations and presentations of gender within *Twilight*.

## SCARED IS SEXY: ROMANTICIZING THE MALE PREDATOR, & EMOTIONAL ABUSE

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“Our relationship couldn’t continue to balance, as it did, on the point of a knife. We would fall off one edge or the other, depending entirely on his decision... there was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the thought of turning away from him. It was an impossibility.”  
— Bella Swan (Meyer 248)

The romance between Edward and Bella in *Twilight* has been received mass attention by consumers of all ages since the release of the book in 2002 and the release of the first film in 2008. A telling example of *Twilight*’s influence be found on fanfiction.net, a hugely popular website where users write stories (and sometimes full-length books) about their favorite literary characters. The site has over 218,000 separate entries for the *Twilight* series as of September 2015, a number of entries second only to the staggering number of entries made for the *Harry Potter* series. The authors of *Twilight* fanfiction range from adults to preteens, the content ranging from innocent and even childish stories to full-scale pornography. Most notably, the best-seller *50 Shades of Grey* is well-known to have been originally published online as *Twilight* fanfiction and later rewritten with new names to replace ‘Edward’ and ‘Bella’.

What is most alarming about these fan-generated stories is the prevailing custom of fetishizing the obvious power imbalance between Edward and Bella. While *50 Shades of Grey* is an easy go-to in terms of criticizing this power imbalance—the divide between controller and controlled easily visible since the book is about an unsafe BDSM relationship—it is hardly the first reader-generated response to *Twilight* that sexualizes what is, plainly put, a dangerous relationship between a 17-year old girl and a 100-year old man.

The imbalance between Edward and Bella is impossible to deny. Edward is physically and mentally superior to Bella, as well as being much older. In addition to having the intellectual/experiential and physical advantage, Edward boasts a slew of supernatural abilities that he can (and does) use to literally force Bella's actions. Wielding his unchecked dominance, Edward controls Bella's relationships, her actions, and even her physical body. Yet Edward's predatory behavior is not even the most frightening aspect of the story; it is instead the way in which Bella romanticizes these behaviors, and the way in which readers are positioned to do the same.

Edward's physical body is one of the first things described when he is introduced as a character in the book, and it is described as nothing less than perfect. Bella's first impression of Edward and his siblings is that they are "all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful" (Meyer 19). Bella constantly notices the physical-appeal that Edward boasts, describing him again and again as "perfect... [a] godlike creature" (Meyer 256). It is clear to readers from the very beginning that they are meant to consider Edward as the epitome of what an attractive male should or could be.

But this physical attractiveness is constantly associated with how dangerous he is. In fact, it is arguable that much of the attraction Bella feels towards Edward is actually due to how easily he could harm or even kill her. She seems to revel in his utter control over her very existence, frequently mixing descriptions of him being terrifying and incredibly attractive: "Edward as he hunted, terrible and glorious as a young god, unstoppable" (Meyer 343). Even her physical responses to his presence are littered with language that sexualizes threats upon her life: "he turned slowly to glare at me—his face was absurdly handsome—with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms" (Meyer 27). Almost

absurdly, Bella stops in the middle of a sentence about her distress to fantasize about how handsome Edward is. She also uses the word “thrill” to describe her fear, a word that is equally useful when describing a sexual encounter and a word that has a clearly positive connotation when compared with a possible alternatives such as ‘shiver’ or ‘shudder’.

This thematic sexualization of danger is not new to the genre of vampire myths, perhaps due to the obvious sexual undertones present in the action of sucking another’s blood. The image of a handsome vampire holding a helpless maiden in his crushing grip, reminiscent of a lover’s embrace, and pressing his lips to her neck is nothing if not sexual.

But *Twilight*’s attempt to make a “normal” relationship between predator and prey possible only renders this image more problematic, as it attempts to give readers an idealistic relationship while ignoring the irreconcilable fact that one partner spends most of his time thinking about murdering the other. Though other relationships characterized by this kind of imbalance would probably be called out—after all, nobody wants to read a love story between a Nazi guard and a Jewish prisoner during the Holocaust—*Twilight* has achieved a kind of moral grey area. While some critics and fans may citizen the book, many, many more do not.

By making Bella love Edward, Meyer casually makes Bella also love Edward’s desire to kill and consume her. And he does consume her, in a sense. As she notes early on in the book: “Since I’d come to Forks, it really seemed like my life was *about* him” (251). Bella is helpless to control herself after relinquishing all control to Edward—and she likes it that way.

Edward’s physical prowess is largely responsible for both Bella’s fear and attraction. While it might be considered culturally-acceptable for a female to fetishize a male’s strength (and even, perhaps, ‘normal’), Edward’s strength is not appealing simply because it is

aesthetically pleasing or because it signals an ability to assert dominance over rivals. Edward's incredible strength is attractive because it signals his ability to assert total dominance over the comparatively-helpless Bella: "He held my hands between his. They felt so feeble in his iron strength" (Meyer 270). Even when Bella become skittish about Edward's ability to do as he pleases, she talks herself out of being afraid: "I refused to be convinced to fear him, no matter how real the danger might be. *It doesn't matter*, I repeated in my head" (Meyer 243). Her desire for him literally outweighs her desire for self-preservation, a more-than-dangerous example for young readers.

If strength wasn't enough, Edward is also supernaturally fast. The combination of these physical capabilities make it easy enough to physically manipulate Bella. Yet, even when she puts up some resistance to his control, her attempts are half-hearted: "If you weren't a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this" she declares playfully on page 495 in reference to Edward having forced her to go to prom. The situation reeks of possibilities for manipulation in less pleasant contexts.

Edward's apparent omnipotent intelligence and experience is yet another mode of superiority. The huge age advantage he holds over Bella is not concealed. Edward states explicitly that he was born in 1901, making him 104 years old at the time that *Twilight* came out in 2005. If Edward didn't have an eternally-young body, the concept of an old man dating a seventeen-year-old girl would probably be revolting to many readers. Yet Meyer never positions the age gap as a problem in the book, and she doesn't attempt to hide it either. Edward frequently makes it clear that he is aware of how much older he is than Bella. He often addresses her as a child: "Who were you, an insignificant little girl" (Meyer 271). Edward isn't suffering from a case of arrested development due to being forced to repeat high school over and over; he knows

he is not an adolescent and speaks about his and Bella's classmates as mere "children" (Meyer 269). When he calls Jacob Black a "child", Bella responds by saying that "Jacob is not that much younger than I am" (Meyer 349). What borders on disturbing is Edward's response: "'Oh, I know,' he assured me with a grin" (Meyer 349). He wants to sexualize her but also wants to be clear that she is a child to him, a thinly-veiled pedophilic behavior that promotes tropes of 'precocious' young women who are somehow advanced far enough beyond their peers that they are desirable to older males. Edward knows that Bella is an underage girl, makes a point to differentiate himself as a "man" and not a boy, and continues their relationship regardless (Meyer 311). He even explicitly states several times that he knows what he is doing is unacceptable: "It's wrong. It's not safe. I'm dangerous, Bella" (Meyer 190).

Pedophilia is hardly the only obvious red flag in their relationship. Edward also engages in behaviors that clearly fall under the definitions of abuse, stalking, and even kidnapping. When Bella discovers that Edward has secretly followed her to Port Angeles, her response is enthusiastic instead of frightened: "I wondered if it should bother me that he was following me; instead I felt a strange surge of pleasure" (Meyer 174). This excited response to his textbook stalking is continued when she finds out that he has been sneaking into her room at night to watch her sleep. Despite how clearly predatory his behavior is, Bella revels in the idea of Edward entering her room "almost every night" as she sleeps (Meyers 293). She knows that she should not be happy about this discovery, but can't convince herself to feel anything other than thrilled: "Somehow I couldn't infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered" (Meyer 292). Stalking is a dangerous thing to romanticize for young readers considering the prevalence of the behavior in the US—some statistics claim that as many as 1 in 6 US women are stalked in their lifetimes, compared to 1 in 19 men (National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey).

Stalking is, however, only the tip of Edward's abusive iceberg. He uses his mind-reading powers to monitor Bella's conversations, despite Bella's explicit discomfort with the practice: "I worried about how to explain things to Jessica and agonized over whether Edward would really be listening to what I said through the medium of Jess's thoughts" (Meyer 202). Edward's presence in Bella's life also forces her other relationships to deteriorate, yet another sign of emotional abuse. After Edward decides to pursue Bella in a relationship (approximately page 200), Bella only speaks to her supposed best friend Jessica two times in the remaining three hundred pages of the book. He also behaves with aggressive jealousy over the mere mention of Bella's male friends: "I was surprised by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt... I knew that if I continued to ignore you... that someday you would say yes to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry" (Meyer 303). Bella internalizes Edward's distrust of her male friends. She yells at Mike when he expresses concern for her relationship with Edward, noting that he believes Edward "looks at you like...like you're something to eat" (Meyer 221). This is the only conversation that Mike and Bella have after she and Edward become an official couple. Later on in the book, Bella is forced to sever her slowly-budding relationship with her father at Edward's command in order to escape the vampire hunting her.

Beyond these obvious signs of abuse, there are more subtle linguistic hints of Edward's abuse. He regularly reminds her of how easily he can control her: "you are so soft, so fragile... I could kill you quite easily" (Meyer 310). There is clear a pattern of Edward's affectionate touches being described as somehow physically controlling: "his long hands formed manacles around my wrists as he spoke" (Meyer 302). Edward even indicates that he could mentally control her without lifting a finger: "I could speak the words that would make you follow... you would have come... I so very nearly took you then" (Meyer 270). His ability and desire to

control her in all aspects is reflected by his constant use of commands when speaking to her: “he ordered” (253); “he demanded” (255); “he instructed” (254); “he finally commanded” (230); “he demanded” (317); “he ordered” (381). These are only a few examples, and they do not even include his use of the imperative form for a significant portion of his dialogues with Bella.

All in all, Edward clearly exhibits 16 of 42 behaviors deemed psychologically abusive by the MPAB (Measures of Psychologically Abusive Behaviors), a common baseline for measuring emotional and psychological abuse in relationships. His laundry list of dangerous behaviors includes the following:

<b>1B</b>	Threatened to harm others (e.g., your family, your children, your close friends) around you to intimidate you	Ex. Bella feels she must protect Jacob from Edward (Meyer 183)
<b>2B</b>	Verbally threaten to physically harm you or make a gesture that seemed physically threatening as a way to frighten you	Ex. Tells Bella he can kill her easily (Meyer 263)
<b>2C</b>	Threaten to kill you as a way to frighten you	Ex. Tells Bella he can easily kill her again (Meyer 310)
<b>3B</b>	Tried to keep you from socializing with family or friends without him/her being present	Ex. Tells Bella he doesn't like her hanging out with Mike (Meyer 303-304)
<b>4A</b>	Continued to act very upset (e.g., pouted, stayed angry, gave you the silent treatment) until you did what he/she wanted you to do	Ex. Yelled when Bella didn't want to run away, forced her to follow instructions (Meyer 385)
<b>4B</b>	Threatened to end the relationship as a way to get you to do what he/she wanted	Ex. Insists she must stay human if she wants to stay together (Meyer 476)
<b>6A</b>	Criticized and belittled you as a way to make you feel bad about yourself	Ex. Tells Bella how 'absurd' she is (Meyer 82), tells her nobody would ever believe her and makes her question her sanity (Meyer 65)
<b>8A</b>	Tried to make you think he/she was more competent and intelligent than you as a way of making you feel inferior	Ex. Tells Bella how strong and powerful he is compared to her (Meyer 264)
<b>8C</b>	Tried to demand obedience to orders that he/she gave as a way of establishing their authority over you	Ex. Tells Bella what to do during James' pursuit, forces her to obey (Meyer 385)

<b>9C</b>	Treated you with strong hatred and contempt	Ex. Acts extremely aggressively towards her (Meyer 24)
<b>10A</b>	Tried to make you report on the details of where you went and what you did when you were not with him/her as a way to check on you	Ex. Wants to know what Bella is doing while he's gone (Meyer 247)
<b>10B</b>	Listened in on phone conversations, read your email, or went through your belongings without your permission as a way to check on you	Ex. Uses powers to listen to Bella's conversations with friends (Meyer 208)
<b>10C</b>	Followed or had you followed by someone else as a way of checking up on your activities	Ex. Follows Bella to Port Angeles (Meyer 174)
<b>12A</b>	Acted very upset because he/she felt jealous if you spoke to or looked at any person	Ex. Tells Bella how angry/jealous he was when Mike asked her to prom (Meyer 303)
<b>14B</b>	Tried to make personal choices that should have been left up to you (e.g., which clothes to wear, whether you should smoke or drink, what you eat)	Ex. Makes Bella go to prom and dance (Meyer 486), constantly tells her when to eat (Meyer 170)
<b>14C</b>	Tried to make major decisions that affected you without consulting with you	Ex. Decides Bella cannot be a vampire (Meyer 476)

(1203-1204 Follingstad)

Edward's psychological abuse becomes physical at some points. The most alarming scene in the book is after Edward decides to protect Bella from James by removing her from Forks. When she demands to be taken home, Edward commands his brother to hold her down so she can't escape. Bella responds by thrashing in her seatbelt and screaming, "No! Edward! No, you can't do this", but he ignores her demands to be released (Meyers 381). When his brother and sister become alarmed and tell him that they want to take Bella home, he becomes violent and begins yelling. When he is finally forced to accept a compromise for Bella to warn her father that she is leaving, he maintains rigid command over her: "You're leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not. You tell Charlie that you can't stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works... You have fifteen minutes" (Meyers 385). The entire scene is construed as Edward being protective, but in reality it begins as a kidnapping attempt and ends as Edward forcibly separating Bella from her only family against her will.

Edward also has one final weapon, perhaps the most dangerous one, to use in pursuit of controlling Bella. Edward can ‘dazzle’ humans, a form a vampiric hypnosis that leaves Bella witless and subject to his commands: “He looked down, and then glanced up at me through his long black eyelashes, his other eyes scorching...I blinked, my mind going blank. Holy crow, how did he *do* that? ...Was he a hypnotist, too?” (Meyer 92). Bella knows how influential this behavior is, and perhaps even acknowledges its inherent danger: “his golden eyes scorched from under his lashes, hypnotic and deadly” (Meyer 270). Whether he decides to use physical force, emotional manipulation, intellectual superiority, or even hypnosis, Edward can do whatever he pleases with Bella.

Edward sums it up best himself: “I’m the world’s best predator, aren’t I? Everything about me invites you in – my voice, my face, even my *smell*. As if I need any of that! ... As if you could outrun me... As if you could fight me off” (Meyer 263-264). He exerts utter dominance over Bella as the worshiped lover-predator. And Bella sums up her feelings about this power dynamic best when responding to his statement that she must risk her life to be with him: “[my life is worth] very little—I don’t feel deprived of anything” (Meyer 305). She essentially gives up all agency to make Edward desire her, but feels that this is no sacrifice.

The fact that Bella feels deprived of nothing despite the major sacrifices she must make to be with Edward is curious, but what is more interesting is the fact that many readers are so attracted to this particular love story despite its obvious flaws. Do readers enjoy the story because they have already been taught to fantasize these stories of male dominance? If male dominance and control, as represented through ideas such as masculine strength and the male provider, are integral to our society’s perception of gendered roles, then it is perhaps unsurprising that female audiences have responded in largely affirmative ways to this text. It

could be argued that they have merely been socialized to find this story appealing, and that it will take the intervention of resistance narratives to help women move away from viewing these roles positively. But does this text really reflect modern values and culture? It could be argued that American society has moved beyond such fetishization of unchecked patriarchal domination, especially in the aftermath of widespread feminism.

In *Reading the Romance: Reading, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Radway offers up the notion that texts reflecting gender oppression might still be enjoyed because they provide a coping mechanism to readers: “By picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness, romances are not necessarily endorsing her situation, but examining an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it” (Radway 1975). Though Bella doesn’t seem to have any particularly appealing strategies for recognizing her own oppression, let alone coping with it, the book may be popular simply because it genuinely reflects the roles women see themselves embodying during day-to-day life.

Another explanation lies perhaps in the idea of a “guilty pleasure.” Perhaps the repression of female sexuality has led to this concept; desire has been made subterfuge for females, and therefore any expression of feminine sexuality might invoke feelings of guilt. Female audiences may enjoy the content of *Twilight* despite its obvious shortcomings because it provides an outlet for female sexual desire, nevermind whether that outlet is sufficiently positive. As Cixous might notes, “we’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty” (Cixous 885). Therefore, any niche which provides a space for female sexuality (no matter how patriarchal) might be embraced by repressed females.

But it may also be the case that some audiences enjoy the relationship in *Twilight* because of its deep fundamental flaws, and not just in spite of its fundamental flaws. The concept of a bad boy in need of saving is hardly out of date, and has perhaps saturated media more in recent years than ever before with a steep rise in media focusing on supernatural combination hunk-villains (see: *The Vampire Diaries*, *Teen Wolf*, *The Originals*, etc.) Cixous might argue that this type of harmful ‘chick lit’ has emerged because there haven’t been sufficient spaces created in literature for women to reclaim their sexuality and selves, and because women are still writing after the fashion of patriarchal values. She explains this idea by saying that “woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of a man” (Cixous 887). For her, to gain a new literature that turns away from the oppressive structures perpetuated in texts such as *Twilight*, there must be writing that exists wholly outside of the ‘phallogocentric’ universe.

However, Cixous’ call for literature that completely breaks apart the social order is a pretty tall order, and there needs to be a way to still take advantage of highly popular texts in cultivating resistance towards traditional gender roles. Though it is unlikely that *Twilight* will ever be considered a feminist text, it could still be used to criticize and re-invent gender roles through methods of critical literacy. If readers ask questions like: “Who does this text benefit? Whose voices are being heard, and whose voices are not present? How does gender influence Bella/Edward’s behavior?” and even “Why doesn’t Bella see Edward’s behavior as problematic?”, then *Twilight* can be used as an educational tool to help readers understand the construction of gender in romance more fully. Being able to make these oppressive discourses visible will only enable readers to gain agency to critique gender in the real world, and to better understand the influences of social identity on their own lives.

**SECTION III: Analysis**  
*of The Hunger Games*

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## USING THE SELCER METHOD TO DESCRIBE THE GENDER LANDSCAPE IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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### Criteria 1 (A): Score 90/100

<b>Named Female Characters</b>	17 (55% of named characters)
<b>Named Male Characters</b>	14 (45% of named characters)

Named Females: Primrose Everdeen, Katniss Everdeen, Effie Trinket, Delly Cartwright\*, Venia, Madge Undersee, Rue, Atala, Johanna Mason\*, Octavia, Mrs. Everdeen, Portia, Mrs. Mellark, Clove, Rooba, Glimmer, Greasy Sae

Named Males: Peeta Mellark, Mr. Mellark, Cinna, Mr. Everdeen, Gale Hawthorne, Mayor Undersee, Haymitch Abernathy, President Snow, Caesar Flickerman, Thrush, Flavius, Cato, Titus\*, Claudius Templesmith

\*Does not actually appear in the book, but name is mentioned.

### Criteria 1 (B): Score 96/100

<b>Named, Speaking Female Characters</b>	13 (52% of named, speaking characters)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters</b>	12 (48% of named, speaking characters)

Named, Speaking Females: Primrose Everdeen, Katniss Everdeen, Effie Trinket, Venia, Madge Undersee, Rue, Octavia, Mrs. Everdeen, Portia, Mrs. Mellark, Clove, Rooba, Glimmer

Named, Speaking Males: Peeta Mellark, Mr. Mellark, Cinna, Gale, Mayor Undersee, Haymitch Abernathy, President Snow, Caesar Flickerman, Thrush, Flavius, Cato, Claudius Templesmith

### Criteria 2 (A): Score 89/100

\*\*Delly Cartwright and Johanna Mason are not included in any of the sections of Criteria 2 because they do not actually appear in the book and there is no information given about their romantic status. Mr. Everdeen appears below because his marital status is clearly stated, despite the fact that he is deceased.

<b>Named Female Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	3 (18% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	4 (29% of named males overall)

Named Females with Clear Romantic Attachments: Mrs. Everdeen, Portia, Mrs. Mellark

Named Males with Clear Romantic Attachments: Mr. Mellark, Cinna, Mr. Everdeen, Mayor Undersee

Criteria 2 (B): Score 99.8/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	1 (0.5% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	1 (0.7% of named males overall)

Named Females with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: Katniss Everdeen

Named Males with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: Peeta Mellark

Criteria 2 (C): Score 96/100

<b>Named Female Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	9 (53% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	10 (57% of named males overall)

Named Females with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Primrose Everdeen, Effie Trinket, Venia, Madge Undersee, Rue, Atala, Octavia, Clove, Rooba, Glimmer

Named Males with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Gale Hawthorne, Haymitch Abernathy, President Snow, Caesar Flickerman, Thrush, Flavius, Cato, Claudius Templesmith

Criteria 2 (D): Score 87.5/100

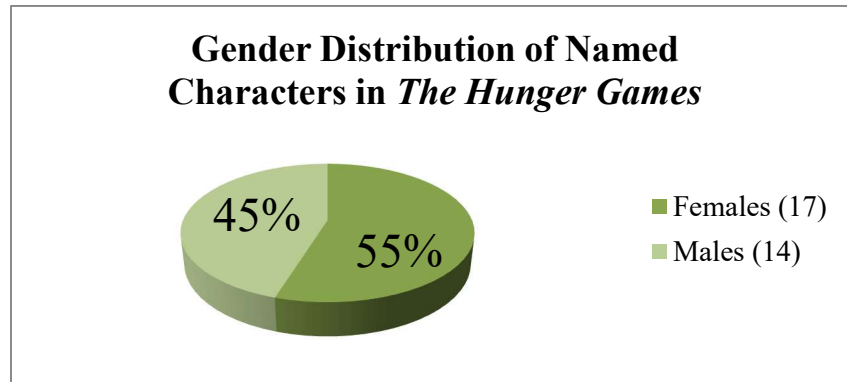
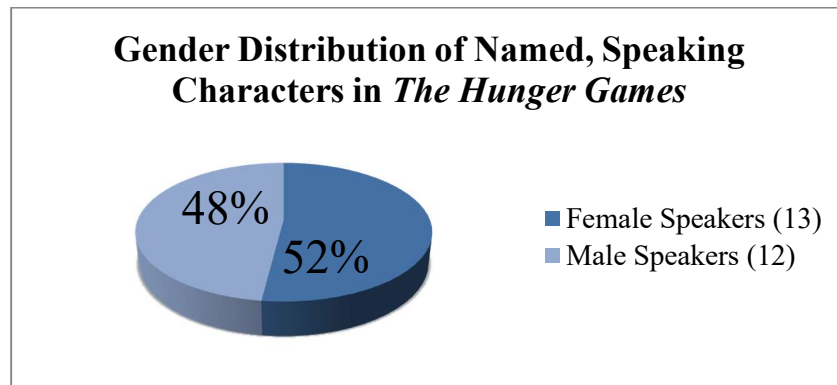
<b>Named Female Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	4 (23.5% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	5 (36% of named males overall)

Named Females with Specified Romantic Interests: Katniss Everdeen, Mrs. Everdeen, Mrs. Mellark, Portia

Named Males with Specified Romantic Interests: Peeta Mellark, Mayor Undersee, Cinna, Mr. Mellark, Mr. Everdeen

**THE HUNGER GAMES' GENDER LANDSCAPE: RELATED FIGURES**

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Fig. 2 (A): Gender Distribution of Named *Hunger Games* CharactersFig. 2 (B): Gender Distribution of Named, Speaking *Hunger Games* Characters

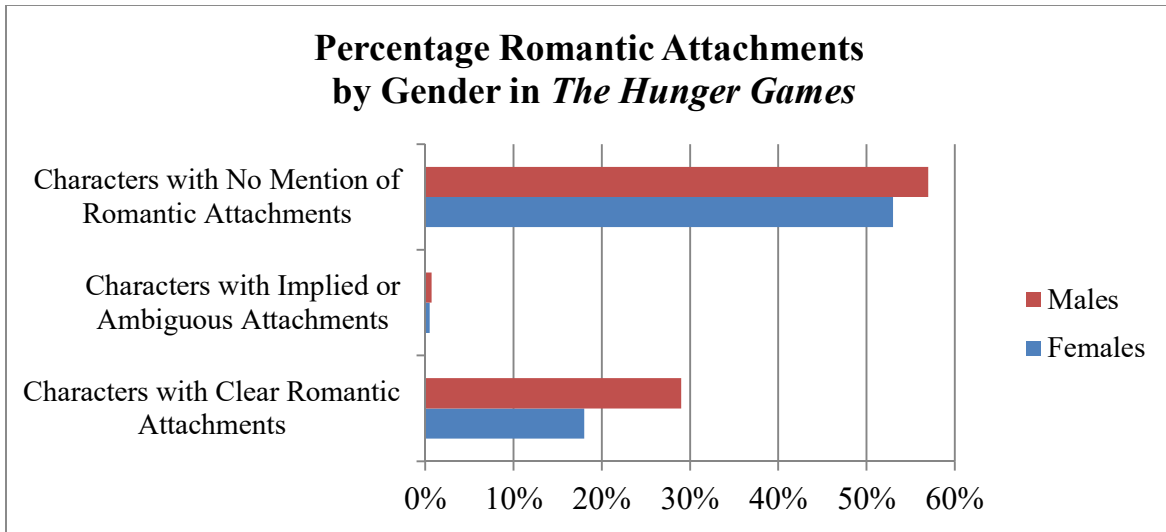


Fig. 2 (C): Percentage Romantic Attachments by Gender in *The Hunger Games*

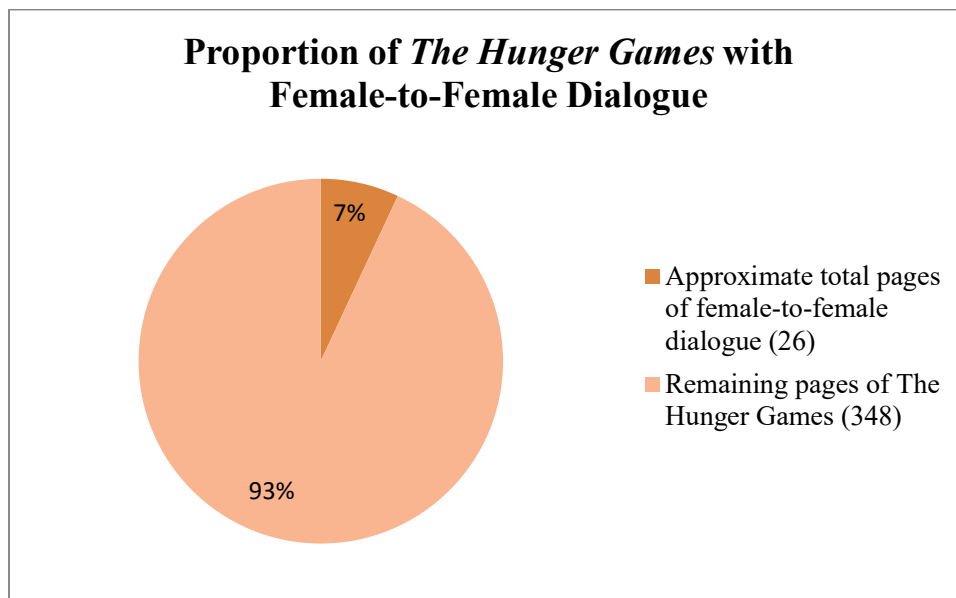


Fig. 2 (D): Proportion of *Hunger Games* with Female-to-Female Dialogue

## DISCUSSION OF THE SELCER METHOD AS APPLIED TO *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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What is most striking about the gender dataset collected for *The Hunger Games* is the fact that genders are represented in largely equal ways. Female speakers account for 52% of the characters in the book, with a close 48% proportion belonging to male speakers. Yet the question might be raised if numerically-equal representation is enough. If women have been historically underrepresented in the real world and in literary worlds, then is it enough to have an equal number of females and males in texts? Or, is it necessary to have an overcompensation in representation of strong females in order to facilitate progress away from male-dominated societies? Is equal representation necessarily equitable?

Also fascinating in *The Hunger Games* is the romance in characters' lives—or rather, the lack thereof. Of 31 named characters, 19 have no romantic attachments (61% of named characters overall.) This seems to make sense in terms of the context of the book itself; a battlefield with only one winner allowed to leave alive is hardly a place for romance. The characters themselves are obviously aware of this. Caesar Flickerman mumbles at one point that Peeta's crush on his competitor Katniss is truly “a piece of bad luck” (Collins 133). Everyone in the book is clearly conscious of the impossibility of love during the Games, and yet the Capitol enthusiastically encourages the supposed relationship between Katniss and Peeta.

Despite the dire circumstances and even more dire outcomes of romance, it seems to be at the forefront of everyone's minds. But only older characters seem to have the luxury of actually engaging romantically; most of the characters in clear romantic relationships are married and at least middle-aged. Young characters, with the exception of a potential love triangle between

Katniss, Peeta, and Gale, almost never have any romantic involvement or even suggestions of romantic interest. The widespread oppression and lack of safe domestic spaces perhaps eliminates the desire for romance altogether in the younger populations, and produces couples in the older populations through necessity only.

The last data worth examining in *The Hunger Games* is the frequency of conversations held between female characters. Though nearly double *Twilight*'s 4% statistic for percentage of female-to-female dialogue in the entire book, a 7% proportion in *The Hunger Games* seems insufficient. Here is yet another book with a female protagonist who spends less than 10% of the book speaking with other females without the intervention of male presence. Katniss, much like Bella, has few female friends. Instead, Katniss spends most of her time with males, whether she is with Gale in the beginning or Peeta in the end. She makes friends with Rue for a short period of time, but they only manage to have a few conversations before the younger girl's death. Katniss also has two close female family members, but despite her constant thoughts about them, only has a few dialogues with them before she is hauled off to the Games. Though *The Hunger Games* has more conversations between females without men that aren't about romantic male interests (6 out of 8 conversations have no mention of romantic male interests), it seems that female relationships are still put on the backburner in favor of female interaction with males.

*The Hunger Games* does seem to present a more favorable distribution of gender representation than *Twilight*, but how these genders are performed is even more critical. Following is a brief analysis of the overall construction of gender in *The Hunger Games* as it relates to romance in the protagonist's life.

## TRAUMA IS TITILLATING: LOVE IN THE TIME OF MASS MURDER

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“You’re not going to like what they do to you. But no matter what it is, don’t resist.”  
— Haymitch Abernathy (Collins 58)

*The Hunger Games* is clearly not meant to be a stereotypical teen romance novel. The pages are littered with critiques of classicism and elitism, with dystopian predictions for a dark surveillance-based future, and with uncensored scenes of heavy violence and death. So why is it that when *The Hunger Games* movies first came out, legions of preteen and teenage fangirls began wearing shirts emblazoned with the words “Team Peeta” or “Team Gale” in exact mimicry of the earlier phenomenon that was “Team Edward” vs. “Team Jacob” in the *Twilight* series? If *The Hunger Games* was meant to be a text that resisted traditional teen romance models, then why were the reactions of the readers largely the same?

The answer lies in the construction of the book itself. *The Hunger Games* is not a novel with a single, straightforward reading. It seems to have a multiplicity of reading possibilities dependent upon what its audience is seeking—whether that be a thrilling romance set in the battlefield, whether that be a female hero who refuses to bow to societal demands of femininity, or whether that be an introductory critique upon heavy-handed government and systematic oppression. Yet, despite obvious attempts to position *The Hunger Games* as something other than a romance, the text is clearly structured in such a way that it encourages reader interest in Katniss’s love life over interest in her traumatic experiences.

Katniss Everdeen is clearly characterized from the beginning as a strong (and even masculinized) female, as someone who deeply values family, and as a capable competitor. The first scene that introduces the readers to Katniss is set in her home, and her first thoughts are

about her desire to protect her sister. She rises and dresses, and sets out for the forest, reflecting upon the rampant oppression of her community as she walks: “District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety” (Collins 6). Though she might not recognize it herself, she is deeply critical towards her society and desirous of challenging it.

The introductory chapter also showcases Katniss as the hunter. She is fierce and skilled in the forest, able to use a number of weapons effectively in addition to exemplifying excellent logical skills. But despite this gender expression that is clearly not within the bounds of classical expression of femininity, Katniss doesn't completely resist gender stereotypes. By page 10 she is reflecting upon the good looks of her hunting partner Gale and noting that she can “tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him” (Collins 10). She follows up with the insistence she is jealous but “not for the reason that people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to find”, but readers get the sense that Katniss does in fact have a romantic fixation upon Gale regardless of her explanations otherwise (Collins 10).

Katniss is also subject to stereotypical demands upon appearance often assigned to women. Gale makes sure to tell her to “wear something pretty” to the reaping, and her sister tells her that she looks beautiful in a “hushed voice” after she gets dressed (Collins 14-15). Katniss responds with a bitter: “And I look nothing like myself” (Collins 15). These few lines effectively set Katniss up to be the ethereal trope of a girl who doesn't know she's beautiful—the kind of girl who would never touch a tube of mascara, but somehow always has perfect eyelashes; the girl who only brushes her hair haphazardly, but has shining tresses without a hair out of place; the girl who somehow embodies feminine beauty without ever actually caring about something so shallow as appearance. This character trope is perpetuated throughout the rest of the book as characters fawn over Katniss's appearance while she remains relatively aloof and nonchalant

about the matter. Though the portrayal is perhaps meant to be resistant—meant to show that girls don't have to care about their appearance—it feels more like a suggestion that women should cater to their physical appearance, but that they are superficial if they cater to it too much.

Katniss is consistently torn between these conflicting ideologies of what it means to be a female. American culture seems to want women to be attractive, but doesn't want them to care about being attractive; it wants women to be romantically engaged without dedicating their lives to romance; and it wants them to be powerful and strong only in ways that don't disrupt the system. The US is positioned as an ancestor of Panem, and so many of our own societal expectations for women seem to be reflected in the fictional nation. These conflicting messages produce inconsistent behavior in Katniss as Collins attempts to write an idealistic female who can somehow reconcile all of the warring demands upon the female gender.

Like her inconsistent portrayal of Katniss, Collins' production of Panem's society is generally suspicious. The country is supposedly a post-apocalyptic nation and it seems to bear no explicit constructs concerning different races, sexualities, or even religions evident. Yet somehow gender persists in a very real and profound way. It raises the question: is it even possible for writers to imagine worlds that are post-gender? Or is the lack of representation of other identities in Panem merely the effect of the author's lack of attention to intersectionality? Though Katniss may be meant to be seen as a feminist protagonist, the lack of inclusion for multiple identities might leave her as only an icon for white feminism.

Collins constantly tows the line between resistant and dominant expressions of gender. Peeta Mellark may be a more effective portrayal of resistant gender than Katniss overall, as his emotional engagement is decidedly un-masculine. He is described as “charming and then utterly winning as the boy in love” at one point in the book, showcasing his ability to be an appealing

character despite his perhaps-feminine preoccupation with romance (Collins 137). Peeta is also shown crying at a few points in the book, an action typically associated with females over males. However, his tears do not go without some qualification: “[he is] broad-shouldered and strong. It will take an awful lot of weeping to convince anyone to overlook him (Collins 41). Peeta’s behavior seems to resist dominant gender roles, but Collins makes sure to qualify his behavior at every turn to assure readers that he is still masculine.

Peeta is also portrayed as much more romantic than Katniss, being the first not only to declare his love, but also the one to uphold the relationship. His romantic interest is more genuine than Katniss’s all throughout the book. On page 91 he mutters to Haymitch that Katniss has “no idea. The effect she can have” (Collins). Though he is clearly referring to his own and the apparent collective interest in her as an attractive female, Katniss remains oblivious to his meaning and only further contributes to her girl-doesn’t-know-she’s-beautiful persona.

As a competitor, Peeta is given a high ranking and acknowledged to be strong. Yet he considers himself to have “never been a contender in these Games anyway” (Collins 149). Peeta is never portrayed as a fighter, and instead spends most of the Games plotting to protect Katniss and hiding disguised in the mud after a serious leg injury. He even spends his last few days in the Games being taken care of by Katniss, worlds apart from what might be expected of a typical male hero who could save the damsel in distress through a combination of wit and raw strength. His gender expression is constantly played with, edging towards and away from classic conceptions of masculinity.

In contrast, Katniss is set up to be the less emotional half of the pair. Instead, she comes off as almost cold and calculating, going so far as to describe herself as “sullen and hostile” (Collins 121). But her identity seems to be in perpetual flux; at one point she notes that “it’s clear

I cannot gush....I'm to 'vulnerable' for ferocity. I'm not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or mysterious” (Collins 118). Despite her insistence that she is not appealing, or even likeable, her performances before the Capitol prior to the Games seem to challenge this notion. Mere pages after her admission that she is not witty, funny, or sexy, Katniss twirls and giggles girlishly on the stage before Caesar Flickerman with apparent ease. As she narrates her thought process during the pre-Games interview, Katniss doesn't seem particularly purposeful in forming this image of herself; it comes out naturally despite the fact that it is apparently not natural behavior for her. She reflects upon the interview later with some bitterness, describing herself as “frilly and shallow”, though her friends seem to think she was “charming” (Collins 137). Collins oscillates between the two extremes of 'hostile' warrior Katniss and the 'vulnerable' and beautiful version of her, apparently unable to reconcile a way in which Katniss can be truly attractive while also flaunting societal norms of femininity and beauty.

The romance between Katniss and Peeta best showcases the strange mix of traditional and resistant gender roles set up in *The Hunger Games*. While it is tempting to assign Katniss a nearly-asexual nature in alignment with her explicit and multiple insinuations that she wants no part in romance, the text itself reveals something as double-sided as Katniss's fluctuation between feminine and masculine. Though Katniss explicitly states that she only engages romantically in order to appease the Capitol viewers, her narration is littered with hints that she very much wants to be a part of the romance she plays at.

In the beginning of the Games, Katniss seems certain that her romance with Peeta is only for show. She holds hands with Peeta as they enter on a chariot in the parade of tributes; she notes that “it's not really fair to present us as a team and then lock us into the arena to kill each other” (Collins 71). One page later, Peeta compliments her and she responds by thinking to

herself that “he is luring you in to make you easy prey. The more likable he is, the more deadly he is... But because two can play at this game, I stand on tiptoe and kiss his cheek” (Collins 72). Yet this façade of detachment constantly falters. Though she seems insistent that Gale is only her friend and that Peeta is even less than that, she obviously considers them both in romantic capacities: “I can’t help comparing what I have with Gale to what I’m pretending to have with Peeta” (Collins 112).

Around her, people continuously remind her of how vital Peeta is to her very survival. When she attacks Peeta following his declaration of love for her during Caesar’s interview, Haymitch shouts at her that she owes Peeta because “he made you look desirable! And let’s face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do” (Collins 134). The harsh admonition is a painful reminder to Katniss that whether she likes it or not, she must engage in romance if she wants to survive. Her entire image in the Games is cultivated by those around her, and she is left as a mere pawn: “there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by Cinna’s hands, desirable by Peeta’s confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable” (Collins 137-138). Katniss is pushed by those around her into the part of the lover, seems to lose part of her identity in the process, admits her hatred for the whole process, and yet still seems strangely enthused about the development of her relationship with Peeta.

The conflict between whether the romance is genuine in Katniss’s mind or motivated only by a desire to survive continues throughout the rest of the book. Her first kiss with Peeta is hardly staged for romantic effect; she states that she simply leaned forward and kissed him impulsively, of her own accord. But she quickly follows up with the realization that she must ham up the romance: “I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed

lovers desperate to get home together...Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick” (Collins 261). Thus her Romance Games begin, and she shares a number of ‘tender’ kisses with Peeta while strategizing about how to keep them both alive with the aid of viewers in the Capitol who are fans of their love story.

But Katniss’s staged actions quickly deteriorate into real feelings as her physical gestures become more honest: “This is the first kiss that we’re both fully aware of...I actually feel stirring inside my chest...This is the first kiss that makes me want another” (Collins 298-299). And beyond growing physical intimacy, she clearly has growing feelings for Peeta complicated by her insistence that the romance is purely put-on: “I’m almost foolishly happy and then confusion sweeps over me. Because we’re supposed to be making up this stuff, playing at being love, not actually being in love” (Collins 301). She wants her independence and distance from romance, but seems incapable of resisting her desire to succumb to the romance being thrust upon her from all directions. Though one might imagine that a teenage girl in her situation would spend most of her time thinking about the recently deceased Rue, the faces of the other children she had murdered, or even just surviving from one moment to the next, a huge percentage of Katniss’s battlefield thoughts are dedicated to her thoughts about a relationship with Peeta.

Yet, almost ridiculously, Peeta isn’t even the only romantic interest in her thoughts. She wonders amidst the battle-torn arena about her status with her at-home best friend: “Gale’s not my boyfriend, but would he be, if I opened that door? ...I wonder what he makes of all this kissing” (Collins 281). She doesn’t think of Gale merely because she misses him, or because she needs an escape from the Games. She thinks about him because romance is all she can think of, and romance with Peeta leads her to think about romance with Gale. The boys are pitted against each other in her mind: “For some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in my

thoughts” (Collins 197). This stereotype that females are wholeheartedly consumed with thoughts of romantic males for most of their waking hours somehow persists throughout *The Hunger Games*, even in life and death situations.

Finally, after the conclusion of the Games, Katniss spends more time trying to sort out her situation with Peeta than she does reflecting on the fact that she has killed several other teenagers, the fact that she narrowly escaped death only to become a target of the President, or even the fact that she might actually escape the nightmare that her life has been up until this point. The reduction of her traumatic experience to teenage romantic turmoil is somewhat unrealistic, and only reinforces tropes of romance coming before all else for girls.

Worse still, the one person who might understand what Katniss has been through is merely angry that she doesn't want to continue the charade of love with him. Peeta reacts poorly when he realizes that Katniss put on most of their romance for show, despite how reasonable it was for her to appease the Capitol and keep them both alive. Katniss is at a loss for how to deal with this: “I want to tell him that he's not being fair...that I did what it took to stay alive, to keep us both alive in the arena... it's not good loving me because I'm never going to get married anyway and he'd just end up hating me later instead of sooner” (Collins 373). Ultimately, Katniss's dominant thoughts are not about the trauma she's experienced, but rather they are about her guilt for not loving Peeta like he loves her.

By the end of the story, readers have received a mixed bag of messages. First, they hear that it is necessary above all for a female to be desirable. This is reinforced by the insistence of characters that pressure Katniss into romantic situations in the interest of keeping her desirable, as well as the strange fixation upon her appearance. It is a dangerous message to readers that Katniss's very survival depends upon her ability to engage romantically with a male.

Furthermore, the suggestion that despite being strong and cunning, she could not have made it out of the Games without her romance only reduces the powerful way in which she was meant to be portrayed.

Secondly, readers get the message that even if a female explicitly states that she wants no part in romance and has good reason for abstaining from romance, she is somehow mistaken. Katniss cites reason after reason why she does not want a relationship, yet the social pressure to be in one only seems to reinforce her own hidden desires. If her romantic engagement came only as a result of the desire to stay alive and the pressure placed on her by society, it would be easy to view *The Hunger Games* as a critique of societies that force girls to engage romantically regardless of their own desires. However, Katniss's obvious interest lines up neatly with classic romances that feature women who simply need to be shown that they want a relationship. Though it would have been perfectly possible to keep Katniss wholly and genuinely separate from romance in this story, perfectly possible to position her as only engaging romantically for the games and seeing both Peeta and Gale as friends, she crumbles to an apparent unconscious desire that she had had the entire time. This seems to suggest that no matter what a female says to the contrary, she always places romance at the top of her list of priorities.

Thirdly, the focus upon romance instead of the traumatic experiences that Katniss undergoes seems to suggest that regardless of the situation, male romantic interests will always be more important to females than personal health and self-care. Beyond that, it is suggested to readers that they should be more interested in Katniss for her romantic possibilities than for her resistance to classism, her ability to survive extreme violence, or even her impressive physical skills. This is perhaps why fans greeted *The Hunger Games* movie premiere with 'Team Gale'

and 'Team Peeta' tee-shirts instead of greeting it with tee shirts decrying the inhumane crimes of the Panem elite.

*The Hunger Games* offers an interesting array of conflicting gender expressions both in line and in contrast with traditional roles, both for females and males. The text is clearly resistant to dominant ideologies in many ways, but perhaps does not go far enough in attempting to reimagine gender and its relation to romance. Though it does offer opportunities for both male and female readers to place themselves in resistant spaces, it continues to promote several harmful ideologies and tropes that affect the female gender disproportionately.

**SECTION IV: Analysis  
of *Looking for Alaska***

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## USING THE SELCER METHOD TO DESCRIBE THE GENDER LANDSCAPE IN *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*

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### Criteria 1 (A): Score 90/100

<b>Named Female Characters</b>	18 (45% of named characters)
<b>Named Male Characters</b>	22 (55% of named characters)

Named Females: Katie, Brook Blakely, Holly Moser, Madame O'Malley, Lara Buterskaya, Mrs. Halter, Marie Lawson, Alaska Young, Sara, Dolores Martin, Molly Tan\*, Janice\*, Maureen\*, Marya\*, Mrs. Forrester\*, Chandra Kilers\*, Ruth Blowker\*, Margot Blowker\*

Named Males: Will, Mr. Halter, Miles Halter, Chip Martin, Dr. Hyde, Takumi, Mr. Starnes, Jake, Maxx, Hank Walston, Longwell Chase, Kevin Richman, Mr. Young, Travis Eastman\*, Justin\*, Jeff\*, Clay Wurtzel\*, Wilson Carbod\*, Paul\*, Tommy Hewitt\*, Marcus\*, Joe\*

\*Does not actually appear in the book, but name is mentioned.

### Criteria 1 (B): Score 84/100

<b>Named, Speaking Female Characters</b>	10 (43% of named, speaking characters)
<b>Named, Speaking Male Characters</b>	13 (57% of named, speaking characters)

Named, Speaking Females: *Katie, Brook Blakely, Holly Moser, Madame O'Malley*, Lara Buterskaya, Mrs. Halter, *Marie Lawson*, Alaska Young, Sara, Dolores Martin

Named, Speaking Males: *Will*, Mr. Halter, Miles Halter, Chip Martin, Dr. Hyde, Takumi, Mr. Starnes, Jake, Maxx, Hank Walston, *Longwell Chase*, Kevin Richman, *Mr. Young*

*Italics = Three or fewer lines*

### Criteria 2 (A): Score 88/100

\*\* Molly Tan, Janice, Maureen, Chandra Kilers, Ruth Blowker, Margot Blowker, Travis Eastman, Clay Wurtzel, Wilson Carbod, Tommy Hewitt, Marcus, and Joe are not included in any of the sections of Criteria 2 because they do not actually appear in the book and there is no information given about their romantic status. Marya, Paul, and Mrs. Forrester appear below because their relationship statuses are clearly stated. Justin is included in Criteria 2(D) because his romantic interest in Alaska is clearly stated.

<b>Named Female Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	7 (39% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Clear Romantic Attachments</b>	5 (23% of named males overall)

Named Females with Clear Romantic Attachments: Lara Buterskaya, Mrs. Halter, Marie Lawson, Alaska Young, Sara, Marya, Mrs. Forrester

Named Males with Clear Romantic Attachments: Will, Mr. Halter, Chip Martin, Jake, Paul

Criteria 2 (B): Score 100/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	0 (0% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments</b>	1 (0.5% of named males overall)

Named Females with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: none

Named Males with Implied or Ambiguous Attachments: Miles Halter

Criteria 2 (C): Score 92/100

<b>Named Female Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	5 (28% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with No Mention of Romantic Attachments</b>	8 (36% of named males overall)

Named Females with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Katie, Brook Blakely, Holly Moser, Madame O'Malley, Dolores Martin

Named Males with No Mention of Romantic Attachments: Dr. Hyde, Takumi, Mr. Starnes, Maxx, Hank Walston, Longwell Chase, Kevin Richman, Mr. Young

Criteria 2 (D): Score 99/100

<b>Named Female Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	7 (39% of named females overall)
<b>Named Male Characters with Specified Romantic Interests</b>	9 (40% of named males overall)

Named Females with Specified Romantic Interests: Lara Buterskaya, Mrs. Halter, Marie Lawson, Alaska Young, Sara, Marya, Mrs. Forrester

Named Males with Specified Romantic Interests: Will, Mr. Halter, Miles Halter, Chip Martin, Dr. Hyde, Jake, Mr. Young, Paul, Justin

**LOOKING FOR ALASKA'S GENDER LANDSCAPE: RELATED FIGURES**

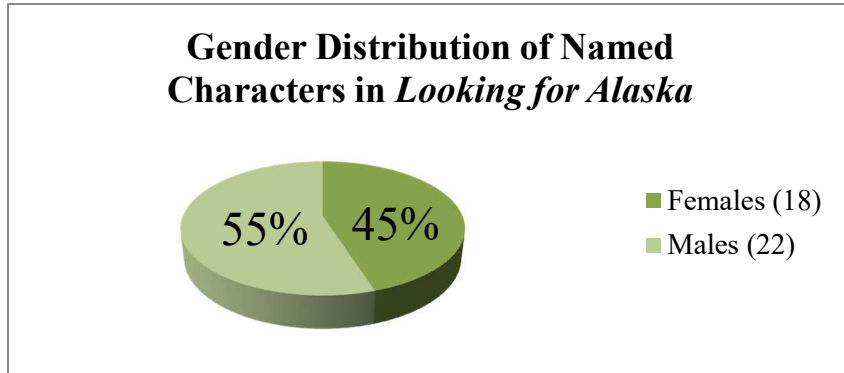


Fig. 3 (A): Gender Distribution of Named *Looking for Alaska* Characters

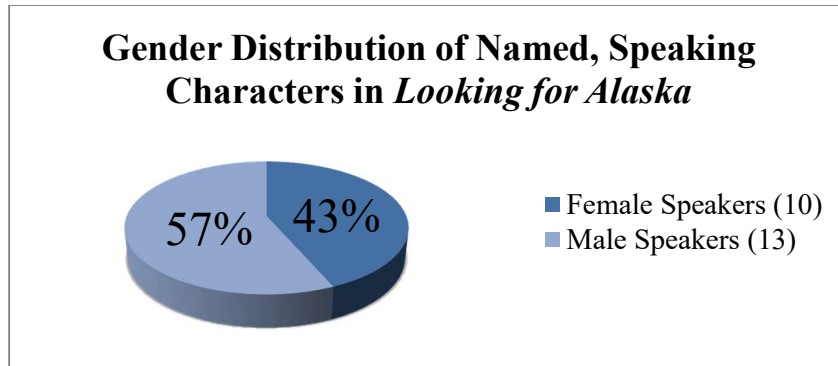


Fig. 3 (B): Gender Distribution of Named, Speaking *Looking for Alaska* Characters

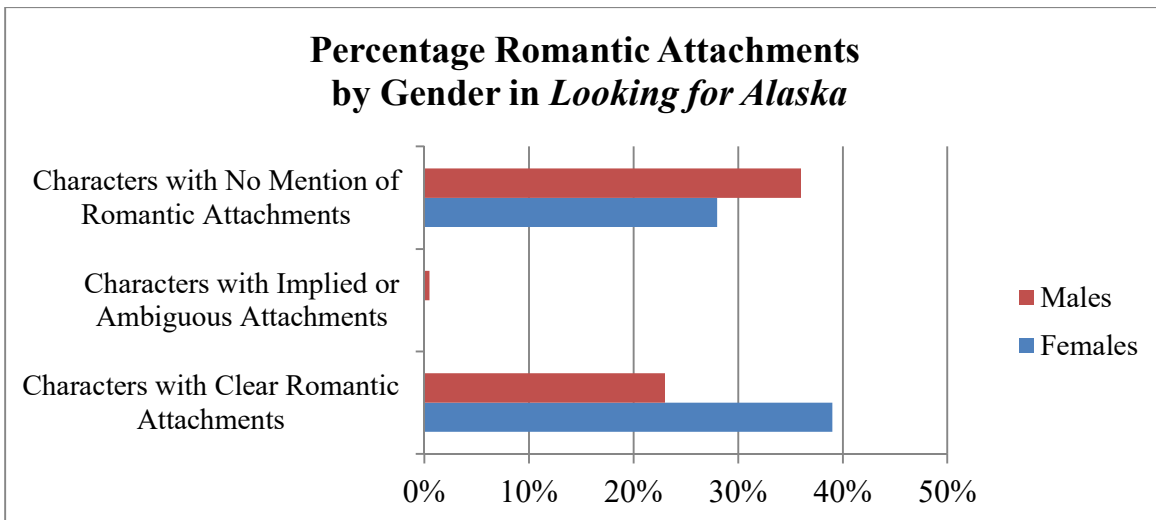


Fig. 3 (C): Percentage Romantic Attachments by Gender in *Looking for Alaska*

## DISCUSSION OF THE SELCER METHOD AS APPLIED TO *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*

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*Looking for Alaska* provides an interesting contrast to the other two texts previously examined in this study, as it differs in one major way: the protagonist of the book is a male instead of a female. In terms of gender distribution, the book generally follows the trend established in *Twilight* of favoring male representation, though the disparity between genders is much less severe. Male characters accounts for 55% of the named characters, and 57% of the named, speaking characters. It is important to note, however, that only 5/10 named, speaking female characters have more than three lines while 10/13 named, speaking male characters have more than three lines. Males account for a massive portion of the dialogue and action in this book, with most of the females functioning as nothing more than potential romantic interests for the teenage boys at the center of the novel.

In terms of romantic engagement, *Looking for Alaska* positions females as being more romantically inclined than males. Of the named female characters, 39% are clearly in romantic relationships compared to 23% of the males. Consistent with this statistic, only 28% of named females are without romantic attachments compared to 36% of named males. Interestingly, 40% of male characters have some specified romantic interest compared to 39% of females, a more equal distribution than almost any other categories.

It is worth mentioning that though the summary statistics for romantic attachment by gender seem to suggest that females are more romantically involved than males, the number of characters included in these categories is small enough that these differences in representation are not entirely conclusive. For example, 7 females with romantic attachments out of 18

characters creates a statistic of 39%, and can be compared to the percentage 23% created by 5 of 22 male characters with romantic interests. The difference of a few characters between the categories accounts for what seems like a large percentage gap ( $39-22=17\%$ ) and may skew perceptions of how inequitable the gender landscape really is.

Though female to female conversations could not be tracked in this novel because the main protagonist was a male, an attempt was made to track male-to-male conversations. However, within only a few pages it was clear that this was not a feasible undertaking. In the first 30 pages, some 13 pages feature male-to-male conversations, accounting for nearly half of the book. The entire novel prioritizes male friendship and interactions in a way that is not similarly reflected in the counterparts featuring female protagonists. Once more, this seems to reinforce the hypothesis that literature tends to favor men as being more important towards advancing the action in comparison with women.

Though the summary of statistics suggest a gap in gender representations in this novel, only a close-reading analysis can give a round critique of the identity hierarchy established within its pages. A critique of gender roles as presented in the novel follows.

## **SWEETHEARTS SANS SUBSTANCE: MPDGs AND MASCULINITY**

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“You don’t even care about her! ...All that matters is you and your precious fucking fantasy that you and Alaska had this goddamned secret love affair.” — The Colonel (Green 170)

John Green receives a lot of criticism concerning his YA books as their popularity continues to grow in mass proportions. In particular, he has come under fire on multiple occasions for his use of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope, a term first coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin who described it as: “that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” In response to a fan question in 2013 concerning the use of the MPDG in *Looking for Alaska*, Green had the following to say:

“Pudge romanticizes Alaska in LfA, but the novel discusses in detail the way that his failure to imagine her complexly proves so disastrous to him and to her...The other attack...is that I write novels about broken people who need saving, and that this encourages the romanticization of brokenness...I write about broken people who need other people in order to go on. But those are the only kind of people I know to exist. We are all broken... But all this crap about how I fetishize brokenness and lift up misogynistic constructions of young women and romanticize suicide is just (I think) totally unfair” (Green, Weblog).

But Green’s intentions are not particularly relevant to an actual reading of the book. As Rosenblatt reminds us, “there is no one absolutely ‘correct’ meaning of a text—[this] creates the problem of the relation between the reader’s interpretation and the author’s probable intention”

(Rosenblatt 1372). Regardless of what Green intended, reader interpretations are no less correct than his own appraisal of his work.

And readers, as evidenced by the heavy criticism he has received, clearly seem to interpret his novel as containing many examples of objectification and hyper-sexualization of females. What is worse, though some males in the novel move towards recognizing the flaws in their treatment of women, they never seem to fully take responsibility for their own misogyny. Moreover, Green's female characters are flat, one-dimensional representations of girls who have neither agency in their own lives nor independence from male desires. Though Green has suggested that he wrote *Alaska* as a purposefully flat character in order to reflect Miles (Pudge) Halter's view of her, the fact remains that there isn't a single female character in the book who isn't equally flat and lifeless. The females in this book are not meant to be people—they are mere stock characters used to entertain teenage boys. Though Green may have meant the book to be critical of female objectification, the book is not nearly explicit and reflective enough to effectively convey the message to readers that the way characters are gendered in the book is harmful.

Miles, the protagonist, is set up as being a completely unremarkable teenage boy excepting for his habit of memorizing famous last words. Miles's journey throughout the book is spurred by a set of famous last words by François Rabelais: "I go to seek a Great Perhaps" (Green 5). Miles is, from the very beginning, a terrible romantic who wants to see his life as whimsical and exciting despite its utter lack of significant events. He notes to himself on page 8 that "things never happened like I imagined them", showing the reader that he is often caught up in his own imagination and unable to adjust to mere reality.

Yet the moment that Miles steps onto the grounds of Culver Creek, his life is almost magically transformed into an exciting series of adventures thanks to a beautiful and mysterious girl named Alaska Young.

Alaska's introductory description shows the extent to which she is nothing more than an object of desire for Miles. Alaska is described as "the hottest girl in all of human history" who is "petite (but God, curvy)" (Green 14-15). As Miles fixates on Alaska's physical appearance, she tells a story about sitting on a couch with her friend who "honks" her boob without permission. This anecdote is interesting for a number of reasons: it gives Alaska the chance to declare her relationship status (taken), but also informs the readers that Alaska is the kind of girl who would see a male touching her sexually without consent as a potential joke ("I can't wait to tell Takumi and the Colonel") instead of as a serious offense (Green 15). The contrast of her extreme sexual appeal and her apparent willingness to brush off unwanted sexual advances seems to signal that she is a rare treasure to teenage boys: she is 'one of the guys', but in a very, very sexy way.

The description of Alaska here sets a dangerous precedent for the rest of the novel. Consistently, Miles focuses upon female appearance before any other traits. He is totally fixated on Alaska's body, describing her in detail once again just three pages later in case readers didn't fully understand how attractive she is: "[she wasn't] just beautiful, but hot, too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing...I realized the *importance* of curves, of the thousand places where girls' bodies ease from one place to another" (Green 19). Miles is totally unable to move past Alaska's physicality throughout the book, leaving her objectified again and again.

Beyond being objectified for her physical appearance, Alaska continues to be portrayed as a sexual being who is somehow unbothered by repeated advances from males that could easily be classified as sexual harassment. She is attractive precisely because she doesn't seem to make a big deal out of this behavior, and because she encourages her own sexualization. The possibility for sex with Alaska is constantly dangled before her male peers, as she reminds them that she has a lot of sex and that she is a notorious cheater. As the Colonel notes in reference to Jake, Alaska's boyfriend: "she hasn't cheated on him, which is a first" (Green 21). Though Jake is set up as a barrier that prevents Miles and others from pursuing Alaska, it is made clear that this barrier is tenuous at best. Alaska is somehow simultaneously just within and just out of reach.

She feeds this fire by stoking the male ego, constantly giving Miles alluring snippets of compliments and then reminding him that she is taken: "you're smart like him...Quieter, though. And cuter, but I didn't even just say that, because I love my boyfriend" (Green 21). She invokes Jake following a complement to Miles more than once: "You're adorable... Too bad I love my boyfriend" (Green 43). The boyfriend acts as a guardian of Alaska's sexuality, and one has to wonder if her male peers are respecting her own desire to stay loyal to her boyfriend or whether they are respecting his claim on her.

Simply put, Alaska is the wet dream of a misogynist. She is sexy and smart and able to recognize oppression, while also being willing to accept and perpetuate it. She goes on several explicit rants about sexism, yet doesn't actually confront sexism in her own life. She shouts "DO NOT OBJECTIFY WOMEN'S BODIES" at her male friends when they discuss Lara's breasts (Green 60), but merely laughs at Miles when he oogles her own breasts. Her response to his preoccupation with her chest is simply to 'wryly' tease him: "You were *clearly* not doing your part in the clover search, perv" (Green 41). Despite her constant statements that she doesn't think

women should be sexualized, she objectifies them herself. She promises Miles early on that she will get him laid, and later calls Lara a “a special gift” for him (Green 98). Her lackluster feminism is best summarized in her own words: “it was sexist to leave the cooking to the women, but better to have good sexist food than crappy boy-prepared food” (Green 91).

Alaska is hardly the only female described in misogynistic ways. The boys in the book frequently demean girls in outright, hateful ways. The Colonel is particularly horrible towards his own girlfriend Sara, calling her an asshole and a bitch at several points. Miles wonders at one point why the Colonel is so harsh towards her, but not because he thinks it is wrong for someone to talk about a partner in such crass terms. Rather, he thinks the Colonel should treat Sara better in order to ensure continued physical access to her: “I wouldn’t have cared if my girlfriend was a Jaguar-driving Cyclops with a beard—I’d have been grateful just to have someone to make out with” (Green 23). Yet Miles also speaks about females hatefully, making his own judgments about Sara: “Sara looked awfully nice in her blue summer dress...She looked like a movie star—a bitchy one” (Green 35). At one point, Miles even goes so far as to exclaim that Alaska is “such a bitch” after he is dunked in the lake (Green 31). Miles feels righteously indignant that Alaska didn’t cater to his feelings more carefully, and feels justified in calling her terrible names despite his professed adoration for her.

Downright misogynistic language isn’t the only problematic way in which males treat females throughout the book. There is also a flippant disregard for females as people. Miles sees only bodies when he looks at girls, and doesn’t take the time to actually get to know any of his love interests. He ends up asking Lara to be his girlfriend later on in the book, despite noting that “we had almost never talked, Lara and I” (Green 122). He is interested in her only for the physical possibilities she presents, and never makes an attempt to get to know her despite the fact

that she is clearly enamored with him and even gives him oral sex in an attempt to appease him. Miles takes advantage of her crush on him while still lusting after Alaska; only a short time after becoming Lara's official boyfriend, he cheats on her by making out with Alaska and doesn't give it a second thought. Even after Alaska's death, Miles sort of just expects Lara to fade away into the background. He is unconcerned with her feelings because she was never anything other than an object to distract him when he couldn't have Alaska Young.

Admittedly, Miles's obsession with Alaska does develop into something slightly different than a sexual interest in her by the end of the book, but that interest is not any healthier than a purely-sexual one. He is obsessed with not who she is, but rather what he wants her to be. He thinks of her as somehow both more and less than human: "I was gawky and she was gorgeous and I was hopelessly boring and she was endlessly fascinating... I was a drizzle and she was a hurricane" (Green 88). He believes that Alaska represents his own Great Perhaps, the opportunity for his life to be more interesting and exciting, instead of as an independent person with her own interests and desires. This is reflected by his frustration when she doesn't behave exactly the way he wants her to: "I'd certainly had enough of her unpredictability—cold one day, sweet the next; irresistibly flirty one moment, resistibly obnoxious the next" (Green 75). Alaska is an object of desire for him, an idea, and any time that she steps out of this role and into a place where she might actually be a rounded person with non-static emotions, he becomes irritated.

Alaska is highly aware of Miles's objectification of her. She even attempts to contribute to the image of herself as an idea or as a legend; she boasts to Miles that "you never get me. That's the whole point" (Green 55). But something deeper seems to be at play in Alaska's distance than merely perpetuating an image of herself as mysterious and therefore interesting. In her own words, Alaska Young is a "deeply unhappy person" who is struggling with long-term

depression following the death of her mother (Green 124). Alaska has internalized the sexist constructs placed around her that seek to reduce her to an image or idea, and feels that she must live up to the images that others hold of her in order to be appealing. At one point, she demands that Miles face up to the fact that he only wants the appealing parts of her and not the whole package: “Don’t you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don’t love the crazy, sullen bitch” (Green 96). Alaska is trapped, unable to be a whole person because she is so torn between her own deeply-rooted trauma and the demands placed upon her by a society that constantly objectifies her.

After her death, she is treated even less humanely. Her friends blame her for her own death, calling her a bitch and claiming that she was selfish for ‘deciding’ to die. They never acknowledge the major ordeal Alaska has experienced, and instead play off her potential suicide as a cry for attention. The Colonel screams angrily that she was “so stupid! She just never thought anything through. So goddamned impulsive. Christ. It is not okay....You had to watch her like a *three-year-old*. You do one thing wrong, and then she just dies” (Green 145). Miles also continues to perpetuate this hatred of Alaska postmortem, saying that “[I could see her] not giving a shit about anyone else, not thinking of her promise to me...that bitch, that bitch, she killed herself” (Green 156). The boys in her life never seem to understand the terrible depression that plagued Alaska. The Colonel is certain that Alaska’s actions were self-centered at the core since they didn’t cater to his and his friend’s desires: “Do you even remember the person she actually *was*? Do you remember how she *could* be a selfish bitch? ...It’s like now you only care about the Alaska you made up” (Green 165). Though the Colonel points out that Miles had constructed a false image of Alaska, he is equally unable to reflect upon who Alaska truly was and is instead caught up in his own projections of her.

Miles does recognize his obsession with the idea of Alaska instead of the girl herself, but this recognition doesn't necessarily come with remorse or even regret. Miles seems almost righteous in his defense of his objectification: "I did want to believe that I'd had a secret love affair with Alaska...It was not enough to be the last guy she kissed. I wanted to be the last one she loved. And I knew I wasn't. I knew it, and I hated her for it. I hated her for not caring about me" (Green 171). He not only thinks he is allowed to hate her for not returning his feelings, but even thinks he is allowed to blame her for the deterioration of his own charmed life. He thinks that her death was meant to directly hurt him: "You can't just make yourself matter and then die, Alaska, because now I am irretrievably different, and I'm sorry I let you go, yes, but you made the choice. You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth" (Green 172). Miles blames her for not wanting to play out his fantasies in the midst of her own suffering.

Finally, after acknowledging that he never really knew Alaska, Miles refuses to take responsibility for his own lack of effort in getting to know her. He doesn't recognize that he didn't know Alaska because he was too busy sexualizing her to truly be her friend, but rather concludes that it was her own fault that he didn't know her: "I'd finally had enough of chasing after a ghost who did not want to be discovered...I still did not know her as I wanted to, but I never could. She made it impossible for me" (Green 212). Alaska, instead of being a teenage girl who had lived a very difficult life and was trying to protect herself from being hurt, is eventually portrayed as a selfish bitch who perpetuated her own larger-than-life image so that she could manipulate the males around her.

Green's insistence that he neither romanticizes brokenness nor produces misogynistic portraits of young women is largely unsupported. Green's use of the "Great Perhaps" perpetuates the idea that Manic Pixie Dream Girls (MPDG) like Alaska Young—unachievable females who

are only truly meant to appease male desires—serve the primary function of making life more interesting for hopelessly boring males. These MPDGs, and perhaps all females in the novel, are never meant to be whole people in Green’s universe and are not given realistic responses to male behavior. They are rendered flat and devoid of agency, mere playthings for boys.

Green also produces a model of masculinity that relies upon hateful, misogynistic language, and he promotes the notion that disregarding female feelings in favor of sexualizing female bodies is okay. Though this may not have been his intent, the book presents an obviously-harmful model for readers who might consider the gender roles and behaviors exemplified in *Looking for Alaska* to be normal and acceptable. He attempts to rationalize the misogynistic behavior of his characters by suggesting that he writes novels that are true to real-world teenage behavior, but doesn’t seem to realize that writing a “realistic” novel only further perpetuates oppression that already exists.

Green’s novel is a perfect example for why critical literacy is such a necessity, and why authors of YA literature must be pushed to produce representations of society that are explicitly anti-oppressive. *Looking for Alaska* had plenty of opportunities to embody this kind of resistant space—to let Alaska become a real feminist who truly advocated for herself against sexism, to make Miles and the Colonel realize that their actions were openly hateful towards women, or to let Miles realize that Alaska was someone with many, many worries completely independent of his feelings. However, the novel falls short because it didn’t go far enough to be explicit about the shortcomings of its characters, and because it is uncritical about the oppressive representations of the female gender promoted throughout the text.

## **SECTION V: Conclusions**

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## **LOOKING FORWARD: IMPLICATIONS FOR READERS, EDUCATORS, AND THE GENRE**

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Throughout this study I have attempted to demonstrate that current representations of gender in Young Adult romance are often highly problematic and potentially detrimental to the conceptions of social identity produced in its readers. I have made some suggestions for ways in which even potentially oppressive texts can be used to understand and challenge the social construction of gender. Finally, I have tested the Selcer Method, which appears to be relatively useful in revealing information about representation in texts that is otherwise difficult to obtain.

The method itself requires some contextualization prior to use. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the method in its current state largely ignores the presence of gender creative identities, agender identities, transgender identities, and other non-conforming gender identities. It also does not consider non-heterosexual orientations in its usage within this paper. However, this is largely due to the fact that the texts selected do not represent these other identities; the highly-popular novels used in the study represent a largely white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgendered set of identities. I have suggested that questions for the method could easily be modified to track representation of any number of other identities, but further work will be necessary to modify and improve the method's usage.

There are certain limitations to the method. It is not universally useful in all settings (I have already used the example of a novel about a boys' boarding school as potentially being a poor candidate for the method due to purposeful and explicit inclusion of only one gender), and may not be a good tool for analysis on small sets of data (if there are only three characters in a book, looking at different gender representations may not be particularly productive). I also

include the recommendation that the method never be used to do holistic analysis, or on its own as a descriptive measure. Though it can provide interesting data to be used to support close-reading analysis, or to elucidate the structure of a text, it is not comprehensive enough to provide a clear critique of gender constructions on its own.

Yet these limitations should perhaps not be seen as weaknesses, as the purpose of the method is certainly not assigning a single numerical value to a text. In the field of literature and language, this would be particularly reductive and would fail in many ways as a strategy for interpretation. The method's strength lies in its potential as a tool, not in it being a discrete and complete form of study. In the realm of academia, the method might reveal ways to interrogate and interpret texts in richer ways. In a cultural context, the method might prove its worth in showing potential trends of gender representation in mainstream media. In the classroom, the method might be used as a manageable and unambiguous framework to help guide new readers to practicing critical literacy.

My purpose in conducting this study was to encourage educators to make critical literacy a primary tool in their classrooms, as it is a natural pedagogical consequence to the framework for literacy set up by Rosenblatt's reader-response theory. It is terribly urgent to put anti-oppressive frameworks into use in our schools, as they are sites in which hegemony is too often enforced. A social justice theory of education has been presented as a response to this problem, and it involves challenging students and teachers to engage in reflection, change, and participation (Miller and Kirkland xxi). Miller and Kirkland explain that:

“Reflection refers to unpacking personal truths from people, ideologies, and contexts to help explain how hegemonic hierarchies are oppressive. Change refers to becoming more

socially aware of how power and privilege that arise from within institutions...can be oppressive. Participation teaches how action, agency, and empowerment can be used to transform ideas and contexts, and may even lead to systematic change” (Miller and Kirkland xxi-xxii)

Critical literacy is an invaluable tool in accomplishing each of these aims. I suggest that students be taught to ask questions about who is represented in texts, how they are represented, why they are represented in that way, and how those representations affect real-world identities. Through this process, they explicitly engage in the first two tiers of social justice theory, enacting reflection and moving towards change. R I believe that when readers are given the tools to become their own advocates through recognizing and resisting oppressive models, they will naturally move into the third stage of social justice theory as fully-fledged participants.

My study, therefore, should not be used as the “correct” interpretation of these YA texts, or even be considered as a finished product. Instead, it is a guide. It is a framework in which educators can read these texts critically and demonstrate to students the value in doing so. The Selcer Method provides new questions to guide readings, and it enriches one’s understanding of the complexity of representation in a single work. My literature review provides a sound justification for why it is so necessary to begin reading critically earlier in education and in wider contexts, and it shows that critical literacy and social justice education are natural consequences of longstanding literary theory that has sought to expose how constructed social identity truly is.

The means for change are not beyond us. It is not enough for a few schools to engage in curriculums that position equity education and anti-oppression as essential. It is not enough to

read critically and not demand that the genre of YA literature itself change. It is not enough to consider only capital-L Literature and to ignore the enormous importance of popular literatures.

It is not enough to passively accept incomplete models of who we are—we are spiraling out in more diverse, complex, and beautiful patterns every day and we are becoming different people. It is only natural to demand a literature and a mode of education that follows suit.

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