THE GENDER POLITICS THAT DIMINISH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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This thesis examines how the gender politics of the Young Adult genre diminishes its literary value. It interrogates the correlation between a genre compromised almost entirely of women and the subsequent devaluation of that genre. To accomplish this, the thesis examines the literary canon, what differentiates and excludes young adult literature from the literary canon, what constitutes literary merit, the justifications for the exclusion of young adult literature from possessing literary merit, and how sexism and gender politics plays a crucial role. It will also compare modern novels categorized as young adult with novels in the literary canon to draw similarities and question why one is included while the other is looked down upon. Finally, it will make the case that young adult literature does possess literary merit: it contains expert social commentary, social politics, and succeeds in transcribing current problems and huge questions about identity, youth, power, and love into entertaining works for young people. Young adult literature helps form the minds and opinions of the next generation.
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Introduction

What constitutes ‘real’ literature? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, literature is “written work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit” but what does that mean? What, or who, decides what is and is not literature. This thesis will examine the literary merit, or lack thereof, recognized towards Young Adult Literature, and the underlying, gendered, issues that play into the genre’s diminishment.

According to data collected from the Census Bureau, 60.3% of authors in the United States are women (See Figure 1) (“Writers & authors”). However, using data collected from the New York Times best seller lists since the 1940s, the highest percent of best sellers written by women is 50% in 2001. The lowest it has been 14% in 1975 (See Figure 2) (Cima). This means that since the 1940s, the New York Times best seller list has been dominated by men writers. This outpacing of men writers compared to women writers carries over in adult prestigious literary awards. In other words, while the publishing industry has become overwhelmingly female, male authors still tend to dominate both adult fiction best sellers and adult fiction prestigious book awards. However, since the New York Times began its young adult fiction best seller lists, women have made up 63% of the titles (See Figure 3) (“Young Adult Hardcover Books - Best Sellers - Books - Oct. 30, 2022”).

The New York Times best seller list is not an omniscient tool for bestowing literary merit, but it does provide a metric for measuring commercial and critical success. Acknowledgement in the New York Times best seller list is a recognition of artistic merit. When
we look at the best seller list for every decade since the 1940s, a major factor affecting the most successful books is genre. Genre fiction, or books written for specific genres such as romance, horror, or political thriller, have vast gender discrepancies. The New York Times best seller list is comprised of ten genres: spy/politics, adventure, fantasy/science fiction, suspense, literary/none, horror/paranormal, mystery, historical, domestic, and romance. Since the 1950s, men have made up the majority of spy/political, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, suspense, mystery, and the broad literary/none category. Literary/none refers to general fiction, or books not written for a specific genre. Since the 1950s, women have come to dominate horror/paranormal, historical, domestic, and romance (Cima).

Books on the New York Times best seller list are often books nominated for and recipients of prestigious book awards. The most prestigious of these include the Nobel Prize in Literature, The Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award, the Booker Prize, and The Hugo Award (Barronter). These are the most prestigious book awards and, unsurprisingly, men have dominated the winnings (See Figure 4). 119 literature Nobel prizes have been awarded and only seventeen of the recipients have been women (Harris). The Pulitzer Prize for the Novel was established in 1918, and as of 2022, only eleven women have won the prize (“Novel”). Of the seventy-nine National Book Award winners, only nineteen are women (Siegel). For the Hugo Award, established in 1953, there have been forty-four years where no or only one novel by a woman was a finalist. Comparatively, since 1953, there has always been at least one man nominated as a finalist (Nicoll). The Booker Award recognizes “the best sustained work of fiction written in English and published in the UK and Ireland” and is the most prestigious book award bestowed on authors from the United Kingdom and Ireland (“Booker Prize Facts and
Figures”). Since 1969, eighteen out of fifty-three recipients have been women (“Booker Prize Facts and Figures”).

For young adult books, the major book awards include the Printz Award, the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, and the Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction. The Printz Award is sponsored by the American Library Association, established in 2000 to honor “the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit” (“Michael L. Printz Winners and Honor Books”). Since 2000, twelve women have won (“Michael L. Printz Winners and Honor Books”). For the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, a branch of the prestigious National Book Award, fourteen out of twenty-five winners have been women (“Explore the Archives”). Keep in mind the gender ratio of female to male winners for the National Book Award is nineteen out of seventy-nine, which highlights the vast under representation of women in adult fiction awards. Finally, the Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction specializes in science fiction and fantasy young adult fiction, much like the Hugo Award specializes in science fiction and fantasy books for adults.

Since 2005, when the first Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction was awarded, thirteen out of the sixteen winners of the prestigious award have been women (“Nebula Awards® Nominees and Winners: Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction Nebula Awards®”). This is even more poignant due to the fact that men still dominate adult science fiction and fantasy genres and awards, yet in young adult literature, that fact is reversed (See Figure 5). In fact, when NPR published its list of 100 Best Teen Novels in 2012, 235 finalist novels were chosen, and of those finalists, 63% were
written by women (Lewit). Young adult books written by women took the top three slots and among the top 100, there was an even breakdown between men and women (Lewit).

Despite this, or maybe because of it, the book awards bestowed on young adult works of literature such as the ones previously mentioned do not carry the same prestige as awards for adult fiction books such as the Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, and National Book Award (even though the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature is an extension of the foundation) (Barronter).

Having established that a) more women than men are authors, b) among adult fiction, men have dominated in most genres since the 1950s, c) the majority of prestigious book award prizes have gone to men, d) the majority of young adult best sellers are written by women, and e) the majority, or at least half, of book awards specifically for young adult literature go to women, this thesis will take a closer look at factors that play into these statistics. Chapter 1 will examine the history of publishing, sexism in publishing, and more specifically, it will detail how women came to dominate the young adult genre, including a discussion of how women are infantilized and how that plays into female authors writing young adult fantasy rather than adult fantasy or young adult fiction rather than adult fiction. It will also discuss a similar trend seen in other industries, in which, when a male dominated industry experiences an influx of women, the value of that field decreases. Chapter 1 will conclude with an explanation how both these concepts work together to push women into the young adult genre while maintaining a male dominance in other, more prestigious, genres.

Chapter 2 will include a comparison between the literary canon and young adult literature. What the literary canon is, themes, main tenants, and its history, and then chapter 2
will provide a breakdown of young adult literature, how the genre emerged, its main themes, trends, reader breakdown, plus its impact on the publishing industry. Chapter 2 will conclude with a discussion of literary merit, what it is, who decides literary merit, and requirements to be considered capital ‘L’ literature. This chapter will compare and contrast the two categories of literature, showing the main differences, but also similarities.

Chapter 3 will include a close readings and analysis of landmark young adult book, *The Hunger Games*. A literary analysis will show the rich social commentary employed by the series and be contrasted with a similar novel accepted in the literary canon: *Lord of the Flies*. These books will be used to show the similarities between the two books, how both groups of books provide social commentary, relatability, and an execution of mature themes, but they will also be used to illustrate the differences in the groups of books. The close readings will provide a tool to examine the gendered differences in the works and provide critical analyses on why one group of books is awarded literary merit while the other is not. Finally, the conclusion will give a brief overview of the thesis while summarizing how the gender politics of the the young adult genre diminishes its literary value.
Chapter 1: The History of Publishing & the Relegation of Women to Young Adult

A Brief History of Publishing

The publishing industry emerged from a need to distribute large amounts of written information. Before the invention of writing, information could be spread only by word of mouth. It was invented as a way to regulate religious ideals or secure codes of law, genealogies, and other socially relevant matters that had previously been committed to memory. Texts of various kinds came to be used throughout most of the ancient world for proclamations, correspondence, transactions, and records, although book production was confined largely to religious educational institutions (Tucker, D. H., n.d.).

Printing was first invented in China during the 6th century in the form of block printing, while the invention of printing in Europe is usually attributed to Johannes Gutenberg in Germany around 1440–50. Block printing had been carried out from about 1400. The renaissance and Reformation were major historical movements that put printing front and center. The Renaissance created an environment for printing to grow and flourish while the Reformation provided a battleground of written ideas. Although printing was thought of at first as merely a means of avoiding copying errors, its possibilities for mass-producing written works soon became evident. The market for books was still small, but literacy had spread beyond the clergy and had reached the emerging middle classes. The church, the state, universities, reformers, and radicals were all quick to use the press (Tucker, D. H., n.d.).

The duties completed by modern day publishers: selecting, editing, and designing the material; arranging its production and distribution; bearing the financial risk or the responsibility for the whole operation, were completed by the author, the printer, or the bookseller. With
increasing specialization, however, publishing became its own occupation by the 19th century (Tucker, D. H., n.d.).

_A Brief History of Sexism in Publishing_

Until the nineteenth century, women were not recognized as or legally allowed to become publishing professionals, even though women in publishing families or those that had relatives in the industry participated, unacknowledged, in writing, printing, publishing, typesetting, and engraving (Claro). After the American Revolution, women were allowed to contribute as authors in newspapers and magazines, but only in “female” areas such as fashion and gossip pages. Women were also hired to read newspapers to find sensational stories that men could adapt into novels (Claro). In the twentieth century, once women were graduating from colleges and entering the professional market, a 1916 career guide for girls published advice for women thinking about entering the publishing industry. It said “[women that want to be] editors, the reporters, and the men who rewrite stories, must be able to work under the pressure in a way that is beyond the power of most women” (Weaver). Despite this, women continued to populate the publishing industry throughout the twentieth century, in mostly clerical and secretarial roles, but slowly taking over editorial and managerial roles as well, eventually tipping the scales in women’s favor. Today, publishing in the United States is 78% women (Flood), although women still tend to dominate in lower-level positions while those in managerial or supervisory roles make less than their male counterparts (Claro).

For authors, a similar trend appears. For most of publishing history, men were the most commercially and critically successful authors. Men still make up the majority of the literary canon. Efforts to look for literary works by women, people of color, and working-class people
did not start until the 1960s (Lauter 495). In 1916, the preface to the book, The Chief American Prose Writers stated, “the nine writers represented in this volume have become, by general consent, the American prose classics” (Lauter 496). All nine were men. Forty years later, the preface to Eight American Writers stated, “in the consensus of our time, eight writers…constitute our ‘American Classics’” (Lauter 496). All eight were white men.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women did begin to write and publish more, though they were discouraged by their male colleagues in the field, often told, “women are more suitable holding a ‘needle’ than a ‘pen’” (Howell). Many women also wrote under pseudonyms, such as Mary Ann Evans who wrote Silly Novels by Lady Novelists under the name George Eliot. She reportedly did this to separate herself from female authors who wrote romance and to ensure her novel was taken seriously (Howell). Similarly, Mary Shelley, author of the 1819 classic Frankenstein, published the novel anonymously after struggling to find a publisher when she submitted under her own name (Rosu). Shelley’s husband, Percy Shelley, received the acclaim for the novel for years due to his contribution to the preface (Rosu). Bookseller and friend to Mark Twain captured the attitude towards women writers perfectly when he said, “What woman can write as Shakespeare? Can any woman ever write a ‘Robinson Crusoe’? Did any woman ever live who could have written ‘Huckleberry Finn’? … And what woman could possibly have written ‘Jude’?” (Jordan). Today however, as stated in the introduction, more women than men write fiction novels, and the most commercially successful genre is romance, another genre women dominate (Smailes). So how does the gender discrepancy exist among best sellers and literary awards? The answer is the genres women are allowed to succeed in are not as prestigious as the genres men are allowed to succeed, and still dominate, in.
This phenomenon is not specific to literature. Women’s work is simply less valued than men’s work. When an influx of women enter fields previously dominated by men, such as writing, pay declines (Miller). Even in industries where training, skill sets, and type of job are similar, if not the same, wage inequality persists. For example, the median earnings for information technology managers (male) is 27% higher than median earnings for human resource managers (female). Janitors (male) earn 22% more than maids and housekeepers (female), according to the Labor Bureau of Statistics (Miller). Adult fiction (male) holds more literary merit than young adult fiction (female).

Paula England, a professor at New York University and author of the most comprehensive study of the systematic devaluation of women dominated industries, found that employers simply place less value on work if it is done by women, because it appears like it requires less skill, or is less beneficial to overall profits (Miller). This phenomenon is exemplified by the exclusion of young adult literature from the literary canon, from inclusion in major literary awards, and general societal attitudes concerning the merit (or lack thereof) of young adult literature, despite the genre offering just as much—if not more—social commentary and societal value than those of canonical literary pieces. This concept will be examined more in chapter three.

Women & Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is one of the two biggest genres that women write in (romance being the other), and, as established in the introduction, young adult fiction does not carry the literary weight that adult fiction does. This inequality is not an accident. Publishers routinely place women’s fiction into the young adult genre rather than adult fantasy/science fiction/adult
fiction. Publishing professionals relegate women’s work to young adult, effectively infantilizing women authors, because women are associated with children, child-rearing, and children’s literature (Katz-Wise, Sabra L et al). Women are placed into young adult, sometimes against their wishes (Hay). For example, the immensely popular series, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, is categorized as young adult even though its themes, sexual nature, and graphic violence lean towards adult. Another reason women feature so heavily as young adult authors is because when readers see a woman’s name, they associate her with children’s literature. R.F. Kuang, author of the high fantasy series *The Poppy War*, in a since deleted Tweet, reminded readers that her work is not young adult and warned young readers about the violence and adult content (Hay).

A more positive reason women overwhelmingly write young adult is because women read young adult rather than adult fantasy or adult fiction. Publishers see the commercial success of other women writing YA fiction and want to replicate that success (Hay). Victoria Aveyard’s *Red Queen* series is currently being adapted into a television show, has sold more than 5 million copies, and the first book alone spent thirty-seven weeks on the New York Times best seller list (White). Young adult books usually feature female protagonists in a complex, nuanced way. Women are allowed to be characters rather than tropes, as seen in adult fantasy and science fiction. Young women see themselves as protagonists in young adult, and while studies have shown women will read books with male protagonists, boys are much less likely to read books with female protagonists (Lipsyte). This leaves the young adult reader base overwhelming female, creating a safer and more welcoming environment for female authors. Unfortunately, it also means that the literary value of young adult is diminished because of its mainly female authorship and female readership.
This chapter has focused on a brief history of publishing, how it became an industry, and the sexism of the industry, both on the business side and on the author side. Women were discouraged from working in publishing due to the male dominated nature of the industry, contributing labor without gaining credit until the nineteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, more and more women began to work in publishing, but experienced immense sexism, being relegated to low level, low paying, clerical jobs, even for women with degrees. Today, though a majority of the publishing industry is female, women dominate low level and low paying jobs rather than managerial roles, and those that do secure high level jobs are paid less than their male counterparts. On the author side, women were also discouraged from becoming authors, undergoing degradation by male colleagues and often using pen names to avoid misogynistic reviews and to have their work taken seriously. Today, women make up a majority of authors, although that majority does not translate to best sellers or critical awards, which both still favor men.

This chapter also discussed the gendered phenomenon of a male dominated field’s importance decreasing when women enter in great numbers. The concept relies on the fact that women’s work is less valued than men’s work, and that when industries become female dominated, it becomes less valued. The relegation of women to young adult fiction, and the subsequent devaluation of the genre exemplifies the gendered phenomenon of devaluing women’s work. Young adult fiction immensely favors women, with the majority of authors and readers in young adult literature being women. Reasons range from voluntary inclusion in the genre to a societal association with women to children’s literature, but the overwhelmingly female demographic of the genre has led to its literary merits being diminished.
Chapter 2: The Formalization of the Literary Canon, Emergence of YA, and Literary Merit

The Literary Canon

While Chapter 1 dealt with the history of publishing, the existing sexism, and the relegation of women writers to young adult literature, Chapter 2 will focus on the emergence of both the literary canon and young adult literature. Specifically, the discussion will cover the canon, what it is, how it formalized, how it compares to young adult literature, its requirements, and its formation. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of literary merit, what it is, how to quantify it, as well as who gets to determine literary merit.

So what is the literary canon? Simply, it is the books or writings that are deemed ‘good’ literature, the best literature, that is worth preserving and continuing to teach and pass down from generation to generation, becoming the ‘classics’ (Thompson 60). This widely accepted definition, as well as even the words ‘classic’ or ‘canonical’ imply evaluation and hierarchy among written works (Thompson 60). Furthermore, the term ‘classic’ can be used to cover a whole canon, Greek literature, for example, and it can also be a term of praise, given to a work of literature which is not only in the canon but at the top of the canonical hierarchy. Canonical classics are, “a 'great' work perceived as having special value for its culture” (Thompson 60).

There are two fields of thought when it comes to why books are in the canon. The first traditional approach says that canonical or classic literature are inherently great, they possess intrinsic qualities that lead to the proclamation of their greatness regardless of external factors (Thompson 60). The second approach is more modern and shifts the focus away from the works themselves and to the social circumstances of their production, dissemination, and preservation (Thompson 60). Canonical works are synonymous with literature itself, but the determination of the literary
canon has its own history. Taking Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as an example, is the play great because of its intrinsic quality or has society been conditioned by educational institutions and existing forms of social stratification to accept its unequivocal greatness? Literary scholars have found the answer to be a bit of both, as determined by the prevailing Western white patriarchal orthodoxy. Admiration for texts such as *King Lear* are, in part, due to the skill and greatness of the piece, but educational institutions have also taught how to admire Shakespeare, which leads to the conclusion that educational processes are not straight indoctrination but as a form of guidance to recognize certain intrinsic qualities (Thomson 60).

David Hume, one of the most influential Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century, and advocate of the first approach, wrote in his 1742 essay, *Of the Standard of Taste*, that there is absolute excellence in literature. Hume argues for the, “catholic and universal beauty” of the continuity of a work’s reputation (Hume). He argues that the absolute excellence in works, “the durable admiration which attends those works that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy” will lend itself to preservation, and that preservation will reinforce its place in the canon. “The same Homer who pleased at Athens two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London,” Hume says. And if one does not recognize the greatness of literary classics, it is the fault of that person, who must be suffering from ignorance, envy, or stupidity (Hume).

L.C. Knights, a literary critic, Shakespearean authority, and tenant of modern criticism, is a proponent of the second approach. He says that while classics are timeless, they must also, “mark a moment of great importance in the changing consciousness” (Thompson, 61). The second approach is intended to recognize that literature, and the literature chosen to represent a
time in history, reflects and illuminates the culture and society. The gap between the writing of a literary work and its acceptance into the literary canon is literary-historical time, or just time. Each generation must pass a verdict on the canon, whether to preserve it or not, as readers immersed in different worlds, with generationally different passions and interests, repeat the preference of their ancestors; they reaffirm earlier opinions of a writer's greatness (Kramnick 1098). “The accolades of successive generations designate Shakespeare an English classic” (Kramnick 1098). He who preserves literature, decides what is Literature.

The formation of the English canon took place in the eighteenth century, formalizing with the emergence of widespread printing. Printing and formalizing literary works into commodities essentially produced an investment in the past (Kramnick 1087). Due to the limits of written works up until printing, human error of handwriting each copy, the loss of books throughout the history, the past was an object of irrecoverable loss, and mid-eighteenth-century critics attempted to fashion a new understanding of cultural transformation. The fixing of the literary history and literary canon, insofar as that once pieces were formally printed and distributed they were permanent, became a monument of this cultural change (Kramnick 1087). In the early eighteenth century the nature of the canon started as progress towards national refinement (Kramnick 1089). The archaic Gothic past stood in opposition to the refined present. Critics such as Thomas Rymer, John Dryden, and Joseph Addison based their literary criticisms on the improvement of modern writers to the uncouth writers of the past (Kramnick 1089). A marker of the distinction between the two time periods was the actual language of writing. Writing of the present was marked by “smooth enunciation and uniformity of measure” such as poetry by John Denham: (Kramnick 1088).
“My eye, descending from the hill, surveys
Where Thames amongst the wanton valley strays;
Thames, the most lov’d of all the Ocean’s sons
By his old sire, to his embraces runs” (Denham, lines 1-4)

At this time, canon mainstays John Denham and Edmund Waller’s smooth verse signified, “the arrival of English verse at modern regularity and of the English language at polite speech” (Kramnick 1088). The early eighteenth-century print culture even went so far as to barbarize old writers, with their gothic verse and impolite diction that insulted the refined public, coinciding with the social emergence of the ‘beaumonde,’ or high society (Kramnick 1088).

Another effect of printing was the expanded literary culture, beyond the aristocracy it was once confined. The Spectator, a daily publication from 1711-1714 founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, represented both the broadening scope of literary culture and filled the role of refining the taste of the increased reading public (Kramnick 1088). The philosophy of The Spectator was that the purpose of literature is for rational discourse, and if the ancient writers had been given printing presses, they would have embraced it. Addison and Steele viewed themselves as a modern-day Socrates, or Moses, saying, “I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses” (Addison and Steele 1: 44).

Paradoxically, the narrative of refinement, and the canon it created set the stage for the next phase of canon formalization: the mid-century’s critique of such refinement in favor of the canon preserved to today (Kramnick, 1089).
In the mid-eighteenth century, the refined literature that marked England’s national taste began to be regarded with contempt. Printing, once controlled by the church and courts, evolved into another public commodity. As literature expanded beyond the aristocracy, to lower classes, and especially to women, calls for a ‘masculine canon’ resounded (Kramnick 1089). Popular thought became that by the public reading a work, it cheapened the work’s past, feminized it (Kramnick 1089). Old writers became valuable, because the printing business spurred a nostalgia for antique forms and language, “Culture products no longer remained components of the Church's and court's publicity of representation; that is precisely what is meant by the loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character” (Habermas). Literary culture became an object of critical discussion, but its ‘sacramental aura’ was debased by circulation and consumption. Literary critics of the mid-century shifted attention away from refined language to the linguistic distance and aesthetic difficulty of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Chaucer (Kramnick 1090).

With the increased reading of the early canon by the common, uneducated, and female populations, the elite needed more difficult texts to hold as great. “‘Without learning…knowledge in ancient customs and manners, in grammar and construction [Shakespeare] cannot be read with any degree of understanding or taste,’” stated John Upton, a mid-century clergyman and critic (Kramnick 1090). His view, and the view of the elite, was the audience of literature was the problem, they had forgotten how to read older texts in favor of easy, refined text. Upton continues, “‘How far the corruption of even our public diversions may contribute to the corruption of our manners, may be an inquiry not unworthy the civil magistrate…matters of these concernments are now left to the management of our women of
fashion”” (Kramnick 1090). Here, he is saying that destruction of public diversions, activities the public uses to entertain themselves—reading—is a consequence of women determing the reading tastes of society, which is why older ‘effeminate’ writers such as Shakespeare and Milton have not had the literary recognition they deserve (Kramnick 1090). “Shakespeare and Milton look to the present and see their eclipse by effeminate mass culture” (Kramnick 1091).

While the early eighteenth-century applauded publications such as The Spectator, the mid-eighteenth century critiqued such publications. The Spectator was lauded as an instrument of the degradation of literature. “The ‘engaged and easy’ manner of The Spectator had the unforeseen effect of degrading the very learning and taste with which it intended to please the public. Addison is right to suggest that the print market has made cultural goods objects of conversation, but this process has turned back on itself” (Kramnick 1092). The consensus of the critiques became that instead of public reading and learning elevating conversation and rational discourse, it degraded learning itself. In this field of thought, the language of canonical literature and language of the public sphere should not be the same but oppose each other (Kramnick 1092).

In this final stage of canon formalization, critics could look back and determine that the growth of the reading public ran parallel to the decline of literature. In the late eighteenth century, the belief that literacy should be a scholarly ability, and with older languages, the ability to not just read, but to read well, is what allows access to high cultural works of the literary past (Kramnick 1093). “Original/translation, difficulty/ease, ancient/modern, literate/illiterate” (Kramnick 1093), in each of these pairings, the latter word is viewed as a degradation of the first, and a condition of “indolent” readers (Kramnick 1093). Whereas an exclusive public consisting
of court members and the aristocracy had produced a robust national literature, the expanded public of widespread printing founded on the market had produced literature of politeness (Kramnick 1095). The theory moving forward became that literature should not cater to the public, rather it should distance itself from it in order to cause rational discourse and affect the public, because public demands are, “experienced as a cloying, ‘female’ presence, the solution to which is a rejection of the polite mode for that of a ‘serious, solemn dictator’” (Kramnick 1095). As long as authors wrote for a small audience their works remained serious. But as soon as authors wrote “to satisfy the ladies and the beaux”, their language descended to the prose of the market (Kramnick 1095).

From the end of the eighteenth century on, literature became part of the economy. “Just like economic consumption leads to the abstraction of exchange value, cultural consumption leads to the abstraction of aesthetic value” (Kramnick 1099). The economy defines the value of a commodity in terms of convertibility into money, while cultural consumption defines the value of literature in terms of its survival (Kramnick 1099). As contradictory as it is, works accepted into the canon must be, “both difficult and pleasurable, necessarily old and always new” (Kramnick 1099), they must be popular but exclusive, timeless but timely. As technical as the formalization of the literary canon is, and as steady as it has been since the eighteenth century, it is simply a group of books with elevated status based on conflicting ideals for the purpose of preservation. Samuel Johnson, author of Preface to Shakespeare (1765), one of the first acts of formal canonization, and renowned critic, believed that the collective body of readers is the agent and framework of literary preservation. Johnson’s work is a marker of English cultural nationalism – the idea that reading cultural artifacts connects generations and stretches into the
immemorial past. The collective body of readers is not united by their own traits (gender, race, class), but by the identification with characters. “Literature abstracts consumption into a perennial identification with masculine character raised to aesthetic law. The canon, in turn, rests on the stability of historical repetition, on one reader's reading like a generation of readers” (Kramnick 1099). The canon rests on the assumption that generation after generation will identify and recognize the greatness of the masculine character of the canon.

The Emergence of Young Adult Literature

So how does young adult literature fit into this narrative? On the whole, it should not. The literary canon is marked by a history of excluding the tenants that have made young adult literature so influential, such as its celebration of women, youth culture, and youth readership. For one, as the history of the canon has shown, it was not made by or for women, and the canon’s formalization was often designed to keep the canon free from ‘a cloying female presence’. Young adult literature does the exact opposite. As shown in Chapter 1, the majority of writers and readers are women. One requirement of the canon is the preservation of the same books over generations, cannot be said for young adult, because it is a relatively new genre. But the other descriptors: difficult but pleasurable, timeless but timely, these can be found within the genre. But first a greater understanding of the genre is necessary.

Young Adult Literature is generally described as books written for twelve- to twenty-year-olds. It may also include books written for adults but have greater appeal to young adults, and within the stories, characters are discovering and pushing boundaries to discover themselves, while in in adult fiction, characters are constrained by those limits and live within them (“Young
Adult Literature”). Young adult texts also include complex and nuanced narrative structures and contemporary, mature issues (Newvine and Fleming). Young Adult traces its roots back to World War II, when teenagers were given their distinction as a social demographic (Strickland). In 1942, Maureen Daly released *Seventeenth Summer*, which is considered the first book written and published for teenagers. The book was mainly for girls, about first love, but sports novels soon followed for boys (Strickland). The term “young adult” was officially coined by the Young Adult Library Services Association in the 1960s and novels such as S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* offered a mature contemporary realism directed at teenagers. The genre allowed authors to continue to write about serious teen issues throughout the 1970s (Strickland). Even today, the young adult books of the 1970s remain time capsules for the teenage experience and the theme of being misunderstood (Strickland). It is also important to note that the emergence and evolution of young adult coincided with social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Liberation (Newvine and Fleming). The genre reflected social issues to teenagers in a digestible way. It was pleasurable reading while also dealing with difficult subject matter.

The 1980s saw genre fiction, horror, mystery, or crime, enter young adult, such as R.L. Stine’s *Fear Street* series, and adolescent high drama such as *Sweet Valley High* (Strickland). Low birth rates throughout the 1970s led to a dry spell in young adult readership throughout the 90s but a baby boom in 1992 resulted in a renaissance among teen readers and a second golden age of the genre in 2000 (Strickland). This golden age was spurred by the book world beginning to market directly to teens for the first time. Expansive young adult sections appeared in both chain bookstores, such as Barnes and Noble and independent bookstores to target teens.
The shift led to successes such as Suzanne Collins’s massive dystopian hit, *The Hunger Games* series, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

From 2000 on, young adult has seen continued success of dystopian and fantasy subgenres, rather than aftershocks of initial success (Strickland). YA fiction retains its themes of transformation and stories connected by emotions to remain consistent. Young adult novelists do not shy away from tackling intense issues, including identity struggles, sexual abuse, to drug/alcohol use and suicide. The evolution of popular trends within the genre includes the beginning books such as *Seventeenth Summer* and *Forever*, focused on the teen experience and being an outsider, to adolescent love and sports novels, to the dystopian boom of the 2000s, to high school realism and mental health, a la John Green books in the 2010s, to the current focus on fantasy (Strickland).

The impact of young adult literature on the publishing industry cannot be overstated. In 2014, the Association of American Publishers claimed, “The area of largest growth for the trade category was children & young adult, which had double-digit growth in both revenue (20.9%) and units (13.5%). Children & Young Adult Fiction surpassed the Adult Fiction market with 843 million units and 746 million units sold respectively” (Hopkins). The commercial success of the genre is due, in part, to the fact that not only people aged twelve to twenty read the genre. In 2012, Publisher’s Weekly found that, “55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 -- known as YA books -- are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44” (“New Study: 55% of Ya Books Bought by Adults.”). Furthermore, of that 55%, 78% adults purchased the books for their own reading (“New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults.”).
On the Basis of Literary Merit

And that brings us to literary merit. Does young adult have literary merit because of its subject matter? Does it have literary merit because of its ability to span age groups, provide timely social commentary, and be both difficult and pleasurable at the same time? Or does it not have literary merit due to the newness of the genre and its mass popularity, which, as noted previously, is not a marker of the literary canon. There is no formalized answer. For one, literary merit exists but does not have a formal definition. ‘Literary’ means: “concerned with or connected with the writing, study, or appreciation of literature” and ‘merit’ means “has good or worthwhile qualities”, both of which are ambiguous definitions (“Literary Merit Definition and Meaning: Collins English Dictionary”).

Kerryn Goldsworthy, a critic, writer, essayist, and former literary academic, finds that merit is whatever the dominant culture, the individual or group in power, and/or the prevailing orthodoxy says it is (Goldsworthy). She discusses that there are quantifiable aspects to literary merit, such as textual and structural skill. Elements such as clarity of line in narrative or argument, character construction, dialogue, imagery, metaphor, sentence rhythm, word choice, breadth and variety of vocabulary and syntax. Another more quantifiable distinction of merit is content, the display of deep understanding, theme, vision, worldbuilding (Goldsworthy). The third element is how authors use style to express their substance (Goldsworthy). Those three aspects are only part of what gives a book literary merit, or excludes it, and all three can be varied and personal. They are determined by the dominant culture and the prevailing orthodoxy.

All this is to say that the young adult genre can possess similarities to the literary canon, can exhibit the quantifiable aspects of literary merit, but it is still not regarded as canonical or on
the same plane as classics. Part of this is due to the relative newness of the genre, but the rest is
down to the demographics of the authors and readers of young adult literature. As Chapter 3 will
illustrate, there are books included in the canon that today would be classified as young adult but
are deemed literary classics, and there are books today that warrant literary merit but are only
defined as young adult. The similarities between the two groups will be examined, as well as the
key differences between them, namely, the gender politics.
Chapter 3: An Analysis of a YA Classic

Up until this point, this thesis has argued that the gender demographics of young adult literature are the leading factor as to why young adult literature is diminished in value as opposed to canonical literature. It has also provided a look back at the history of canonical, of capital ‘L,’ literature to trace its roots and illustrate how it has always centered men. As gender theory has shown, when women enter a field previously reserved for men, such as publishing, and then come to even dominate it, the field’s value diminishes. In the case of literature, women have been placed in genres of writing that are given less societal value than the genres dominated by men. However, I argue that young adult literature, one of the most women-dominated genres, is not devoid of literary value because of the immense political, social, and literary commentary that exists in young adult books.

This chapter will aim to use a prime example of young adult fiction, *The Hunger Games*, to show how timely, useful, and rich in political commentary young adult can be. Chapter 3 will focus on *The Hunger Games* itself, its impact, and some of the major themes and ways the series portrays contemporary issues in a smart, subtle way. It will then expand on how gender is discussed in young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* compared to canonical, male centered works such as *Lord of the Flies*. Finally, Chapter 3 will interrogate why young adult novels are not given the same place in the canon as their male counterparts.

*Analysis: Social Commentary in The Hunger Games*

260 consecutive weeks on the New York Times best-seller list, has over 100 million copies currently in print, and spawned four big screen, record breaking films (Levithan). In addition to the series’ commercial success, *The Hunger Games* was a critical hit as well. On November 5, 2019, BBC named *The Hunger Games* to its list of “100 Novels that Shaped Our World” (“The Greatest Books.”). This list also includes novels such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and *Forever* by Judy Blume (“The Greatest Books.”). *The Hunger Games* provides the standard for young adult literature due to its themes, reader demographics, and provides an example how young adult literature provides social commentary just as well as, or better, than canonical literature. Through the series’ commentary on police brutality, personhood, and masculinity, *The Hunger Games* builds upon classic literature in a more poignant and reflective manner.

*The Hunger Games* is set in the ruins of North America, now the nation of Panem, a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. The Capitol keeps the districts in line by forcing them all to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate in the annual Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live TV. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen regards it as a death sentence when she steps forward to take her sister's place in the Games. But survival, for her, is second nature. If Katniss wants to win, she will have to start weighing survival against humanity and life against love (Collins).

*The Hunger Games* is a young adult dystopian series. The purpose of the dystopian genre is social commentary, writing about, “the society and time they live in” (Hamre). Using the dystopian genre as a framework for a young adult series puts young adults in the center, forcing the protagonists to take responsibility and, “overcome the problems the adult generation has
created” (Hamre 182). The books function as an introduction to political life for readers, but by adding adventure, humor, and romance, they become relatable. In the book *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, Monica Hughes adds that “dystopian worlds are exciting” (Hughes 156), but nihilism and despair cannot be the end result. Dystopian novels for young adults have a dual function: a cautionary tale about consequences of human behavior and an appeal for social change (Hughes 156). Political themes – complex issues about the world – are subtly transmitted to young readers in an engaging way.

One of the main themes throughout *The Hunger Games* is televised violence. The content consumers choose to elevate speaks to society itself. Suzanne Collins told the New York Times in 2018 that the idea for *The Hunger Games* occurred to her late one night, while she was flipping between cable TV channels showing reality shows and war coverage (Levithan). The brutality of children killing each other in the Hunger Games is mitigated by making the event a sports event, a media event filled with beauty pageants, interviews, and sports betting. “Popular programming desensitizes people to violence and conflict”, writes Tom Henthorne in *Approaching the Hunger Games trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis* (Henthorne 95). By creating a fake reality on television shows, the real and serious news reports of people in actual pain and suffering in the same medium do not have the impact they should have (Hamre 183). In contemporary society, this translates to the desensitization of police killings compared to the wide viewership of reality television.

In the novel, the police officers are known as “Peacekeepers”, individuals employed by the government to maintain law and order within the nation. They hunt rebels, political dissidents, and are also in charge of punishing such individuals. In the first book, in Chapter
Fifteen, Katniss, the protagonist, has made an ally of Rue, the twelve-year-old tribute from District 11. District 11 is made of a predominantly black population and is the agriculture district. Rue tells Katniss about District 11, how the people are forced to work in the trees and fields, providing food for the rest of the country, but are not allowed to eat the food they grow. Rue says, “they whip you and make everyone else watch” (Collins 202). ‘They’ meaning the Peacekeepers, whip the residents of District 11 if they eat the food they are forced to grow. This section of the chapter clearly parallels slavery in the United States with the current state of District 11.

In the same chapter, Rue tells Katniss how a boy in her district, Martin, stole a pair of night vision glasses. “Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they’ll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight doesn’t reach. One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot” (Collins 204). This passage unfortunately feels like a callback to Rodney King (1991), Amadou Diallo (1993), and Sean Bell (2006), among others murdered by police. For contemporary readers, the 2020 murder of George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed by police for allegedly trying to use a counterfeit $20 bill, likely also comes to mind (Hill et al.).

Rodney King was twenty-five when police pulled him over for allegedly driving under the influence before they beat to death (Poon and Patino). Amadou Diallo was twenty-three when he was shot because police thought he had a gun, although it was just a wallet, and Sean Bell was twenty-three when he was shot leaving a strip club for his bachelor party, unarmed (Poon and Patino). So, although Suzanne Collins did not know George Floyd, the United States already had an existing history of police brutality and police force murdering black men. Collins
reflected this reality by bringing it into her books and framing it in a dystopian lens as a catalyst for a just war.

Collins spoke about the concept of a just war in an interview with the New York Times. She explained that the just-war theory comes from thousands of years of philosophical thought about what circumstances give the moral right to wage war (Levithan). The just-war theory tries to answer the questions of acceptable behavior before, during, and after war; to differentiate between necessary and unnecessary wars. Collins says, “in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, the districts rebel against their own government because of its corruption. The citizens of the districts have no basic human rights, are treated as slave labor, and are subjected to the Hunger Games annually. I believe the majority of today’s audience would define that as grounds for revolution” (Levithan). Collins uses the realities of contemporary societal issues as justifications for her revolution. She poses her work as a true dystopian cautionary tale of institutional corruption.

Furthermore, an additional example of potent social commentary used by Collins to satirize contemporary society lies in the second book of the series, *Catching Fire*. In the sequel, Katniss and Peeta are forced to go back into the arena so the Capital can kill off the cause of a potential uprising. The night before the games though, all twenty-four tributes have an interview, much like a late-night talk show. In Chapter 18, Peeta is the last tribute to be interviewed. During his time, in an effort to cause chaos and outrage towards the capital, Peeta tells the audience Katniss is pregnant:
‘Maybe I'd think that, too, Caesar,’ says Peeta bitterly, ‘if it weren't for the baby.’

There. He's done it again. Dropped a bomb that wipes out the efforts of every tribute who came before him. Well, maybe not. Maybe this year he has only lit the fuse on a bomb that the victors themselves have been building. Hoping someone would be able to detonate it... As the bomb explodes, it sends accusations of injustice and barbarism and cruelty flying out in every direction. Even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can't ignore, at least for a moment, how horrific the whole thing is.

I am pregnant.

The audience can't absorb the news right away. It has to strike them and sink in and be confirmed by other voices before they begin to sound like a herd of wounded animals, moaning, shrieking, calling for help” (Collins 256).

Katniss is not actually pregnant. But she is still a sixteen-year-old girl who must go into an arena and either kill or be killed because of a corrupt government. This section of the book clearly means to comment on abortion in the United States. How the Capital does not care that children are slaughtered every year, but when they think Katniss is pregnant, that an unborn life might end before it begins, they are, “moaning, shrieking, calling for help” like wounded animals.

This quote about how audiences react to the news mirrors Randall Lake’s article on the Metaethical Framework of Anti-Abortion Rhetoric, “the Republican party commits itself to a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion; the Reagan administration cuts off aid to world population control programs that maintain the abortion alternative the film "The Silent Scream" plays at the White House; violent attacks on women's health clinics mount; shots are fired into
the home of Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun; the Department of Justice asks the Supreme Court to reverse its ruling in Roe v. Wade; and the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops denounces as "logically untenable" the notion that one can personally oppose abortion and at the same time support the availability of that option for” (Lake). Much like anti-abortion activists today, they prioritize prenatal life rather than postnatal life, but take up the cause when fetuses are brought into the mix.

Most recently, with the overturning of Roe v. Wade and the consequent lack of federally protected right for abortion across the country, anti-choice hypocrisy abounds. The same hypocrisy used since the adoption of Roe v. Wade in 1973, reflected in Catching Fire, was called out by US Senator Chris Murphy May 10, 2022, “And as I've said on this floor before, it's also hard to take seriously, Republicans’ passionate pleas for this body to defend the existence of an unborn fetus when they seem to care so little about many of the existential threats that are posed to every American after they are born. Today, this day, over 100 Americans are going to die from gunshot wounds, from murders and suicides… It seems that after birth, life matters a little bit less to some people in this body” (“Murphy Calls out Republican Hypocrisy on Abortion, Limits to ‘pro-Life’ Argument: U.S. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut.”).

Catching Fire does not deal with abortion, it does not wade into that argument, but it does highlight the hypocrisy of the Right to Life Movement in an introductory way, thereby preparing young readers for the same issues of hypocrisy, child endangerment, and the prioritization of fetuses over women.
A Discussion on Gender - The Hunger Games vs. Lord of the Flies

The Hunger Games series provides a subtle discussion of gender throughout the books by positing characters as mavericks. In literature, mavericks are lone dissenters who, “take an independent stand apart from his or her associates” (Fisher). In other words, mavericks are rebellious characters that disrupt existing policies or ideas. In the case of The Hunger Games, they are characters that do not solely present masculine or feminine characteristics, but a blend, and often subversion, of both. Collins does not gender characteristics by classifying them as ‘male’ or ‘female’ traits or careers. Nor does she disavow feminine traits in favor of masculine traits. Instead, she uses her characters to portray a blend of gendered characteristics.

Rismon states, “Perhaps a criterion for identifying undoing gender might be when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged” (Risman 83). Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, the protagonists of The Hunger Games, display a blend of feminine and masculine traits to illustrate their strength. Katniss is a young woman skilled in archery and survival. She is sullen, confident, and nurturing. Peeta is a young man, skilled at baking. He is kind, a great public speaker, and emotionally expressive. In the first book, Peeta is described as “medium height, stocky build”, and strong enough to throw bags of flour (Collins 24). But while Peeta is physically bigger than Katniss, he often inhabits the ‘female’ role of caretaker: cooking, gathering, and talking about his feelings. In the Hunger Games arena, Peeta admits he is no help hunting for food, “‘I’ve never hunted before.’ ‘I’ll kill and you cook,’ I say. ‘And you can always gather’” (Collins 290). Katniss takes on the role of defender and provider. At other points in the novel, Katniss assumes the role of healer and caretaker, nursing Peeta back to health in the arena (Collins 204). For most of the novel, Katniss is stoic, emotionally
unavailable, while Peeta fills the role of vulnerability, but near the end, they switch. “I’m afraid I might cry and then I remember everyone in the country is watching me so I just bury my face in Peeta’s shirt” (Collins 369). A full character analysis of Katniss’s character by Unjina Rana reveals that Katniss, “demonstrates both vulnerability and power. She is confused and decisive. She is not only individualistic but also practices conformity. She is caring and heartless. She is strong and weak. She takes on an active role and remains passive at other situations” (Rana).

While *The Hunger Games* does not explicitly discuss gender, Suzanne Collins makes a conscious effort to write her protagonists with a level of androgyny that subverts traditional gender roles in literature for women and men.

Comparatively, another survival adventure novel for young adults that contains gendered commentary is *Lord of the Flies*, although *Lord of the Flies* belongs to canonical literature rather than young adult literature (“Classic Literature Books: Classic Fiction”). *Lord the Flies*, the 1954 novel by William Golding, is a dystopian adventure novel with allegorical twists and follows a group of school boys stranded on an island (Bovey). *Lord of the Flies* deals primarily with the concept of civilization vs. savagery, but it is an inherent commentary on gender due to the fact that there are no women. The only female character in the entire novel is a sow. Stefan Alidini, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, notes that civilization in *Lord of the Flies* is a consequence of hegemonic masculinity, “projecting rationalism, harmonious hierarchy, moral and physical purity as the expected and implied behavioral patterns, the plot is structured as a dynamic power struggle followed by transgressions the boys commit in an attempt to play out the roles they believe they ought to” (Aldini 219). In other words, *Lord of the Flies* is a case study on young boys performing the masculinity taught by society.
The dual concepts of hegemonic masculinity and imperialism are explicitly linked. “Literature, while gaining a foothold for itself…helped create the foundation that made imperialism sustainable” (Aldini 218). In *Lord of the Flies*, this connection is first introduced with its characters. Ralph, one of the oldest boys, becomes a leader to the group. In describing Ralph, Golding says, “You could see now that he might make a boxer, as far as width and heaviness of shoulders went, but there was a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil” (Golding 4). Other motifs such as how the boys debate and the use of a seashell as a way of giving legitimacy to a speaker all illustrate a structured notion in the boys’ consciousness of a supposed masculinity they hope to join. Aldini states, “it takes centuries of literary and social instruction in order for such a sentence to be accepted without recognizing its implications” (Aldini 217). *Lord of the Flies* is a novel built upon decades of prior British literature. Through years of social instruction on imperialism and masculinity, the text is accepted without comment, its value and commentary seen as necessary by the prevailing group in power: Western white patriarchy, the same group that determines literary merit.

The imperialist masculinity complex functions through the principle of othering undesirable traits (Aldini 220). In *Lord of the Flies*, undesirable traits are ‘female’ traits (Aldini 220). Characters like Ralph and Jack inhabit the traditional heroic model archetype in an attempt to reaffirm the dominant masculine culture (Aldini 220). The other boys gravitate towards the masculine superiority of Jack or Ralph, as the senior, most adult persons, and why characters like Piggy, Simon, and Roger are not crowned leaders. They do not exhibit the same masculine attributes so, they must, “prove their worth and conquer space for a masculine identity of their own (Aldini 220). Roger accomplishes this by enhancing his sociopathic tendencies and
subordinating himself to Jack while Piggy, a more passive and unimposing character, remains ostracized until the boys discover his glasses can be used to start fire, and thus provides a use to himself. Lastly, Simon, a character deficient in traditional masculinity traits, emerges as the ideal and necessary victim of the group’s violent outcome (Aldini 220).

As previously mentioned, there are no women in *Lord of the Flies*. The only female character in the book is a sow, and the sow is murdered by the boys. Aldini notes that, as the only feminine symbol, the sow is lumped together with Simon and Piggy, symbolizing the weak and worthlessness of beings devoid of masculinity (Aldini 222). It is no accident that Piggy, Simon, and the sow are all murdered by the group of boys on the island throughout the novel. Golding posits the killings of Piggy, Simon, and the sow are as a “sacrifice of those that can be sacrificed, for the good of all. The release of impulses, forms of initiation and the production of cultural patterns are followed by the systematic destruction of everything that is weak, deemed impure, foreign, peculiar” (Aldini 222). Using the theme of identity formation throughout *Lord of the Flies*, the killings of the only characters deficient of masculinity are acts of “sexual, ritual purification” (Aldini 223).

*The Hunger Games* is one of the most commercially successful young adult books of all time, and one of the most critically reflective contemporary fiction books of the modern age. It offers poignant political commentary on issues as police brutality, governmental corruption, and the current anti-abortion hypocrisy. It also approaches gender in a nuanced, different way than canonical literature approaches gender. While *The Hunger Games* is written by a woman and predominantly read by young women, *Lord of the Flies* was written by a man for other young men. The canon is overwhelmingly made of men and elevates imperial, white colonial works
while young adult is primarily written by and for women. And yet, even given the rich commentary and literary technique with which *The Hunger Games* is written, it is not given the same literary valued as *Lord of the Flies*, a similar dystopian novel that only centers masculinity and imperialism.
Conclusion

(Classics As Modern-Day Young Adult)

The benchmarks of the young adult genre can be used to cast a light on canonical works that, if written today, would be sold as young adult novels. These benchmarks include:

- novels written and published for twelve-twenty year olds,
- the characters discover and push boundaries to find themselves (as opposed to adult books where characters already exist within the boundaries of the world),
- the novels include complex and nuanced narrative structures and contemporary, mature issues facing youth.

Using these stipulations, works such as The Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, A Separate Peace, The Giver, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer all inhabit the young adult space, yet they are not categorized as young adult, they are categorized as ‘classics’ ("Classic Literature Books: Classic Fiction.").

Lord of the Flies was discussed in Chapter 3, but its dystopian setting and themes of civilization and violence by children align with The Hunger Games, although the novels’ messaging is radically different. Lord of the Flies was originally written for adults, although if it was written today, would be classified as young adult due to its readership by teenagers and story centered on children (Jarvis). Another classic novel originally written for an adult audience but, if it were written today, would be marketed as young adult is The Catcher in the Rye (Jarvis).

Published in 1951, the novel by J.D. Salinger details two days in the life of Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old boy expelled from prep school. Throughout the novel, Holden searches for truth amidst the ‘phoniness’ of the adult world (Lohnes). The most obvious similarity between The
*Catcher in the Rye* and *The Hunger Games* is the coming-of-age angle. Both novels, and many novels in the literary canon as well as in young adult, focus on young people coming-of-age. A more specific parallel between *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Hunger Games* is the primary motivation of both Holden Caulfield and Katniss Everdeen. A ‘catcher in the rye’ is someone who saves children from falling off a cliff, which is a metaphor for passing from childhood to adulthood in the book, and Holden spends a good portion of the novel acting as a catcher in the rye for his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe. Likewise, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss’s primary motivation is to protect her twelve-year-old sister, Prim. Katniss volunteers to be a tribute in the games so Prim will not have to be tribute. Holden and Katniss are both motivated to be catchers in the rye.

Another coming-of-age novel with similarities to present day young adult is *A Separate Peace*, written by John Knowles in 1959. *A Separate Peace* is often thought of as the heir to the Salinger throne, because it is reminiscent of *Catcher in the Rye*. *A Separate Peace* can be seen as almost a, “proto-YA novel: not written for adolescents exactly, but it’s easy to see why they’d find that audience” (Lewis). It takes place at a boys’ boarding school set against the backdrop of World War II, and it follows the protagonists two boys named Gene and Phineas, and functions as a parable of the dark side of adolescence and the banishment of childhood innocence (“A Separate Peace”). *A Separate Peace* takes inspiration from *Lord of the Flies* and *Catcher in the Rye* in detailing young boys’ evolution into adulthood. It mirrors young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* in this way, but also in the role violence plays in corrupting the innocence of childhood. Phineas dies in *A Separate Peace* because Gene purposely jounces a branch that
Phineas falls from (“A Separate Peace”). *The Hunger Games* follows children who are forced to murder each other.

Although Mark Twain is now known as one of the most famous children’s book writers, his novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, were not explicitly written for children, and there is still a debate among literary scholars today whether they are children’s books. Stanford University Professor of English & Humanities Shelley Fishkin states, “*Huckleberry Finn* is adult fiction readily accessible to young readers” (Fishkin 138). However, both are coming of age novels primarily read by people aged twelve to twenty years old. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* follows Tom Sawyer, a boy growing up along the Mississippi river and the mischief he gets into with his friends. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is a look at boyhood and a reflection of morality (Tikkanen). Likewise, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in the pre-Civil War South and follows Huckleberry Finn, a young boy who runs away from his abusive father and takes a voyage down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave, Jim (Luebering). Both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depict Southern society pre-Civil War, through dialect and descriptions of its characters, eliciting cries of racism from scholars and present-day writers (Luebering). While young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* also follow the journey of teenagers leaving childhood, young adult criticizes current society through its messaging, genre, and themes. These consist of dystopian, or fantasy and themes of youth led revolution, toppling oppressive regimes, and fighting against the oppression that exists in the modern world, such as racism, sexism, and classism.
All this is to point out the similarities canonical classics have with modern YA novels such as *The Hunger Games*. Similarities in readership, age of protagonists, and general coming of age tales. However, the classics were not written with children or teenagers in mind, but as adult novels, and they have been maintained in the canon as ‘classics’, not YA. Books written about teenage boys losing their innocence and discovering the world around them, written by men, are allowed to be staples of the literary canon, while YA novels written by women, about young girls facing the oppressive regimes around them are regarded as devoid of literary value, despite the similarities of the two groups of books.

*Excluding Women from the Canon*

The canon refers to texts recognized as worthy of academic study by the same Western white male orthodoxy that determines literary merit. It is synonymous with Literature itself (Coryat and Clemens 41). Literature is a marker of time, reflecting the changing consciousness and passing down works deemed beneficial to the canon, or works worthy of academic study for generations. While books are written in private, they reflect the ideological makeup of their host culture (Krystal). That culture is and has been decided by Western white male viewpoints, where elite scholars and critics embrace a work of art and send it to the realm of canonization (Morris). That culture continuously strives to exclude women.

While this thesis focuses on how a genre predominantly filled with women authors are constantly devalued and excluded from the canon, it does not aim to dismiss the women already in the canon. Authors such as Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, and Toni Morrison have many works in the literary canon, but these women are
‘allowed’ into the canon because scholars argued that their work met the criteria of Western male culture on a case-by-case basis (Stockton). Their admittance does not change the discriminatory standards of the canon, it merely provides a route for exceptions. Harold Bloom, a literary critic and Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University wrote *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, where he creates a list of the most important literary figures of the western world. Out of the twenty-six writers, only four are women, and all are white women (Bloom). Furthermore, the third edition of the Norton Anthology, in an effort to diversify its entries, states, “And the literature by and about women has been substantially supplemented…” (Stockton). Of the eighty-four authors, eight are women.

In *The English Journal*, Susan Coryat and Colleen Clemens state, “To appear in the Norton or Oxford anthology is to have achieved, not exactly greatness but what is more important, certainly—status and accessibility to a reading public” (Coryat and Clemens 41). Texts that appear in the Norton Anthology belong to the canon and are taught generation after generation, which begs the question: if the same texts repeatedly appear in anthologies and classrooms, why is there such a resistance to change (Coryat and Clemens 41)? Because it goes against the canon’s foundations. As explored in Chapter 2, much of the literary canon’s history is devoted to intentionally keeping women, or a ‘female presence’ away from the canon.

Using industries such as caregiving, child-rearing, and other care work, a phenomenon of devaluing femininity itself can be seen. The Western white male culture does not value traits or activities traditionally associated with women (Christen). When an influx of women enter an industry, the entire industry is then devalued, or women are placed into a separate category (Christen). In the case of publishing, women are overwhelmingly placed into young adult and
romance genres, genres devoid of literary value and excluded from the traditional canon. Belonging to the canon bestows social, political, economic, and aesthetic status and serves as a guarantee of high quality Literature (Christen). George P. Landow, professor of English and Art History at Brown University, states "[the canon] is something to be enjoyed as an aesthetic object. Complex, difficult, privileged, the object before you has been winnowed by the sensitive few and the not-so-sensitive many, and it will repay your attention. You will receive pleasure; at least you're supposed to, and if you don't, well, perhaps there's something off with your apparatus" (Landow). Interrogating the homogeneity of the canon and questioning why entire genres are disregarded questions the assumption that men hold the majority of power in the “social, political, economic, and aesthetic” (Coryat and Clemens 42). In Writing a Woman’s Life, feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun says, “We live our lives through texts . . . they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives” (Sadker and Sadker 128). When women are absent from the literary canon, from Literature, or when entire genres dominated by women are excluded, it feeds into the assumption that work by women is worth less than work by men.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this thesis, it has been established that women make up the majority of authors. However, male authors have dominated adult fiction best seller lists throughout history, as well as prestigious book awards such as the Pulitzer Prize. But when the lens shifts to young adult literature, women dominate in terms of writers, readers, best sellers, and award winners. Thus, it is not surprising why this genre in which women experience so much success, is
diminished in literary value. Young adult is excluded from the literary canon due to its gender politics.

As seen in Chapter 2, the literary canon’s formation is rooted in Western patriarchal culture for the purpose of preserving its historical power over generations. It is inherently biased against women. As seen in similar feminized industries, when women come to dominate, the entire industry suffers, or women are put in spaces where their societal value diminishes, such as young adult literature. The relegation of women into young adult authorship creates a gap of engaging stories written by women that appeal to women in adult sections, which feeds into popularity of young adult fiction with adult women readers.

In a more positive spin, women predominantly write young adult because young adult has a huge female readership. And young adult has a huge female readership because mainly women write young adult. It is a cyclical phenomenon. Young adult also routinely features female protagonists, but more than that, young adult has built its success on creating spaces for women to be characters rather than tropes. They get to lead their own narratives rather than be an accessory to a male narrative. Furthermore, whereas adult fiction and fantasy often features violence towards women, such as George R.R. Martin’s massive series *Game of Thrones*. Violence towards women is defended by authors because it is an attempt to ground fantasy or historical novels in reality (Gilbert). In contrast, young adult literature features young women fighting against oppressive regimes, and more often than not, leading the fights, such as in *The Hunger Games*. All of this culminates in young women and adult women seeing themselves represented in a non-exploitative way through young adult literature in a way adult literature comes up short. Finally, studies have shown that young boys do not read books with girl
protagonists (Edwards). This absence of men creates a more welcoming and positive space for women writers and readers.

Chapter 3 took a deep dive into a pristine example of young adult literature, *The Hunger Games*, to illustrate how rich a canvas young adult literature can be in terms of literary analysis and social commentary. While young adult is written for a younger demographic, that does not eliminate meaningful, intelligent socio-political commentary. In fact, novels such as *The Hunger Games* illustrate how young adult literature functions as a reflection of the current time. Thus, if young adult novels satisfy the quantifiable skills described in Chapter 3 for literary merit, the question becomes: is YA excluded from the canon because it is too new, too reflective of our current time, or is its exclusion based on a history of excluding women and works that challenge its foundations? This thesis has strived to make a strong case for the latter.
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Figure 1: Percentage of women in the U.S. who identify as authors vs. percentage of men
Figure 2: Gender Equality of New York Times Best Seller 1950-2015 (Cima 2017)

Best-Selling Novels by Author Gender
Figure 3: Young Adult New York Times Best Seller List by Gender Percentage 2012-2022 (Jensen 2016)
Figure 4: Gender Difference of Prestigious Literary Awards
Figure 5: Gender Difference in Young Adult Literary Awards