HORROR AND HOPE: FAIRY TALE TROPES IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

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Jill Elizabeth Coste
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The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the
Thesis of Jill Elizabeth Coste:

Horror and Hope: Fairy Tale Tropes in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Literature

________________________
Phillip Serrato, Chair
Department of English and Comparative Literature

________________________
Alida Allison
Department of English and Comparative Literature

________________________
Margaret Larlham
School of Theatre, Television, and Film

7/25/13
Approval Date
DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, for making me smart. To Tristan, for everything.
In fairy tales, as in dreams, we are every character.

-Adam Gidwitz
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Horror and Hope: Fairy Tale Tropes in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Literature
by
Jill Elizabeth Coste
Master of Arts in English
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Contemporary pop culture is positively riddled with and riveted by both dystopian fiction and fairy tales. In the young adult publishing market in particular, dystopian novels have exploded in popularity in the last decade. Similarly, while fairy tale retellings have been part of our cultural landscape for years, new versions of old tales are appearing with rising frequency in young adult novels, particularly those aimed at young women. This thesis examines the intersection between dystopias and fairy tales in young adult fiction, looking at such tropes as the princess, the fairy-tale romance, and the quest. By outlining the dystopian and fairy tale genres by themselves, arguing that they converge most aptly in our post-9/11 society, and examining how fairy tales work within a post-apocalyptic landscape, this thesis determines that fairy tales offer fertile ground for subversion when paired with dystopias. To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of such subversion, this thesis examines two young adult novels in close detail. Marissa Meyer’s “Cinderella” retelling, *Cinder*, offers a postmodern role model for contemporary young women, while Lauren DeStefano’s *Wither* demonstrates that certain fairy tales, like “Bluebeard,” hinder feminist progress.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales are everywhere. Snow White and Cinderella show up in advertising, Beauty encounters all manner of Beasts in texts and films, and Rapunzel can symbolize any woman trapped by domesticity. Fairy tales are part of our culture’s collective unconscious: we learn of fairy tales as children, we commit them to our deepest memories, and we keep coming back to them as adults. They represent both a time of innocence and a time of awakening, as we transition from childhood into adolescence. Jack Zipes writes that “as children, we all hear fairy tales and read our lives into them. But we also want to see and realize our lives as fairy tales even as we grow older” (Happily 1). Fairy tales become not only part of our cultural awareness; they also become part of us.

Fairy tales teach us lessons (don’t stray from the path!), offer us delight (if you’re good, a fairy godmother will grant your wishes), warn us of strangers (beware that tempting house made of candy), and promise us that all will turn out right at the end. Bruno Bettelheim has famously argued that fairy tales also represent the child’s psychological concerns, from fear of abandonment to sibling rivalry. The simple narrative arc and clear examples of good and bad make fairy tales logical options for children’s entertainment. But these same elements also make fairy tales the perfect canvas for painting social commentary. Since fairy tales have such familiar source texts, they come with their own sets of expectations that are thrilling when subverted.

Like fairy tales, dystopian fiction also offers an excellent backdrop for social commentary. Dystopian literature for children, while pointing out flaws in society, delivers a hopeful ending and provides a lesson for its readers, as fairy tales do. And because both stories delineate frightening detours—either in the form of a man-eating wolf or an unrecognizable post-apocalyptic America—they draw on the same attraction young readers have to horror and hope. In her book Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood, Maria Tatar examines the thrill of fantasy for the child reader, claiming that “they know how to harness the astonishing power of beauty and horror” (70). The child reader is not so
different from the adolescent or the adult—each understands the bewitching push-pull of attraction and aversion. Dystopian books run a wide range of this kind of attraction/aversion paradox. They can project a future wherein an atomic bomb has caused everyone to fuse a body part with whatever they were near at the time of the detonation, as in Julianna Baggot’s *Pure*. They can envision an obliterated New York City where genetically engineered robot soldiers disguise themselves as humans, like Dan Wells’ *Partials*. They can suggest quiet horror, as in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, whose characters take pills to combat any sort of emotion and are one step away from lobotomy patients. And they can provide grand narratives and sweeping descriptions of technological beauty, as in Beth Revis’s *Across the Universe*, which describes a spaceship so large it almost defies comprehension. Whatever manner of attraction or aversion they provide, dystopian novels reliably “mingle problems of adolescence such as social conformity with a broader political question about the nature of the perfect society” (Hintz 259). In other words, they take the individual nature of adolescent experience and contrast it with the greater concern of how to become an adult in a world that is full of problems.

This thesis aims to examine what happens when fairy tales are put into conversation with dystopian young adult (YA) novels by looking at the different ways fairy tale tropes can characterize a narrative. There is a great deal of interaction between these seemingly discrete genres, and both have become ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture. Because dystopian YA novels typically trace the coming-of-age of a character against a backdrop of political unrest, they tend to dramatize and heighten the difficulty of the adolescent experience. When these novels are influenced by fairy tales, they recall the innocence of childhood. Of course, not all fairy tales are innocent, and not all associations are pleasant. As we will see in this thesis, a novel that brings to mind “Cinderella” might have an entirely different effect than one that is evocative of “Bluebeard.”

Because of their inherent associations with specific characters and tropes, fairy tales lend themselves to retellings. Since they originated in the oral form of storytelling, in which one version might shift to another upon retelling, there is no one definitive version. Thus, it is easy to pick and choose elements from a familiar tale and stitch them into another narrative.
The 1980s and 1990s, at the heart of the transition from second to third wave feminism, saw an influx of feminist fairy tales. These stories and films typically subverted the common patriarchal expectation of a happy ending wherein the princess marries the prince. Feminist retellings have paved the way for, essentially, turning fairy tales into more than allegorical anecdotes. Now fairy tales appear in new narrative forms and with new commentary on contemporary society, showing up in comic books, on television, and, as I have mentioned, in dystopian novels.

The pairing of fairy tales and dystopias is not only natural, but it also allows for the reader to take part in formulating the story. Dystopian young adult novels that employ fairy tale tropes allow for a sort of cognitive dissonance to occur. The heroines at the forefront of these books subvert the maiden-in-distress archetype that we see in so many fairy tales, but they also follow the kind of quest pattern we expect from those very same tales. Therefore, readers are at once oriented and disoriented in the narrative. Additionally, fairy tale tropes offer a sense of familiarity—both archaic, as the use of fairy tales calls on the stories we have always known, and modern, as it gives us a lifeboat of the “known” in a sea of the unknown. Ultimately, these dystopian novels use fairy tale tropes to simultaneously defy and reify the societal standards that popular fairy tales share. If Cinderella appears in a post-apocalyptic science fiction narrative, or if a mother tells her children a fairy tale as an allegory for their hidden royal heritage after a nuclear holocaust, the fairy tale anchors the readers and provides familiarity and hope.

Two recent young adult novels in particular have notable fairy tale influences that are complicated by their dystopian settings. Bluebeard’s mysterious castle and Cinderella’s cruel stepmother respectively appear in Lauren DeStefano’s Wither and Marissa Meyer’s Cinder, and they hit all the familiar notes while also offering something new. While Cinder is the most overt retelling of a fairy tale, it also subverts the maid-to-princess arc by making the heroine’s “otherness” an important factor in the dystopian society. Similarly, the stakes for Wither’s main character, who is trapped in a dystopian version of Bluebeard’s halls of horror,
are higher as her escape might signal a change not only for her physical safety but also her understanding of the world.

Both of these novels address the idea that fairy tales are not always black and white. While we may think fairy tales have a clear-cut moral lesson, it is not always so. As Trina Schart Hyman points out, “Morality…is not so clearly drawn in Grimm and almost never pointed out. Heroes and heroines often pull some pretty rotten, nasty, or self-serving tricks in order to get what they want” (qtd. in Tatar, *Grimm Reader* 310). At the same time, Charles Dickens has written that “Forbearance, courtesy…and abhorrence of tyranny and brute force” are all tenets of the fairy tale (qtd. in Tatar, *Grimm Reader* 306). These opposing standards reflect an overarching theme in dystopian literature, and, in fact, in human nature: selfishness versus self-sacrifice. In both *Wither* and *Cinder*, the heroines have to weigh the needs of others against their own. They have to fight to win, but first they have to determine that are indeed capable of fighting. Rhine, the main character in *Wither*, must abandon people who rely on her to get what she wants. Cinder, the re-imagined Cinderella character, must decide between her own safety and that of the commonwealth in which she lives.

The binaries of choice and the high stakes that accompany them in dystopian novels echo the fairy tale motifs of devastating difficulty and uplifting triumph, horror and hope. Why is our contemporary culture still captivated by these motifs? Why are dystopian novels so popular and what do fairy tale tropes add to the story? Ultimately, fairy tales add a level of familiarity to a foreign, science fiction world, allowing for the hope of a happy ending and the vanquishing of evil when all else seems lost. Even though both of the aforementioned books are the first in a trilogy and therefore end in a murky area somewhere between “happy” and “dissatisfying,” the very fact that they are YA promises that the trilogy will end with a victory for the heroine.

*Wither* and *Cinder* fit the bill for standard dystopian fare. As in most dystopian novels, something catastrophic has occurred to destroy life as we know it. Typically, some sort of massive world war has reshaped the face of the planet and altered the way society functions. In these two books, that catastrophic incident also has drastic effects on human health and quality of life. In *Cinder*, the world’s timeline was re-set after a devastating third world war, so that the characters live in 126 Third Era. The moon has been colonized, China is the world’s largest superpower, and an incurable plague has begun attacking everyone who
lives on earth. *Wither*’s world is also altered by World War Three, but unlike *Cinder*’s setting, *Wither* finds North America to be the last continent standing. Moreover, even though genetics have been perfected and cancer has been cured, something has gone wrong and now all females die at 20, and all males die at age 25. Both novels also employ the standard dystopian fare such as “a rigorously planned society, charismatic leaders or masterminds, control of reproductive freedom, and the prioritization of collective well-being over the fate of the individual” (Hintz 254). *Wither*’s Rhine exists in a stringent micro-society, forced into a marriage because she has a uterus and can help further society’s population. *Cinder*’s title character must sign away the rights to her own life when she becomes a subject of testing to try to find a cure for the plague that is decimating society. The heroines’ respective journeys through these dystopic elements encompass both the familiar quest of fairy tales and the standard coming-of-age and learning-to-be-brave trope that accompanies young adult fiction. As Carrie Hintz points out, fairy tales and dystopias keep excellent company because dystopias, just like fairy tales, “prepare young people for difficult tasks and make them aware that they have ample strength for such tests” (256).

A common way for the dystopian YA novel to demonstrate this aforementioned strength is through the warrior-like female protagonist. While this thesis does not examine the gender bias in contemporary YA toward girls, it does explore the implications of these strong female heroines. The dystopian girl seems to be in direct contrast with the demure heroines of fairy tales, who were often drawn as such to remind young girls of proper behavior. But not all fairy tales feature gentle, well-behaved souls—“Hansel and Gretel” sees its heroine pushing the witch into an oven to burn alive, the heroine of “Furrypelts” lies about her identity, and one of the sisters in “Fitcher’s Bird” outsmarts and torments the villain. Additionally, the tropes that accompany many fairy tales—docile and subservient maidens, wicked and bloodthirsty stepmothers—are re-used and subverted in contemporary young adult literature. In *Cinder*, Meyer introduces us to the familiar subservient Cinderella, but endows her with the kind of sass, confidence, and bite necessary to a modern-day feminist hero. Dystopian heroines like Cinder serve as role models in our contemporary society, young women who are not content to sit back and wait to be rescued.

Not all heroines successfully subvert the damsel-in-distress archetype. Protagonists that evoke the fairy tale heroine can fall prey to what Kathryn James calls “a patriarchal
framework” (166). Due to her feminine trappings, the heroine re-establishes the male hegemonic status quo by ending up with her prince and becoming less threatening in her happy-ever-after. This is especially true in the case of *Wither*. The heroine is desperate to escape her Rapunzel-like prison, but she goes about her escape in a manner that reinforces the patriarchal state of affairs. She does not manipulate her way out or use unexpected brute force; she simply flees when she has a chance, and she takes her male love-interest with her.

Granted, the variance in heroine-strength is partly due to the type of fairy tales these novels employ. Clearly, different tropes will affect the story in different ways. During the course of *Cinder*, the familiar Cinderella tropes offer levity to a serious storyline and a safe harbor in a story about a future that is incomprehensible. We know Cinderella; our society loves her. We enjoy a rags-to-riches story, and we want to see Cinderella triumph over those who have quelled her spirit. Because of this, we automatically side with the title character of *Cinder*, accepting her unusual cyborg nature and wishing for her to be happy and win the prince. And when she does not, we are impressed by her resolve to take a different path.

Unlike Cinder, the main character in *Wither* is trapped in a horrific situation where her body is her only asset. Due to its “Bluebeard” influences, *Wither* is an inherently darker story, but also due to associations with Bluebeard’s wife, Rhine is inherently less likeable. She is not defiant in a kick-ass heroine kind of way; rather she is manipulative, wishy-washy, and petulant. She is not a Cinderella-type who overcomes adversity; she is an oppressed wife who must devise an escape from her situation, which, arguably, she got herself into.

Where the two novels are quite similar is in their endings (neither is particularly happy), it is also in their endings that these two young adult dystopias depart from their fairy tale origins. While *Cinder* finds its main character humiliated and without her prince, *Wither* situates its main character literally adrift at sea. Rhine has escaped the mansion of horrors, but she has no idea where the current will take her, her dystopian world is still devastated, and she is still doomed to die at age 20. By subverting the happy endings, these young adult dystopias shove aside one of the most common tropes of fairy tales. However, as I mentioned earlier, the fact that these are the first books in a trilogy promises a happy ending—or at least a satisfying conclusion—to come. The use of fairy tale tropes allows for these books to be at once hard-hitting narratives of heartbreak, dark and dystopic visions of the future, and familiar and hopeful tales of redemption.
I will examine the importance of hope and redemption in the second chapter of this thesis. In Chapter Two, I delve into an overview of both the dystopian genre and the world of fairy tales. Examining the rise of popularity of both over the last decade in popular culture, I consider the reasons for this and posit that adolescents who are growing up in a post-9/11 need hope and a hero. Additionally, I examine how postmodernism is situated now vis a vis a technologically advanced society in which science fiction has become reality. Ultimately, I conclude that fairy tales partner well with speculative fiction because they offer a kind of stabilizing familiarity.

Chapter Three zeroes in on a specific dystopian fairy tale retelling, Meyer’s *Cinder*. Its science fiction elements mingle with fairy tale expectations to offer something entirely new to the young adult publishing market. Since the “Cinderella” tale is widely associated with the Disney movie version in our society, I describe several versions of Cinderella from historical tales. Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm both have their own versions of the Cinderella tale (with the Grimm version being much more, well, grim), and one of the earliest-known recordings of the tale originated in China, with the story of Ye Xian. An overview of these stories plus an examination of many different kinds of Cinderella fables and Cinderella princesses in reality reveals that Meyer’s work on the tale is a welcome, subversive contribution to pop culture.

Chapter Three also looks closely at the theory of posthumanism. As our society progresses further into the development of technology, we begin to depend increasingly on machines and gadgets. Posthumanism examines the “human” connection to the machine, averring that humanity is not relegated to organic matter. As *Cinder*’s protagonist is a cyborg, she is a particularly interesting example of this human-creature symbiosis. Because she represents a beloved character famous in the world of fairy tales, Cinder-the-cyborg will have a built-in fan base to understand and accept not only posthumanism, but also the general idea of the Other.

Chapter Four takes a different approach to looking at fairy tale elements in a dystopian text. Lauren DeStefano’s *Wither* evokes comparisons to Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” the dark tale of a serial killer. Because of Bluebeard’s wife-murdering legacy, however, it is a difficult and complex tale to use. On the one hand, it is blatantly anti-feminist, as Bluebeard threatens to kill his wife if she disobeys his orders. On the other hand, the fact that wife
disobeys those orders due to her thirst for knowledge can make her appear to be a feminist character. But Bluebeard’s story is still haunted by the previous wives he has already killed, and in this sense patriarchal power has already prevailed. In Chapter Four, I examine “Bluebeard” as an anti-feminist tale and explain how its shadows weigh down Wither. Unlike in Cinder, the main character in Wither is a weaker heroine who does not manage to capture any of the positive characteristics of Bluebeard’s wife. A comparison with the Grimms’ two versions of “Bluebeard”—both of which offer a little more female agency—also reveal that Wither is trapped in a patriarchal narrative, not allowing its female characters to rise to the kind of strong female abilities outlined in other dystopian novels. Wither reveals that not all uses of fairy tale elements are positive, and that the associations with a specific tale can be too difficult to overcome if not handled correctly.

Ultimately, what I hope this thesis examines is how we see fairy tales in our contemporary society. Fairy tales are enduring and adaptable, and they will continue to be part of our media. I am interested in why at this moment in time fairy tales are appearing in dystopian novels. My examinations of fairy tales within Cinder and Wither take two different perspectives—one in which the fairy tale lends itself to subversion and social progress, and another wherein the fairy tale stymies the novel’s social commentary. That Cinder shares its genre walls with science fiction may contribute to its ability to subvert a famous fairy tale, and because Wither is relegated to a domestic setting, its problem may be that it simply does not do enough to push out of the patriarchal sphere. Either way, both books use fairy tale tropes to augment the narrative and complement the characters’ actions, and it is significant to examine why one is successful and another is not. While both offer the kind of social commentary for which dystopias are an ideal vehicle, they also show the varying uses of fairy tales. And just as in fairy tales, straying from the path can lead to illumination, or it can cause a character’s downfall.
CHAPTER 2

DYSTOPIAS AND FAIRY TALES AND POSTMODERNISM, OH MY!: A GENRE OVERVIEW

The scene is familiar: a lovely young girl dashes down the palace stairs, and in her hurry she kicks off a shoe. She hesitates, fretting, then rushes away without the shoe, leaving behind a hint of herself. But in a recent reimagining of the classic Cinderella tale, the events unfold a bit differently. Set in a fantastic dystopian society where an evil queen from the moon wants to take over earth, Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder* positions the heroine as a strong-willed mechanic, a young woman with principles and agency and a way with a wrench. And there’s another twist: when she rushes away from the ball, this heroine does not leave behind a delicate glass slipper. She leaves behind an entire metal foot. Cinderella is a cyborg.

In the futuristic world that Meyer creates for her twenty-first-century Cinderella, the threat of oppression from lunar overlords has a distinctly dystopian feel. In a post-World War Three society, global commerce is controlled by China, and a worldwide plague threatens to wipe out humanity. Cinderella-the-cyborg is a resident of New Beijing, simply going about her business as a teenage mechanic, until circumstances call her into action and send her down the path that so many protagonists have trod before: as a hero on a quest.

This combination of dystopia-plus-fairy-tale may seem like a strange juxtaposition, but the combination is not only natural, but timely. Fairy tale retellings and reimaginings have risen to pop-culture prominence on the same trajectory as dystopian young adult literature. Even though revised fairy tales have been part of literature and television for years, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a boom in their prevalence in contemporary entertainment, especially in the young adult literature market. Similarly, dystopian literature has existed for decades—Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1922) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) are two of the earliest novels categorized in the genre—but it has exploded on the young adult market in the last seven years. Part of this is due to the
wild success of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, but I would also argue that one factor in the popularity of dystopian fiction is its similarity to fairy tales in structure and themes. These novels examine societal standards, scrutinize morality, and feature a hero or heroine setting out to overcome villainy, just as fairy tales often do. Dystopian young adult novels also traditionally end in hope, echoing the fairy tale custom of happy endings.

Fairy tales, like dystopias, also have clear cultural reference, reflecting concerns germane to today’s issues. For our society in the second decade of the twenty-first century, cultural concerns are colored by 9/11, terrorism, and ever-evolving technology. In this post-9/11 society, in which our sense of American invincibility has been destabilized, we want a sense of hope, and we want to know where our society is going. Thanks to increasing technology and a political system that frequently feels painfully partisan, the disturbing scenarios of futuristic dystopian societies have begun to feel less like science fiction and more like cautionary tales. Young adult dystopias aim to address these concerns, and their publication uptick in the last decade reveals them to be part of a new canon of post-9/11 literature. Dystopias pull on the same narrative structure of fairy tales—problem, quest, conquering—but offer a more nuanced examination of what propels humanity. Instead of a short quest and a moral or edict occurring within the space of a few pages, dystopian young adult novels follow a conflicted protagonist, usually female, through her journey from the discovery of a problem to the heroic act of overcoming the problem for the betterment of society.

Here dystopias depart from traditional fairy tales, as the female protagonist is no damsel in distress. She is usually strong of mind, character, and body, and she offers a new type of modern hero. These strong female heroines—“kick-ass” girls, if you will—are also a relatively recent addition to our cultural lexicon. While the smart, savvy female protagonist is nothing new, the brutal fighter is. Our contemporary culture has embraced the strong female heroine, and young adult authors are churning out Katniss Everdeen 2.0s in their submissions to the dystopian market. Beatrice Prior in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* wills herself to be tough and uses her small stature to her benefit in hand-to-hand combat in her dystopian Chicago; Aria in Veronica Rossi’s *Under the Never Sky* walks for days through the desert in bare feet with nary a peep of complaint; Saba in Moira Young’s *Blood Red Road* shaves her head and becomes a fierce cage fighter. These tough-girl heroines also manage to hang on to their
humanity. They are generally not bloodthirsty killers; they are fighting for a worthwhile, often political, cause.

Despite their ubiquity, these strong female activists are a contradiction to other post-9/11 scholarly analysis. In her book *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi deftly makes an argument that in the years following 9/11, American society embraced the masculine power commonly associated with Hollywood’s version of the Wild West. She cites Peggy Noonan’s op-ed piece, “From the ashes of September 11, arise the manly virtues,” in which Noonan referenced John Wayne by offering a hearty “Welcome back, Duke!”, as if our country had been sorely lacking in so-called manly men since John Wayne’s 1979 death (Faludi 4). Faludi takes umbrage with the strong-man/weak-woman rhetoric that seemed so prevalent in the media retellings of the 9/11 story; she argues that “we respond[ed] to real threats to our nation by distracting ourselves with imagined threats to femininity and family life” and points out that Americans essentially retreated into a mythology of the past to protect itself from the pain of the present (295).

In light of Faludi’s argument, it is curious, then, that the majority of young adult dystopian books feature female heroines. Is this perhaps a reaction to the America that Faludi criticizes, bringing women back into the spotlight as strong, capable saviors who do not need heroic members of the Fire Department of New York to carry them out of buildings? I am inclined to assert that it is. Strong female protagonists have become more popular in years following after Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, which finished its publication run in 2008 and featured a passive, traditional female who, due to her clumsiness, was constantly in need of rescuing by one of her inhumanly strong suitors. The dystopian protagonist, on the contrary, rescues herself, often from situations that are the result of governmental machinations. When the character of June in Marie Lu’s *Legend*—already a well-trained and highly skilled soldier for her government—discovers hidden agendas and devastating corruption within said government, she essentially fights her way out using weapons and an alliance with another strong female warrior. Similarly, Saba in *Blood Red Road* is forced into cage-fighting for others’ entertainment in a gladiator-like arena, and by first defeating and then allying with another female cage fighter, Saba innovates her escape. The fighting and escaping scenes in novels like these point to the resilience and fierce determination of these female protagonists, who serve as role models of admirable, active qualities. These role
models also encourage young women to fight against the oppressive powers that may bind them. In this way, the rise of the “kick-ass” female protagonist is in fact something to empower young girls, a way to emphasize being independent and fearless by way of pop culture.

The fact that these heroines almost always ultimately achieve a happy ending reinforces the positivity of their behavior. After a journey (sometimes lasting two or three books, as these YA novels are frequently part of a trilogy), the heroine restores her world to a more reasonable, less totalitarian order while also finding the kind of everlasting love that teenage readers fantasize about. The trend for YA novels to be part of a trilogy does often result in first novels that end messily, subverting the standard happy-ending fairy tale trope, but since these novels are part of a trilogy, they inherently promise a satisfactory ending if you can just make it through book three.

In this way, young adult dystopian novels play into our expectations for a happy ending, satisfying both optimistic young readers and fussy parents. The happy ending trope also translates effortlessly to the big screen. These YA novels fit nicely into a postmodern consumerist culture, as their trilogies are ripe for Hollywood branding. The popularity of the film franchise of *The Hunger Games* has spawned additional dystopian film franchises—Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* has recently been cast with well-known Hollywood stars, and Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* trilogy has been optioned for a television series. Like Walt Disney’s fairy tale franchises, dystopias are making their mark well beyond the page. And while our market is too saturated today for dystopian films and television series to reach the height of cultural consciousness that Disney has, they are still an essential and growing part of pop culture.

Again, we see how the fusion of fairy tales and dystopias makes sense, as both simultaneously reflect and determine pop culture. Ruth Bottigheimer points out that even though fairy tales sprang from oral storytelling, the way they are perpetuated currently is in line with our consumerist society. When it comes to the sharing of tales today, Bottigheimer says, “we see not a process of oral transmission, but a pattern of dissemination that follows publishing routes and book sales” (217). In other words, fairy tales not only follow the trends, but also become part of them. Since fairy tales are, as Jack Zipes calls them, culturally “mimetic,” they are logical vehicles for representing whatever the current zeitgeist is
(Irresistible 22). With a technologically advanced society still entangled with the War on Terror and a younger generation who is growing up with constant stimulation, fairy tales have to adapt to reflect our science fiction reality. By examining the unique qualities of dystopian novels in conjunction with fairy tales and postmodernism, we can how the two genres work together to offer a wholly new commentary on society.

**Our Future Dystopia**

As fairy tales take place “once upon a time,” often in “a land far, far away,” so too do dystopias unfold in an unfamiliar setting. Instead of being “once upon a time,” though, dystopias are essentially “once upon a future,” and the future is bleak. In many of the dystopian novels that have become so popular in the last decade, America is represented as a desolate post-apocalyptic landscape, a nation symbolizing not greatness but failure. The protagonists of these books scurry through the skeletons of Chicago or Los Angeles or Manhattan, meta-musing that the cities must have been something spectacular once. The utter destruction of American cities is a curious textual choice for authors writing in the years following 2001. In an America where terrorist attacks are a thing of possibility and where our largest city has actually been blanketed in ash, why does our pop culture want to repeatedly reimagine a dystopian society set in a destroyed city?

To propose an answer to this question, I must first offer a brief survey of the history of the dystopian genre. In his book *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*, M. Keith Booker elucidates the connection between the Cold War and the dystopian novels that rose to prominence in the years following the United States’ initial conflict with the Soviet Union. Booker first correlates Stalinist Russia with a dystopian society: “By the time of [the 1949 publication of] Orwell's *1984* it was becoming increasingly clear that the utopian dreams that had formed such an important part of the rhetoric of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath had already been devoured by the dystopian nightmare of the Stalinist terror” (91). Booker then associates America with this idea of a dystopian society, segueing from Russia to McCarthyist America and pointing out that the very real threat of nuclear war coupled with the communist witch hunt pushed America into a cultural crisis. This crisis, according to Booker, was “so strong that even ostensibly utopian works of the period take on decidedly
dystopian intonations” (91, emphasis original). Thus, post-war America was poised to point at dystopian novels as representations of what was wrong with society at the time.

Like mid-century America, we can see our own cultural concerns reflected in the young adult dystopias that have flooded the marketplace. Our modern-day enemies are no longer the cold, calculating, communist Russian villains imagined in the collective American consciousness of 1950—rather they are reckless bombers intent on annihilating as many lives as possible. Even the names of the central conflict of these separate time periods—“The Cold War” versus “The War on Terror”—reflect the difference in cultural perception. But what stays the same is that our culture has a seemingly collective reaction to trauma. And as Faludi points out, the way we responded as a nation after 9/11—embracing the so-called return of the so-called manly man—echoes the values and mores of the Cold War-fraught 1950s.

However, the stories that have come out of these war-infused time periods are most different. Instead of tales featuring a totalitarian environment wherein a government ideology has insidiously crept in and changed a society’s infrastructure, our new fictional world has been utterly obliterated and whatever society there is has started anew, at some sort of year zero. The characters not only muse about the history behind city skeletons, but they also refer to “before” and “after” when narrating the world as they know it. We as readers do not typically get too much information about “before” from our narrator (as it supposed to be our “now,” so presumably we are familiar with it already and will supply our own visions), but “after” clearly signifies the demarcation between “normal” and “post-crisis.” This reflects our contemporary American fear that our society will be leveled by terrorism, and it also reflects how our perception of time shifted from “normal” to “pre” and “post-9/11.”

As I mentioned previously, dystopian novels certainly existed before 9/11, but their number skyrocketed in the decade following the attacks, particularly in the young adult market. On her personal blog, scholar Amy Sturgis has compiled hundreds of young adult dystopian books from the last 50 years, and her list shows this exponential growth. The 1960s saw seven young adult dystopias; the 1970s, 44; the 1980s, 48; and the 1990s, 44 again (Sturgis). The year 2000 saw only six young adult dystopias, but after 2001, the numbers rapidly climbed. From 2001 until today, the number is 226, with 115 of those in the last three years alone. Additionally, Sturgis lists a book series as one item, and with
approximately 68 of those items being series with two, three, or four books each, the number
is drastically multiplied.

It is not surprising that this publishing explosion coincides with an unprecedented rise
in technology. While the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of portable music players, televisions,
and phones and the advent of dial-up internet, the aughts have exploded with handheld
devices and omnipresent internet connections. Consider M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*, published in
2002: it envisions a society where the internet is literally implanted (i.e. “fed”) in people’s
brains, so that the characters have constant access to noise, television, music, instant
messaging, and e-commerce. The characters are bombarded with advertisements every
moment of their waking lives, and the one person who tries to fight the feed has a wiring
malfunction and does not survive. Anderson’s novel was eerily prescient; to read it more than
a decade after its publication calls to mind the internet’s omniscient ability to track
consumers’ preferences and the ubiquity of smart phones, both developments of more recent
years. Our society may not have the “Feed” implanted in our cerebral cortexes, but we have
constant stimulation in our pockets and at our fingertips.

*Feed* is also eerie in that it portrays how insidiously technology can change society.
In the novel, no drastic war destroyed the normal way of life; rather, technology kept
advancing until spending a weekend in the country became synonymous with going out to a
meat-processing farm, where beef is first grown in a lab and then mass produced for the
public in wheat-like rows of consumable product. The world used up its natural resources
(and there is no actual countryside as we know it) and the atmosphere is toxic, but
technology has allowed for everyone to build domes for their neighborhoods and to buy
hover cars to easily navigate the different levels of subterranean neighborhoods. While our
current society has, of course, not quite reached this point, a viewing of the film *Food, Inc.*
or a deep breath of Los Angeles’s smog-choked air reminds us that what is most unsettling
about Anderson’s novel is how imaginable it is.

Unlike *Feed*, though, most dystopian novels depict a society gone very wrong, where
some inciting incident—like biological warfare, wayward scientists, or a well-meaning
government gone off the deep end—has paved the way for a closely monitored community
with strict rules and stricter boundaries. While not as unsettlingly familiar as *Feed*, neither do
these dystopian stories feel so far-fetched. In our contemporary society where increasing
surveillance is accepted and, in fact, invited (again I think of the internet algorithms that track our spending habits), a fictional world with an oppressive Big Brother feels almost realistic. But I still find it curious that post-9/11 young adults buy these dystopian books in droves—enough to have propelled a several-year trend in young adult literature. What does this fixation on destruction and oppression mean for our society's next generation?

One possible answer appears in Kristine Miller’s article “Ghosts, Gremlins, and ‘the War on Terror’ in Children's Blitz Fiction,” where the author proposes that war-tinged literature “helps readers to think constructively about a world being destroyed...the protagonists...model the process of identifying and articulating the place of individual citizens within the social and political context of a world at war” (273). Miller’s article focuses on WWII London, but this statement also applies to how the United States has operated for the last decade. We are a country at war, and for teenagers who were either in diapers or preschool at the time of the World Trade Center attacks, there is no “before” and “after.” There is simply “during,” and they must navigate their position as young adults coming of age during volatile times. The teen experience, already fraught with change and unfamiliarity, situated in a liminal space of uncertainty, is complicated by war and technology, and dystopian novels can, like the blitz fiction Miller mentions, help teens envision their own place in society. When asked about the enduring popularity of dystopian fiction for young adults, literary agent Rosemary Stimola explains, “This is a population of young people who don’t remember a time when the country was not at war. It makes perfect sense that their literature would allow them a way to exercise their thoughts about the nature of good and evil, and that it might reflect violence and great loss” (qtd. in Corbett).

Author Joni Richards Bodart has a similar perspective in her book They Suck, They Bite, They Eat, They Kill. Though her analysis is aimed at the popularity of supernatural literature for young adults, it can easily be extended to apply to dystopian literature. Examining the bestselling phenomenon of supernatural YA during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Bodart explains that “monsters can teach us about our responses to menace or danger from a perspective that is safe—within a story. We identify with the victims in the story, telling them what to do or not do, and asking ourselves what we would do in their place” (xxiii). This can also be applied to dystopian literature, which asks the “what if?” questions and forces its readers to envision what they would do in that scenario.
Bodart also points out that young adults consider this time period an “age of fear,” especially considering that they have more access to news, pop culture, and current events than previous generations (xxiii). As Bodart notes, “We may think that we are protecting our children, but we are not. Technology gives them access to people and information all over the world in just seconds, and they both talk and read. Teens know what is going on in far more details than previous generations did. They don’t just know that the world is a scary place, they also know why” (xxiii). Considering that the status quo for contemporary teenagers is awareness of fear, it is understandable that they would reach for disaster and monster novels to help them face those fears from a safe distance.

It is in this sense of dystopias being a safe distance from actual disaster that we see another connection to fairy tales. Fairy tales provide a sense of comfort and familiarity in a foreign setting; they promise hope and the vanquishing of evil. Furthermore, fairy tales, like dystopias, depict a frightening conflict that leads to a satisfying ending. YA dystopias and fairy tales intersect at the place where all is set to rights at the end. Fairy tale elements in dystopian literature also increase the distance for a reader from the devastating future depicted on the pages. Fairy tales do not care about space or national identity or war or political discourse; they have a unique space all to themselves, one in which the protagonist will safely return home having learned a valuable lesson. Additionally, fairy tales draw on a sort of collective consciousness of expectations. Thanks to the Brothers Grimm and Walt Disney, fairy tales are deeply ingrained in our culture. How they came to be as we know them, though, is more complex than “Walt Disney’s animators drew Snow White in a blue and yellow dress.”

In his book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes traces the evolution of fairy tales and explains how they act as cultural documents, changing to fit the needs of the times. He links fairy tales to Arthur W. Frank’s theory of socio-narratology, which emphasizes not the meaning of stories, but rather the meaning of *telling* stories. According to Zipes, “Frank notes that stories embody capacities we need to consider in order to articulate and discuss problematic issues in our lives” (3). In order to explain how and why fairy tales fit so well with this idea of socio-narratology, Zipes traces fairy tales’ roots in oral storytelling. He emphasizes the importance of storytelling in not only understanding societal issues, but in creating ways to deal with issues. Zipes writes that “telling effective, relevant stories became
a vital quality for anyone who wanted power to determine and influence social practices” (6). Thus the told tale could be standard, reinforcing cultural norms, or subversive, proffering societal alternatives. Citing Walter Burkert, author of *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Zipes writes that “the tale often is the first and fundamental verbalization of complex reality, the primary way to speak about many-sided problems” (8). Thus, since the age of Greek mythology (and probably before), the tale was born from and exists to fulfill a need to understand our culture, our society, our world. This links back to Miller’s assertion in her article that literature helps its readers—especially young readers—understand the world. If our world is unstable, shaky with war and other societal ills, storytelling can give us a firmer understanding of our place in that world. But what do we do when the world that’s described is a fantasy world, as in contemporary young adult dystopias? Why have we pushed into a realm of imagined ruined societies? I think we may be able to find an answer by examining the evolution of fairy tales, from their oral origins to their more recent postmodern appropriations, and how they show up in contemporary dystopias.

**POSTMODERN FAIRY TALES**

Dystopian YA novels fall into the Venn diagram comprised of sci-fi, fantasy, and speculative fiction. While “most dystopian and utopian works are considered today to constitute a subgenre of science fiction” (Little 14), young adult dystopias employ very pointed fantasy and fairy tale elements. In the realm of speculative fiction, dystopias tell a story of “what if?” What if uber-conservatives took over the government by force and categorized women by Madonna or Whore in their vocation, a la Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*? What if an oppressive government posited that they were making the world a better place by mandating the words we can use, as in Orwell’s *1984*? The “what if” questions posed in dystopias for teens, while still eerie and prescient in their musings, are placed against a backdrop of teens-finding-love, and particularly against a backdrop of teens-saving-the-world. YA dystopias tend not to be quite so bleak as other speculative fiction, because their protagonists are young and not yet jaded.

Indeed, YA dystopias channel the more enchanting elements of fantasy, and then they combine those fantastic elements with familiar fairy tale tropes. As Maria Nikolajeva points
out, “Fantasy is an eclectic genre, since it borrows traits not just from fairy tales, but from myth, romance, the novel of chivalry, the picaresque, the gothic novel, mysteries, science fiction, and other genres, blending seemingly incompatible elements within one and the same narrative” (139). This aspect of creating a pastiche also echoes what fairy tales have done as part of the narrative landscape for centuries.

Maria Tatar also expresses this same sentiment in her book *Secrets Beyond the Door, the Story of Bluebeard and His Wives*: stories “are constantly altered, adapted, transformed, and tailored to fit new cultural contexts. They remain alive precisely because they are never exactly the same, always doing new cultural work, mapping out different developmental paths, assimilating new anxieties and desires” (11). It makes sense, then, that fairy tale elements are showing up overtly in contemporary media. Fairy tales have shaped our cultural history and cultural norms, and they are part of our collective unconscious. And in this post-9/11 society, with its ever-growing surveillance and technology, fairy tale tropes can serve as a stabilizing influence. Fairy tales are a constant, a reminder of childhood comfort and imaginative possibility. By merging fairy tale standards with post-apocalyptic, futuristic nightmare scenarios, young adult authors create a new cultural narrative that serves as cautionary tale, coming-of-age-story, and hope for the future.

Indeed, Zipes refers directly to this idea of providing hope: “Fairy tales originated and derived from wish fulfillment coupled with a desire for other moral worlds…Whatever the outcome of a fairy tale, there was some sort of hope for miraculous change” (*Irresistible* 155). That “change” is reflected in the fairy tale trope of transformation, in which a character pushes at proscribed boundaries and finds another version of herself or of her world. This hope for change is also evidence of what Zipes calls fairy tales’ utopian purpose in his book *Fairy Tales as Myth*: “the fairy tale has always projected the wish and possibility for human autonomy…and proposed means to alter the world” (142). In other words, fairy tales represent humanity’s desire for an ideal world. In a fairy tale, the straightforward narrative almost always calls for the villain to be punished (sometimes most brutally, as in the Grimm Brothers’ version of Snow White, where the wicked stepmother “danced in red hot iron shoes until she dropped to the ground” [Grimm, “Snow White” 178]) and almost always results in a happy ending. However, as Zipes also points out, that happy ending “reinforce[s] a patriarchal…social code,” which is problematic (*Myth* 141). Moreover, contemporary tales
“renew the fairy tale tradition by…exposing problems that are directly related to our present troubled times and cannot be easily resolved” (Zipes, *Myth* 155). In this sense, dystopias are almost an answer to what is wrong with fairy tales. If Zipes points out the utopian impulse, dystopias show how that utopian standard can easily warp to an unsavory cautionary tale. On the contrary still, young adult dystopias also embrace that utopian ideal, as they do offer a happy ending and the villains usually do get their comeuppance.

Even though the utopian story is discrete from a dystopian one, the stories are like light and dark: if one exists, so must the other. Utopian literature sprang from Thomas More’s titular and seminal work of 1516, which described a place so wonderful it could not possibly exist: the fictional isle of Utopia, wherein there is “no class of idlers, drones who receive an income from the labor of others without performing any social service themselves [and where] women receive the same education and the same rights as men” (Scott xvi). Furthermore, in More’s Utopia “war is presented as the greatest of crimes, essentially a crime committed by rulers against their unoffending subjects, a social sin rising from human greed and pride” (Scott xvi). More’s book is essentially the antithesis not only to the ills of society, but also to the contemporary dystopian novel itself. War is central to the dystopian novel – either it has already occurred and changed the face of the planet either figuratively or literally, or it is occurring as a backdrop to the protagonist’s journey. Some aspect of war must exist for the protagonist to fight against, calling to mind the mythic hero of old. The hero must fight, and the hero must prevail.

The hero is another example of the overlap between fairy tales and dystopias. The mythic hero archetype is one that transitioned into fairy tales during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and one that has morphed into the contemporary heroines I am examining today. Folklorist Vladimir Propp points out the stability of the archetype in fairy tales: “We observe that the actors in the fairy tale perform essentially the same actions as the tale progresses, no matter how different from one another in shape, size, sex, and occupation” (74). Just as characters in a fairy tale have certain roles to fulfill—the helper, the trickster, the hero, the villain—so too do characters in young adult dystopias. There are typically the government official with veiled motivations (the trickster), the scrappy friend (the helper), the brooding love interest (whose ancestry lies with the prince, but whose existence in the dystopia is more because it is a young adult book for hormone-riddled teenage girls who
grew up with Edward Cullen of *Twilight* fame), and the purely evil government official whose thirst for power obscures all sense of humanity (the villain). Certainly we can find echoes of fairy tale archetypes in nearly any work of fiction, but their formulaic and reliable appearances in young adult dystopian novels shows how related the two are.

We can see additional overlap in Propp’s breakdown of the folkloric structure, which reliably follows one of these prototypes to incite the action of the story:

1. The king sends Ivan after the princess; Ivan departs.
2. The king sends Ivan after some marvel; Ivan departs.
3. The sister sends her brother for medicine; he departs.
4. The stepmother sends her stepdaughter for fire; she departs.
5. The smith sends his apprentice for a cow; he departs. (74)

Propp’s list of narrative movement is easily transcribed to reflect my own list of common scenarios in young adult dystopias:

1. The teenager takes a test that reveals a dangerous secret about her abilities; she departs.
2. The teenager finds a flaw in the strict government regimen; she departs.
3. The teenager finds out she has some heretofore unknown special gift; she departs.
4. The teenager finds an escape route from her dystopian captivity; she departs.
5. The teenager must fulfill some role as a government tool; she departs.

Both patterns show the start of a journey. But while an outside actor—a king, a sibling, a stepmother, or an employer—sends the fairy tale protagonist on his journey, usually a *force of* or a *discovery about* the society sends the dystopian heroine on her journey. Instead of being instructed by someone with more power, the heroine rebels against that power. This pattern sets up the protagonist in the dystopian narrative to be a proactive character who is destined to be an agent of change. Dystopian stories offer a modern take on the fairy tale, offering the protagonist an adventure instigated not by an errand, but by a need for more knowledge.

A character who is an inciting force may be the purview of the dystopian adventure story and may differ from the more passive protagonist in fairy tales, but the purpose—to serve as a lesson for readers—is very similar. As Michael Cart notes, dystopian young adult novels employ “implicit models for a code of conduct…from which young readers can select strategies for how to live a moral life” (qtd. in Hintz 255). Through fiction, young readers are exposed to what is bad in the world—oppression and mindless conformity being the two
chief issues in dystopias—and by aligning with the protagonist who is fighting the oppression, readers can get a sense of their own inner strength. Young readers have a similar experience when encountering fairy tales, as Hintz explains: “Fairy tales prepare young people for difficult tasks and make them aware that they have ample strength for such tests” (256). Using these ideas from Hintz, we can see how the fairy tale protagonist’s journey into the forest, where she must fight the proverbial Big Bad Wolf, parallels the dystopian heroine’s journey to fight the Big Bad Government. Each pilgrimage requires the reader to experience, along with the heroine, the moments of doubt, confusion, fear, and ultimately realization that are inherent in a coming-of-age story.

The links are not always so clear, however. Nikolajeva comments on one typically limpid difference between protagonists in fairy tales versus fantasy: namely, that fantasy protagonists do not get the same kind of easy, happy ending. Nikolajeva writes, “The essential difference between the fairy-tale hero and the fantasy protagonist is that the latter often lacks heroic features, can be scared and even reluctant to perform the task, and can sometimes fail. Fantasy rarely ends in marriage and enthronement; in contemporary philosophical and ethical fantasy it is usually a matter of spiritual maturation” (140). We can see the characters of Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter in the kind of fantasy arcs Nikolajeva mentions, and her point about reluctance certainly would resonate with most readers of YA dystopias. Despite their tough-girl exteriors, the female protagonists of dystopias usually start out bewildered by their situation—Katniss joins the Hunger Games as a fluke, Cinder’s Cinderella rails against being a savior for her society, and Wither’s Rhine spends a great deal of the novel moping about and fearing death. But once the characters do rally, they attack their tasks with the kind of fearlessness appropriate for a modern-day heroine. Additionally, YA dystopias usually do feature the kind of coupling-off happy ending. They may not end with marriage, but there is a resolution to whatever love story arced through the trilogy. Thus, even though dystopias can be considered fantasy, they are neatly aligned with fairy tales, and they rise to the expectations that fairy tale tropes set for readers. The happy ending for the heroine and the just desserts for the villain typically await at the end of the journey, however many books that may take.
**Dystopian Hyperrealities**

If fairy tale tropes permeate contemporary dystopias and lend a sense of familiarity to futuristic fantasy societies, they also come with another set of preconceived notions: that of Disney. I previously asked why we keep producing and consuming novels that feature a destroyed America, and I posited that it reflects how we have handled our cultural unease following 9/11. But I think there is another element that keeps readers—whether children or adults—returning to these dystopian tales: the postmodern concept of hyperreality.

This is where Disney comes in. In his book analyzing dystopias and postmodernism, Booker begins his introduction with an evaluation of Disneyworld as a modern-day utopia. He describes it as “a marvel of technology and efficiency that ostensibly serves as a major modern embodiment of the kinds of utopian dreams that have inspired visionary thinkers throughout the history of Western civilization” and as having “a multifaceted significance that illustrates the complexity of the utopian project as a whole” (*Dystopian 1*). Disneyworld and its ilk, according to Booker, represents alluring utopian fantasy, a world of escapism built on children’s stories. But beneath the cheerful exterior lurks “a sinister hint of dystopia in the ease with which… docile crowds mill antlike about the park under the watchful eyes of uniformed overseers” (2). Beyond being the incarnation of the two sides of a Utopia/Dystopia coin, Disneyworld, Disneyland, and the Disney Corporation in general are the embodiment of hyperreality. Disneyworld is a movie set for plebeians, the pastel-painted home of a fairy tale castle where visitors can have tea with an endlessly pleasant Cinderella. It is a place where grown women can indulge their princess fantasies from childhood, basking in the comfort of remembered innocence. As such, Disney is also a place for ignorance. Citing Jean Beaudrillard, Booker writes that Disney “represent[s] a negative escapism that is specifically designed to divert attention from social problems in the ‘real’ world” (2).

But in our post-9/11 society, we need escapism. Admittedly, while it may be odd that childless adults flock to Disneyworld and grown women plan Disney-princess-themed weddings, it is also understandable, as Disney is a large part of our contemporary cultural consciousness. Similarly, I posit that dystopian young adult novels have risen to cultural prominence because they offer another form of escapism, one that links directly with the idea
of coping in a post-9/11 society. They offer a shattered futuristic America that is put to rights by a heroine, and they employ the fairy tale trope of hope and happy endings.

Roberta Seelinger Trites claims that the dystopian genre “has emerged as an aspect of postmodernism” (qtd. in Hintz 255), and Nikolajeva also asserts that “fantasy seems to reflect the postmodern human being’s split and ambivalent picture of the universe” (140). By its very nature, postmodernism is nearly impossible to define, as it encompasses an “anything goes” sensibility. As an art and literature movement, postmodernism offers a pastiche of historical cultural moments, drawn together into a new, unique creation. This is, essentially, where we are as a society in our early twenty-first-century cultural moment. If the trauma of 9/11 shook us to our very national core more than a decade ago, we are only recently learning to piece our sense of cultural identity back together again, into a pastiche of technology, war, and hope. Fantasy and fairy tales—the combo—gives us a new way to portray our national identity and concerns. By reading about socially constructed anti-utopian societies, consumers are in effect taking part in their own version of “hyperreality,” wherein what is real may be indistinguishable from what is fiction. By engaging in stories about worst-case scenarios, readers are able to at once live in a safe world and plan for the ruined one.

In today's post 9/11 society, the postmodern concept of hyperreality is more applicable than ever, especially to a younger generation that is growing up with the belief that the Internet and cell phones are as essential to human life as oxygen and water. Hyperreality's definition—that we are so consumed with the image that we cannot discern what is real—is linked both to young adults and to the ever-popular dystopian genre. In their article “A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11,” Efraim Sicher and Natalia Skradol analyze the concept of hyperreality in connection with dystopian fiction. They argue that to read dystopian fiction after 9/11 means to experience a reverse of the real and the imagined. Fiction has become lived experience, they claim. Any dystopian disaster we read about now will hold echoes of our own modern disaster, that of 9/11. What is “real” reality, now that we have experienced “real” disaster? Can hyperreality still exist when reality has given us concrete images of the kind of disaster we only see in Hollywood or envision on the pages of a book?

If we look at hyperreality as reality as a social construct, I would argue that nowhere is a “fake reality” more apparent than in dystopian fiction. All dystopias recycle the same
story, creating an alternative image of disaster, a repressive society, and a protagonist who yearns to escape that society. And despite its connotation as a way to obscure reality, I think that the hyperreal aspects of dystopian novels actually reveal the complex cycle of identification and separation in a post-9/11 society. By emphasizing what is not real, contemporary dystopias may shed light on what actually is. For example, we may not live in a society where we send our teenagers to fight to the death for our entertainment in the manner of *The Hunger Games*, but the indulgent excesses of the Capital in the novel evoke comparisons to both Hollywood and Washington. As protests have shown us, our celebrity and political cultures are at great odds with the ninety-nine percent. And yet, many of us read the news on our Twitter feeds, express outrage via text, and move on to the next interesting piece of information. We are constantly at odds with ourselves and with our culture, fixated on the image on the screen.

While modern-day hyperrealism brings to mind our busy culture of consuming, the minimalistic survival trope of post-apocalyptic novels subverts this idea. Instead of gluttonous intake, many dystopian novels give us stories of ascetic survival. As I mentioned in the previous section, they evoke the question of “what if?” What if we genetically engineered humanoids who turned against us? What if any sort of catastrophe ended life as we know it and ushered in an era of merely struggling to live for one more day? What if our great cities no longer hold the manmade glories of plentitude? By returning to a simpler time, before technology allowed them constant (dis)connection, characters—and by extension, readers—are able to reconnect with their essential humanity. In the midst of the fight for survival comes a profound appreciation for what that survival actually means.

Pop culture media offers a harsh backdrop for this reconnection with humanity. We see iconic landmarks of American identity wantonly obliterated by CGI in disaster films. The Statue of Liberty becomes submerged in water and then encrusted with ice in *The Day After Tomorrow*. The Empire State Building and the White House are beamed to particles in *Independence Day*. And a tsunami takes out Manhattan in *Deep Impact*. Similarly, the worlds that are created in dystopian novels feature cities fallen from their former grandeur. In *Divergent*, Chicago is a shell of its former self, and Lake Michigan is dried to a mere trickle. In Marie Lu's *Legend*, half of Los Angeles is underwater. In Dan Wells' *Partials*, Manhattan itself is re-envisioned as an abandoned war zone, at once decrepit with rust and decay and
lush with the overgrowth of nature. And yet instead of shying away from these disturbing depictions of our beloved landmarks and thriving cities, we embrace them. We pay to see them.

Sicher and Skradol make sense of this preoccupation by linking 9/11 and the dystopian scenario. They explain that in popular culture, the all too familiar scene of destruction seemed incredible because it was, indeed, all too familiar. The common comparison [of 9/11] with other disasters that delivered a fundamental psychological shock and served as historical or epistemological turning-points, such as the sinking of the Titanic or the attack on Pearl Harbor, underscores the paradoxical unexpectedness and predictability of the event. (157)

Similarly in a dystopian novel, a disaster that leads to an oppressive government is not so much traumatic as it is expected. We have been here before, and we know how to respond. We are vulnerable, but we are strong, just like our contemporary young adult dystopian heroines, just like our real-live teenage girls. We know our humanity and what—good and bad—we are capable of.

In adult literary dystopia, Sicher and Skradol point out, the high stakes of linking fictional disaster with real-life disaster often result in a bleak outlook at the ending: “there is no return to innocence because there was none” (154). Their statement echoes Booker’s examination of our cultural consciousness after World War II and how the dystopian literature being produced then had a dreary perspective. But the proliferation of young adult dystopias belies Sicher and Skradol’s statement. Written for a younger, more optimistic audience, YA dystopias almost always end on a note of hope, calling to mind the fact that fairy tales started that trend of the happy ending, and Disney perfected it. The hyperreality of the hopeful ending reflects modern teens’ not-yet-jaded perception of our own post-9/11 society. If, as Sicher and Skradol say, “futuristic fictions tend to reflect the cultural anxieties of the present,” for contemporary teens, they also reveal the collective cultural hope (169). By presenting a destroyed world that can rise from the ashes, dystopian fiction both reflects and re-envisioned our past.

CONCLUSION

As hyperreality shows us, there is a fine line between fiction and reality, especially in our technologically advanced society. The faster we progress into a science-fiction-like
future, the more unsettled we become. Dystopian literature is a prime vehicle for highlighting that sense of discomfort, extrapolating the disastrous future that might await us. Even though young adult dystopian fiction does not posit a utopian alternative, it does offer hope, especially when viewed in conjunction with fairy tales. Fairy tales have their roots not only in European culture, but also in world literature and the ancient custom of oral storytelling, one of the earliest forms of communication and of making sense of the world. Because of their history, fairy tales call upon something primal, something that hearkens to a time before any sort of technology engendered cultural unease. By noticing how fairy tale tropes appear in dystopian literature, we can stabilize what feels like an unstable culture.

In their structure of quest, trial, and hope, dystopias and fairy tales are kindred spirits. And as fairy tales do, dystopias give readers heroes to champion and uplifting moments of hope in a horrific situation. They connect with the world adolescent readers already know; as Bodart points out, “The 9/11 bombings—when the terrorists came onto our territory, our home soil—changed how Americans see the world. Terrorism, we learned, doesn’t happen only overseas, but also here at home” (17). For the generation of adolescents currently coming of age, terrorism, instability, and unhappy endings are part of their cultural knowledge. But so is hope, and so is a world of fiction that offers strong heroes and heroines and examples of surviving in an uncertain world.
CHAPTER 3

A POSTHUMAN FAIRY TALE: CINDERELLA GETS WIRED IN CINDER

In the previous chapter, I discussed the overlap of fairy tales and dystopias, examining the logical links between the two due to the ways in which they offer hope for change, track a hero’s journey, and reflect society. Marissa Meyer’s Cinderella retelling, *Cinder*, is an example of a fairy tale at work within a dystopian narrative. Because of the science fiction setting, *Cinder* takes standard fairy tale expectations and turns them upside down. Instead of a powerless Cinderella who pines at the hearth, Meyer gives us a cyborg who can access limitless information from her built-in internet connection at a moment’s notice, which instills the heroine with ability and agency from the outset. Her best friend is an android, technology is her fairy godmother, and a hover car is her carriage. Despite its futuristic elements, *Cinder* is not as overtly dystopian as many other YA books in the genre. Instead of a frightful totalitarian government and a heroine at the forefront of a revolution, *Cinder*’s dystopic elements are more subtle, with surveillance, pestilence, and an out-of-Earth threat nudging at the edges of the narrative.

Set at an unspecified future date in a Chinese commonwealth called New Beijing, *Cinder*’s environment is an almost utopian one. The world is at peace. The global political infrastructure is the result of a disastrous third world war, in which all factions of society finally realized they could no longer fight each other and sustain life. They are 126 years into the Third Era, which began when the harmonious world started anew. In New Beijing, Cinder’s home, the emperor is respected and a fair ruler who communes with the leaders of the other countries, which have peacefully maintained their original governing systems. The world leaders convene via an advanced version of Skype to discuss political matters and come to a reasonable, amicable decision. Despite the surveillance (everyone has ID chips implanted under the skin of their wrist) and the plague, called letumosis, the world is tranquil.
Of course, overpopulation has led to an easier transmission of the deadly letumosis, and android automatons follow orders and make it impossible for citizens to resist them, so all is not ideal. But what really creates the dystopic element is the threat from Lunars, “a society that had evolved from an Earthen moon colony centuries ago” (Meyer 43). Living on the moon has changed their biological make-up, and the Lunars have morphed from being human to being creatures who can manipulate bioelectricity. The Lunar residents are subject to a tyrannical queen, who will prove to be our futuristic Cinderella’s greatest enemy. But what is frighteningly dystopian about the Lunar world is that it was created by man, and now it threatens to destroy man.

In this sense, Cinder carries with it the subtextual lesson of “just because you can doesn’t mean you should” that so many science fiction novels proffer. R.C. Neighbors points out that science fiction “uses the future…to comment on the present—on current social, cultural, and political ideologies” (112). Beyond being mere escapist entertainment, science fiction—and dystopias—suggest a future where the status quo has become something different, with negative consequences. Those consequences are, as Farah Mendlesohn argues, “the rippling out of effect, the quantum butterfly that flaps its wings” (13). In the world of Cinder, the earth may have achieved peace, but by colonizing the moon, it has created a new set of problems.

Not only does science fiction envision the consequences of the futuristic changes, it envisions consequences for the characters who engage with those changes. Mendlesohn explains that consequences are “more than individual wish fulfillment: this is not [a] fairy tale in which the invention/magic trick can raise the pauper to prince without some kind of change in the social structure” (13). As we will see in this chapter, the merging of the Cinderella fairy tale with a science fiction universe illustrates this very principle. The Cinderella character may be raised from pauper to princess, but it is not the result of a wish, nor is it free of far-reaching consequences.

Even though fairy tales have a more simplistic structure than science fiction, they are also ripe for literary commentary. Fairy tales not only “reflect established social scripts, [but] also shift with each interpretation/retelling—thus folklore narratives can reflect a challenge to the status quo or they can merely reflect it” (Matrix 21). For many fairy tale retellings, this means subverting gender expectations, but as Jack Zipes explores in his book Fairy Tales
and the Art of Subversion, fairy tales can also “disrupt the normative structure and affirmative discourse of the…bourgeois public sphere” (107). Coupled with science fiction and dystopias, fairy tales are primed to offer what Zipes calls a “liberating role” in the mind of the young reader (170). In other words, sci-fi fairy tales are poised to be truly subversive works of literature. The amalgamation draws on sci-fi’s cautionary tale elements and fairy tales’ simple narrative structure to challenge our expectations of both genres. Additionally, the troubling questions about the nature of humanity raised by a science fiction narrative overshadow the traditional fairy tale happy ending, offering a more complicated resolution that opens up the narrative for further exploration.

In this chapter, I will argue that Cinder is subversive not only because of its science fiction influences, but also because of how Meyer handles the ending and the romance plotline. Meyer subverts the classic Cinderella tale by circumventing the standard girl-marries-prince ending. However, the author still gives her readers a semblance of a happy ending in that the main character finds out she is a princess with a rightful claim to a very significant throne. But the royalty is neither something Cinder wants nor something that is handed to her. She has to fight for it, and at the end of book one (of a planned tetralogy), she is not ready to do so. In addition to the unhappy-happy ending, Meyer also gives us a Cinderella who does not dream of going to the ball and who eschews romance. And most significantly, Meyer’s Cinderella is a cyborg. She is utterly unconventional—and even in her own futuristic society she is still ostracized for being different—but at the same time she is familiar. In the first section of this chapter, I will explore the different versions of Cinderella that have paved the way for a cyborg one, and in the second section I will use the theory of posthumanism to examine how that cyborg Cinderella works as a subversive text. Finally, in the third section I will explain how, by shirking the conventions of the YA romance, Cinder truly succeeds at being subversive.

CINDERELLA THROUGH THE AGES

Because the Cinderella tale is so inherently part of our collective consciousness and our pop culture, it is a story ripe for retellings. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that everyone is familiar with at least a general idea of the Cinderella story. The rags-to-riches concept has appeared repeatedly in film, television, and literature, successful not only
because the consuming public is familiar with the tale already, but also because we love to see the underdog win. To use another fairy tale as a metaphor, we love to see ugly duckling turn into a (rich, royal) swan. Young adult literature is particularly fertile ground for the Cinderella trope; indeed, the heteronormative female teenage audience is positioned to embrace the story of a young girl who is overlooked and put-upon, but ultimately resplendent. As Sidney Eve Matrix points out in her article “Cinderella goes to the Prom: Constructing Rituals of Youth Culture Through Teen Media,” magazines for young girls traffic in the rhetoric of transformations. The high school prom is a latter-day royal ball, and to attend this rite-of-passage is to play at being Cinderella for a night. Numerous anecdotes that Matrix cites feature teenage girls describing their fairy tale fantasy prom. One claims that “at prom, you get to feel like royalty” (11), while another claims that her dress “made [her] feel like a princess” (14), and still another thanks David’s Bridal, where she bought her prom dress, for making her “fairy tale dream [come] true” (30). When it comes to prom, the Cinderella fairy tale is still associated with a grand ball, a gorgeous dress, and a happy ending.

However, because we are now situated in a post-feminist-revolution society, many authors and storymakers have tried to subvert the Cinderella story, most frequently by having the heroine rescue herself instead of waiting for the prince to come fit her foot to the delicate slipper. Ever After, a 1998 film starting Drew Barrymore, offers an ostensible history lesson, one in which the Cinderella character was a feisty French peasant named Danielle who served as the inspiration story the Grimm brothers collected. At the end of Ever After, after being sold into slavery by her cruel stepmother, Danielle presses a sword against the throat of her captor and tells him she is leaving. As she staggers out of the castle in which she was held, she comes across her prince, who bewilderedly tells her he was on his way to rescue her. We, as viewers, are meant to chuckle at Prince Henry’s bumbling and unnecessary heroics, secure in our knowledge that Danielle was no damsel in distress. Zipes points out that heroines like Danielle “manage to survive one disaster after another despite the fact that their societies offer little support as they seek to overcome prejudices, not just against women but against anyone who deviates from the social norm” (Relentless 123). A movie like Ever After makes its heroine scrappy and resourceful, someone who will not back down against prejudice and consequently bucks the status quo.
The subversive Cinderella type exists not only in fiction but also in reality, as Matrix discovers. Matrix investigates the convention of prom and its connection to fairy tales, and she concludes that more young women want to be different these days, and retailers are working to keep up with the teenage zeitgeist. Generally considered a teenage rite of passage in which young women get to don a gossamer gown and play princess for a night, the prom exists at nearly every school in North America. Magazines print entire prom issues with survival guides and dress advertisements. But as young women have been exposed to more Danielles and fewer Sleeping Beauties, the marketing of prom has tried to change with the times. According to Matrix’s research, magazines for young women now encourage unconventionality, straying from “traditional versions of femininity and womanliness” (28) by showing models posing in prom dresses while hanging out in a diner instead of a proverbial enchanted garden and suggesting alternatives to the prom gown such as “grandad’s…suit” with “crazy socks” (29). We have moved beyond the assumption that all young girls are harboring inner Disney princesses, but not so far that we do not assume all young girls have the desire to go to the proverbial ball.

The Cinderella character, Cinder, in Meyer’s novel embodies this modern-day approach to femininity. Gone is the passive archetype who waits for her prince and takes abuse with endless good grace. In her place is a savvy, sharp, and sarcastic heroine who works in the traditionally unfeminine position of mechanic. This Cinderella will not be daydreaming by the fireplace with her animal friends; she has too many androids to fix at her busy mechanic’s booth at the marketplace. She will not be picking the perfect dress to wear to the ball, because it happens to be occurring on the same night she has plans to run away, assume a new identity, and start a new life away from the oppressive rule of her stepmother.

The fact that Cinder characterizes the kind of unconventional girl contemporary magazines are courting and the fact that this Cinderella is situated in a futuristic dystopian society give credence to the shifting qualities of the fairy tale and to the fairy tale’s ability to reflect zeitgeist. As Maria Tatar writes, “fairy tales can be told and retold so that they challenge and resist, rather than simply reproduce, the constructs of a culture” (Off 236). Because a fairy tale comes with a certain expectation of plot attached to it, it has more power when that plot is challenged. If we expect Cinderella to marry the prince in a happy ending, we must pause and consider the reason why when she does not. Additionally, not only does a
fairy tale have the ability to lend itself to subversion, it also has to do so. As Justin Platt asserts, “Cinderella must change to stay relevant, interesting, and representative of our culture” (33). Cinder offers a version that critiques our society as well as our inclination to shun those who are different from us. (After all, for all the rhetoric of wearing grandpa’s suit to prom, the majority of young women are still looking for their poufy, shimmery ballgown.)

Part of the reluctance of young women to part from the fairy tale prom or wedding comes from their association with Walt Disney’s version of Cinderella. It has been a good twenty years—at least—since I last watched this film, but I can still vividly recall the storyline, the images, the songs, and the union of Cinderella and the prince at the end. Disney’s retelling of Perrault’s version of Cinderella is ingrained in our society, and it has spawned countless remakes and appropriations. It is, generally, what people think of when they hear “Cinderella.” The average person will envision Walt Disney’s pretty, gentle heroine and her anthropomorphic mouse friends. They will picture that same Cinderella in her pale blue ballgown, blonde up-do, and black headband, perhaps in human form at Disneyworld. When I taught fairy tales in my Introduction to Literature class, my students were surprised to learn that the Disney version of Cinderella is not the original one, that there are several other Cinderella stories throughout folkloric history with their own details, many of which differ from Disney’s version. For the contemporary American teenager, Disney’s Cinderella is canon.

For its framework, Disney’s version uses Charles Perrault’s tale, eschewing the grisly parts of the Grimm brothers’ more disturbing one. Playing a significant role in the French salon era of fairy tales in the late seventeenth century, Perrault wrote “Cinderella” as one of many tales meant to proffer standards for morality. Zipes writes that Perrault’s stories “address[ed] social and political issues as well as the manners and mores of the upper classes” and that he wrote with “an adult audience in mind” (When 40). Zipes also affirms that Perrault would have written with a demure, obedient heroine in mind. The oral tales from which Perrault would have drawn his Cinderella story “emanated from a matriarchal tradition that depicted the struggles of a young woman…to regain her stature and rights within society,” but Perrault’s tale takes an active heroine and “change[s] her to demonstrate how submissive and industrious she is” (Subversion 46). Cinderella’s fairy godmother, an invention of Perrault’s, reminds her to “be but a good girl, and I will contrive
that thou shalt go [to the ball]” (Perrault, “Cinderella”). Perrault’s Cinderella is indeed a good girl, so good and kind, in fact, that at the end of the story she hugs her cruel stepsisters, “forgave them with all her heart…gave her two sisters lodgings in the palace, and…matched them with two great lords of the Court” (Perrault). In her online annotations, Heidi Anne Heiner, librarian and curator of the website SurLaLune Fairy Tales, explains that Perrault “desire[d] to emphasize Cinderella's virtuous goodness…[m]ost versions of the story have Cinderella ambivalent of what happens to the sisters; she is busy marrying the prince instead” (“Annotations”). Perrault’s Cinderella is so kind and good that her focus is on the family who wronged her, not on the prince who is presumptive salvation.

In the Grimm brothers’ version, Cinderella is still demure, obedient, and kind, but the fates are less so. The primary differences between the Grimms’ and Perrault’s versions lie in how the magical elements get Cinderella to the ball and how the stepsisters are treated at the end of the story. Instead of a fairy godmother, the Grimms’ tale features a tree where Cinderella’s deceased mother is buried. Cinderella communes with her mother’s spirit there, and she also befriends birds in the tree, talking to them and getting help from them. Her connection to animals is directly related to the fate the stepsisters suffer; the birds swoop down from the sky and peck out the sisters’ eyes, rendering them forever blind as punishment for their misdeeds.

While Walt Disney’s version of Cinderella is mainly influenced by Perrault’s, it also draws on Cinderella’s connection to nature and animals in the manner of the Grimms’ tale. As far as the character of Cinderella herself, Disney opened the door to extended versions of originally terse fairy tales. Naomi Wood notes how Disney expanded these brief stories:

In his fairy-tale movies, not only was the heroine of each tale ‘fleshed out’ with more dialogue and action than the tales of Grimm and Perrault deemed necessary, and the heroes made much more a part of the action of the story, but the secondary characters were amplified as well. (30)

Walt Disney and his team of storytellers and animators took a four-page tale and turned it into a 90-minute feature film, replete with personalities and layered conflicts. While those personalities and conflicts may not be deep or unpredictable, and while he was not the first
filmmaker ever to expand fairy tales, Disney was certainly a pioneer in making märchen\(^2\) part of American pop culture. Disney’s appropriation of fairy tales served as a blueprint for the appropriations that have followed.

Meyer follows Disney’s example in drawing from the Cinderella tale as inspiration but enhancing it with her own twists. Meyer also draws from another Cinderella tale that is less a part of our knowledge of literary history: by setting her version of Cinderella in China, she is invoking the Tang dynasty’s Ye Xian, one of the earliest known versions of the Cinderella story (Heiner, “History”). The story is familiar: Ye Xian, a beautiful young girl, loses her father to the plague (which we see in Cinder) and must be raised by her resentful stepmother. Ye Xian’s closest friend is a golden fish (we see here connections to the animal magnetism in the Grimms’ version and the Disney movie), who is eventually killed and eaten by the wicked stepmother. Its bones are magical, though, and through their power Ye Xian receives the beautiful robes and golden slippers she will wear to the festival, where the prince falls in love with her. As for the fate of the stepmother and Ye Xian’s stepsister, the story proclaims they “were never allowed to visit Yeh-Shen and were forced to…live in [a] cave until the day they were crushed to death in a shower of flying stones” (Louie 29). The brutal end of the cruel family is reminiscent of the ending in the Grimm version (or, chronologically, vice versa).

While each story has its own cultural references and lessons, the general Cinderella plotline remains the same: a kind young girl loses her immediate family, is persecuted by her stepfamily, attends a ball and meets a prince, finds love, and rises to elevated stature as her happy ending. These are the inherent expectations we carry with us when we read any Cinderella retelling. When these expectations accompany us in our reading of a dystopian science fiction novel such as Cinder, the fairy tale tropes can add a level of recognition to an otherwise foreign world. If we cannot imagine a dystopic future in which our colleagues might be made of metal, we can at least relate to the aspect of storytelling that we have heard all of our lives. As Adam Gidwitz points out in his article “In Defense of Real Fairy Tales,” “In fairy tales, as in dreams, we are every character.” In Cinder, the science fiction, futuristic

\(^2\) The German term for folktale, generally associated with the Grimm Brothers’ collections.
world and the science fiction, futuristic heroine are unfamiliar to the standard reader. Our eponymous main character is a cyborg, having been saved from a fiery accident as a child and fixed up with metal body parts. She has a chip in her brain that scans the area around her, allowing her to size up a room and make computer-accurate judgments. She cannot blush or cry, and her computer programming regulates her temperature.

However, the fact that Cinder is a futuristic version of the Cinderella we already know allows for immediate empathy. We are familiar with the girl with the wicked stepsisters and the lost slipper. *Cinder* follows the Cinderella tale but diverges often: Cinder lives with her cruel stepmother and a cruel stepsister, but her other stepsister is her best friend. Cinder must work to earn money for her family, since her stepmother refuses to provide for her. But instead of keeping house, Cinder brings in the bucks as a mechanic who has a popular shop at the local market, and her skills are so renowned that the Prince of the Commonwealth comes to her for help fixing an android. When Cinder ultimately gets the chance to go to the ball, she does not need a fairy godmother to make a coach out of a pumpkin. Rather, she drives an old orange car that she has fixed up herself. Additionally, she does not lose a delicate glass slipper on the steps of the palace; she loses her entire metal foot. Most significantly, she does not end up with the prince, and she receives startling news at the end of the book that empowers her beyond anything the prince could do for her. Essentially, *Cinder* takes the standard Cinderella tale and gives it teeth.

Despite the differences, there are still many similarities with the standard Cinderella tale. While not outright lower class, Cinder is othered and marginalized for being cyborg. She is treated poorly by her stepmother, and her mean stepsister cries out with snobbish disdain when the stepmother says that Cinder might go to the ball if she earns enough money and if she can find a dress that hides her “eccentricities” (Meyer 25). But Cinder has already marginalized herself enough and does not need her stepsister to point out that she would not fit in at a royal ball. She fantasizes at first, musing that since the Prince met her at the market, he might even “ask her to dance. Out of politeness. Out of chivalry when he saw her standing alone” (33). But Cinder’s dream crumbles quickly enough, as she reminds herself “She was cyborg, and she would never go to the ball” (33). This cyborg version of Cinderella, though very different from the standard female heroine, is still recognizable because we already know her.
Because Meyer sets up enough hints at the familiar fairy tale, she can then take *Cinder* in a subversive direction. In reality, attending the ball is not even that important to Cinder, and it is hardly her dearest wish. When Prince Kai, who has become Cinder’s friend through their bantering over his android, asks her to be his personal guest to the ball, she respectfully declines. The prince is noticeably deflated, but Cinder holds her ground. She gives him no reason, but she muses to herself that “he didn’t know who, what, he was asking. If he knew the truth…how mortified would he be if anyone found out?” (Meyer 164). Here Cinder is displaying the fairy tale characteristics of selfless goodness, because she does not want the prince to be saddled with a cyborg date. However, she also has plans to run away from the Commonwealth that night, so her reasons for declining his invitation are not entirely selfless, which again subverts fairy tale expectations.

Additionally, she is a complex character, not merely a good girl who deserves happiness because her docile behavior merits it. Cinder is far more like a normal young woman than the Cinderella we know from Disney et. al. She is sarcastic and self-deprecating, and she admits to feeling a “smug delight” about her interaction with the prince (Meyer 20). And when faced with her stepmother’s refusal to buy a dress for Cinder to attend the ball, Cinder’s inner dialogue alerts us to the fact that she is not endlessly tolerant like the standard fairy tale heroine: “Irritation hardened in Cinder’s gut. She [wanted to point out] that, as she was the one doing the work, the money should have been hers to spend as she saw fit” (24). This Cinderella is aware of injustice, and she knows that she deserves more than being a working slave for her resentful stepmother.

Despite the setbacks, Cinder does end up at the royal ball. But a happy ending does not await her there—rather than arriving at the ball and stunning everyone with her unexpected beauty, Cinder shows up storm-soaked, rumpled, and covered in grease stains. Additionally, when she loses her “slipper” on the steps of the palace, she falls into an ungraceful heap where Prince Kai sees her, her metal arm, and her metal calf stump in all its unnatural glory. This ending of *Cinder* is hardly a fairy tale—but its juxtaposition against what we expect from a Cinderella story makes it more powerful. The blow of her spectacularly embarrassing debut at the ball is softened somewhat by the secret Cinder learns at the very end of the book—she is a Lunar princess and the rightful heir to a throne that has been usurped by an evil queen.
Part of Cinder’s immediate appeal for readers is the knowledge that it is a Cinderella retelling. The title, “Cinder,” evokes the name we all know. The original cover art depicts a slim foot tucked into a red stiletto, with the skin of the leg transparent to show the metal bones beneath. We already know that the “glass slipper” is significant in the Cinderella tale; this contemporary version also matures the heroine by featuring a sexy shoe on the cover. Furthermore, we see from the cover that this will be no ordinary Cinderella—that sexy shoe houses a cyborg foot. From the get-go, we are both oriented with familiar tropes and disoriented with science fiction. If the cover of Meyer’s book makes us expect a femme-fatale Cinderella, the content does not deliver on that promise, to the book’s benefit. Instead, we get a barely-femme-machine. Cinder’s cyborg existence marries the human and the machine and gives us a new, freshly modern heroine who not only subverts societal expectations of femininity, but also offers a new way to be human.

CYBORG CINDERELLA: A POSTHUMAN HEROINE FOR OUR TIME

In order to understand where a cyborg Cinderella fits into the landscape of literary fairy tales, we need to take a (admittedly abridged) look at the history and purpose of fairy tales. As I mentioned previously in this chapter, the literary fairy tale as we know it bloomed with Perrault in the bourgeois French salons of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. It took shape as a didactic tale for children roughly 100 years later, as the cultural purpose of fairy tales—to morally instruct in an engaging way—translated easily from adults to children. Zipes asserts that the fairy tale was meant “to instruct and amuse; that is, to make moral lessons and social strictures palatable” (Subversion 9). In the case of the Cinderella tale, the moral lesson of both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions falls into the “good girls are rewarded and bad girls are not” camp. Furthering his point, Zipes cites Denise Escarpit: “[fairy tales embodied] a utilitarian moralism that taught how to ‘act in a proper way’; that is, to insert oneself into society docilely but astutely, without disrupting society and also without creating trouble for oneself” (9). To be a Cinderella was to be docile and inoffensive.

What do we do, then, with a sarcastic, put-upon, cyborg Cinderella? First, we can trace her footsteps in the fantasy tales Zipes addresses in his book Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion. He asserts that the work of nineteenth-century authors like Charles Dickens,
Andrew Lang, E. Nesbit, and L. Frank Baum paved the way for subversive stories in the twentieth century by “opposing the authoritarian tendencies of the civilization process and expanding the horizons of the fairy-tale discourse for children” (170). In other words, they avoided the standard instructional mode of classical fairy tales and offered an escape into fantasy that would prove thrilling for young readers. However, Zipes subsequently catalogs the long road fantasy writers had ahead of them; the progression of society into an increasingly capitalist, consumerist, and panoptic one stymied the subversive element of fantastic tales.

However, this hindrance caused “the fantastic in fairy tales…to take the offensive,” resulting in a collective effort by writers to offer “possibilities for nonalienating living conditions” and a hopeful perspective on the future following the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements (Zipes, Subversion 170-71). Although Zipes acknowledges that the optimistic utopian vision of fairy tales has given way in the early twenty-first century to fictional dystopian societies, he asserts that “many writers still envision the fairy tale as a means to critique the barbarian turns of the civilizing process—and they do so with the belief that social change is still possible” (171).

In one of the chapters of Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, Zipes sets out to examine how—and how effectively—writers in the latter half of the twentieth century have used the fantastic in fairy tales to liberate the reader from social constrictions, as opposed to indoctrinating them into those constrictions. Zipes also looks at how Freud’s theory of the uncanny—that which is both strange and familiar—fits with fairy tales: “once we begin listening to or reading a fairy tale, we experience estrangement or separation from a familiar world, inducing an uncanny feeling that can be both frightening and comforting” (173). This fits well with the cyborg, which is a representation of the posthuman. I would like to take Zipes’s chapter and extend it to Cinder, examining how author Meyer manages to use fairy tale tropes and a dystopian setting to provide a document that encourages social acceptance of The Other. With Zipes’ history as a guide and with Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” as an ideological window, I will investigate how Cinder fits into the postmodern—and posthuman—landscape.

The idea of posthumanism is inexplicit. Neil Badmington admits “The use of [the term posthumanism] is…far from straightforward” (1), while N. Katherine Hayles explains
“though the ‘posthuman’ differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine” (2). As a starting point for defining the posthuman, Hayles offers four elements of description:

First, the posthuman view privileges information pattern over material instantiation...Second, [it] considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition...as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth...the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. (2-3)

Hayles’s description focuses largely on the idea of consciousness—it’s definition, its importance, and its connection to “being.” Essentially, if a being can transmit information and connect with an inorganic body, it is posthuman. In this sense, cyborgs are perfect examples of the posthuman being, particularly when we consider Hayles’s third element. If our minds inhabit organic bodies that we learn to manipulate in order to follow the commands of said minds, then any prosthesis is simply an extension of the organic body we were born with. Therefore, we should not look at Cinder’s metal foot or steel hand any differently than we do our own fingers. And consequently, if we use a fork—a prosthetic aid—to eat our dinner, aren’t we, essentially, also posthuman cyborgs?

Donna Haraway argues for the possibility that we are all cyborgs in her seminal “Cyborg Manifesto.” From a feminist perspective, Haraway claims that the cyborg is “a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality” and that “the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (70). The intersection of body and machine is one that has grown exponentially in the twenty years since Haraway published her manifesto. In the early 1990s, Haraway commented that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (70). This has become increasingly true as our society has progressed relentlessly forward. Haraway’s prescience is notable when she describes the technological differences that had arisen due to 40 years of progress: “Contrast the TV sets of the 1950s...with the TV wristbands now advertised” (73). Now, contrast those wristbands with the iPhone, which, in addition to serving as a TV-watching device, encompasses hundreds of other uses. And consider the way most smartphone users have their device at the ready, an
easy extension of their body—a handy tool that responds to commands. We are Haraway’s cyborgs, and a book like *Cinder* is a fictional representation of how that is true.

Cinderella-as-cyborg blends fantasy and reality and subverts our expectations, while posthumanist theory shows us that paths have already been forged to accept “different” as “normal.” Zipes claims that “all good fairy tales aesthetically structure and use fantastic and miraculous elements to prepare us for our everyday life” (*Subversion* 171). If, as Haraway asserts, the cyborg is now part of our everyday life, it makes sense that Cinderella could be positioned as such. Additionally, as we are meant to identify with our Cinderella cyborg, we are already in a place to accept the cyborg as one of our own.

Haraway’s cyborg also fits well with the utopian aspect of fairy tales—wherein there’s a happy ending and the good are rewarded while the bad are punished. Instead of just desserts, though, Haraway’s idealism hinges on the elimination of discrimination: “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (74). A cyborg world allows us to be two things at once, to be equal in our difference. Cinder’s futuristic society is not quite there, just as ours is not. Cinder herself is still considered an outsider, someone to be scorned because of her difference. The way she is treated brings to mind Perrault’s and the Grimms’ Cinderella, who is marginalized by her step-family and treated as less worthy because of her forced status as housemaid.

Instead of being a housemaid, however, Cinder is a mechanic, and an excellent one at that. She has her own stand in a busy marketplace, where she is known as the premier mechanic in the city. She keeps quiet about the reason for her skill, though—as a cyborg, she has plenty of practice working on her own machinery. As readers, we are introduced in the opening line to Cinder working on that very machinery: “The screw through Cinder’s ankle had rusted, the engraved cross marks worn to a mangled circle. Her knuckles ached from forcing the screwdriver into the joint as she struggled to loosen the screw one gritting twist after another” (Meyer 1). This jarring image sets up Cinder not as a feminine princess-to-be, but as a dogged synthesis of girl and machine. Further description has Cinder tottering on one foot, disconnected wires dangling, while she waits for her android friend Iko to bring a replacement foot, one that will fit better. Prepping for work, she runs “her dirty fingers
through her hair, combing it up into a messy tail, then grab[s] her blackened work gloves” (5). Cinder’s actions and appearance accurately reflect what she is: a mechanic who knows her own body. She is not a delicate Cinderella dusted in ashes from the fireplace; she is a skilled artisan who shows no surprise when the prince, a customer at her booth, tells her that she is rumored to be “the best mechanic in New Beijing” (10). Here we see another connection to Haraway’s assertions about the cyborg, whose “intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment” (Haraway 83).

Though the vocation of mechanic is still generally viewed as a masculine one, the fact that our heroine is easily and contentedly in this role allows us to connect with Cinder as a new version of the posthuman. She is skilled in her job because her unique position as a bionic woman allows her to be, showing us the benefits of a posthuman existence. Being a mechanic, and being a cyborg, are simply facts of Cinder’s life, which she accepts as it is with sarcastic aplomb, not self-pitying, and not quite self-accepting, but more self-ambivalent.

We get a sense of Cinder’s sarcastic sense of humor when she mutters “it’s not like wires are contagious” when she is ignored by a human baker at the marketplace (Meyer 5), and again when a doctor, who has examined her cyborg makeup in an investigation for plague vaccine, tells Cinder she “should be grateful” that her reproductive system is intact (116). Cinder responds with a self-effacing comment: “I’m sure I’ll feel much more grateful when I find a guy who thinks complex wiring in a girl is a turn-on” (116). Sarcastic, self-doubting response aside, this interaction evinces the posthuman connection between human and machine. Cinder’s body may be largely non-human, but that cyborg form can create and carry life.

Cinder’s likeability also allows us, as readers, to root for her. We may wish for her to end up with the prince in a happily-ever-after similar to what we expect from the Cinderella tale, but what we really wish is for Cinder to live in a society where being a cyborg—being different—is not a reason for ostracizing.

In Cinder, the stepmother’s disdain is not about envy because her stepdaughter is so pure and sweet and beautiful, as it is in the Disney version of Cinderella. Instead, it is actual disgust with Cinder’s otherness. When Cinder grieves her stepsister Peony’s death and tells her stepmother that she loved Peony, the woman responds: “Don’t insult me…Do your kind
even know what love is? Can you feel anything at all, or is it just…programmed?” (Meyer 63). Since we already know that the stepmother is the villain, thanks to our understanding of the Cinderella tale, we know that this is an unfounded insult and that Cinder’s “kind” can indeed love. The cyborg is not an automaton; it is a person. It is, as Haraway writes, “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (69). Cinder is in fact an exemplary “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”—she is literally a creature of fiction, as she is the famous Cinderella character, while she also embodies the social reality of the oppressed other.

Even though Cinder is never fully at ease with being a cyborg, she takes her unusual makeup in stride. Sent against her will to a lab to serve as a guinea pig for plague research, Cinder is scanned and visually dissected, so that her entire human-machine configuration is revealed on a screen. She catalogs what she sees in an almost detached, scientific manner: A girl full of wires. It was as if someone had chopped her down the middle, dividing her front half from her back half, and then put her cartoonish image into a medical textbook. Her heart, her brain, her intestines, her muscles, her blue veins. Her control panel, her synthetic hand and leg, wires that trailed from the base of her skull all the way down her spine and out to her prosthetic limbs….the metal vertebrae along her spine…the four metal ribs…the synthetic tissue around her heart…the metal splints along the bones in her right leg. (Meyer 82)

The scan has revealed that she is 63.72% organic matter and “36.28 percent not human” (82). Her control panel is, according to Dr. Erland, the doctor who pointed out her intact reproductive system and her one true ally, “marvelously complex” and comprised of “the highest technology [he’s] ever seen in a cyborg” (116). She is, in a word, special. Cinder is equipped to be the hero we expect in our grand fantasy narratives, and as a marginalized minority, she represents an ideal future in which those who are ostracized can rise to their full potential.

However, in keeping with social reality, Cinder is not perfect. She has her own prejudices, unequivocally believing that all Lunars are “cruel, savage people” who “lied and scammed and brainwashed each other because they could” (Meyer 178, emphasis original). Finding out that she herself is Lunar is a shock that sends her into denial and comparison. She rails that she’s already a cyborg—isn’t that “bad enough?” (176). She does not want any additional characteristics worthy of marginalization, and she also fears what she knows about the Lunar population. However, being Lunar gives her, essentially, superpowers, providing
her with additional strength that she will need as she pursues her heroic path. It also serves as another example of how she is posthuman—she can manipulate the minds of others, demonstrating the fallibility of consciousness.

Learning that she is also the long-lost Princess Selene, the “only one who can dethrone” the evil Lunar queen (Meyer 381), instills Cinder with a sense of despair. This revelation occurs in the last few pages of the book, where we would normally expect our happy ending. But for Cinder, this is not a happy ending—it is the beginning of a long, burdensome road. Dr. Erland tells her that the powerful Lunar queen will take over the earth and make everyone slaves “if you are not willing to accept who you truly are” (384). For Cinder, this means accepting that she is (1) a cyborg, (2) a Lunar, and (3) royalty with the power to depose a totalitarian regime. The end of the book finds Cinder lingering at the precipice of this discovery, admitting that it would be “so simple not to fight back” (386), but also pulsing with the powering bioelectricity of her Lunar heritage. She is poised to change the world.

Since this is book one of a tetralogy, I imagine we can anticipate a satisfying, ultimately happy ending in Book 4. But in Book 1, Cinder's “happy” ending is to be supplied with the tools to escape her prison cell, saddled with the news that she is a refugee princess and the only one who can overthrow the evil queen. She will have to embrace her Lunar abilities—which include the sketchy moral ground of being able to manipulate what other people think—and her cyborg nature in order to become the heroine (both in the novel and as a character in our landscape of YA dystopian girl-heroes) she was born to be. In order to grow and to fulfill the text’s “liberating role” as Zipes writes (Subversion 170), Cinder will have to accept her posthumanity.

(Not) Romancing the Cyborg: Cinderella and What Women Want

Marissa Meyer has created a (post)modern Cinderella in the character of Cinder by imbuing her story with details both familiar and foreign. But perhaps her greatest achievement in writing a subversive fairy tale is the way she eschews the conventional romance and happy ending. Most of us have certain expectations when we hear the phrase “fairy tale romance.” We envision some sort of whirlwind in which an unsuspecting (and
often un-fabulous) heroine is swept off her feet by a dashing prince-type character. Stephenie Meyer’s wildly popular *Twilight* series speaks to the collective desire of the consuming market to experience these fairy tale romances in different forms. S. Meyer’s work, featuring the fraught (and chaste) love affair between an ordinary girl and her extraordinary vampire boyfriend, spawned dozens of other paranormal young adult trilogies. These novels reliably feature an every-girl—she’s relatable and not too popular or pretty—and an enigmatic, brooding male love interest. Certainly there are plenty of novels that deviate from this standard, but in the cadre of the paranormal romances that boomed in the young adult publishing market in the middle-aughts, the nice-girl-meets-mysterious-guy trope is the most prevalent.

When the YA zeitgeist shifted from werewolf/vampire love triangles to post-apocalyptic dystopian hellscape, so too did the dynamic shift between the heroine and her love interest. Gone were the girls in need of rescue, and in their place were strong and savvy protagonists like Katniss in *The Hunger Games*. Tatar recently pointed out that these stories more commonly feature a trickster archetype than a damsel in distress, but that the latent Sleeping Beauty characteristics—of waiting for the man to come along and set her straight—were still insidious (“Sleeping Beauties”). Because *Cinder* embraces its fairy tale roots, it is actually better able to sidestep the Sleeping Beauty pitfall. In many ways, *Cinder* hits the notes we expect from a fairy tale/YA romance. The main character is outwardly ordinary—she laments her “stick-straight figure,” which is “too angular, too boyish” (Meyer 34)—and she experiences a little thrill when the prince calls her pretty. She finds herself daydreaming of Prince Kai, and her heart flutters when they have an almost-kiss in an elevator, in what is the most conventionally “romantic” scene in the book. But the traditional aspects of the romance are limited to those few examples, and Cinder’s appearance at the ever-important ball is disastrous. Because of the de-emphasis on the romance and the unusual ball experience, Meyer manages to subvert our romantic expectations.

Cinder and the prince “meet cute” when he arrives at her mechanic’s booth at the market and tells her he is looking for the mechanic Linh Cinder, asking “is he here?” (Meyer 8). Cinder announces that she is the “he” the prince is looking for, and the two strike up an easy conversation. Because Cinder immediately owns her profession, which is unconventional for a female, there is no lingering shame attached to not being outwardly
feminine. What Cinder does feel enough shame to hide is her cyborg body, knowing inwardly that the Crown Prince of the Commonwealth of New Beijing would not electively fall for a cyborg.

Already unconventional as a lady mechanic, Cinder also resists joining the throngs of young women who have a celebrity crush on the attractive Prince Kai. Cinder is starkly contrasted with her bubbly and sweet stepsister, her best friend, who behaves in typical, starstruck teenage fashion. She pouts and fusses when she finds out that Cinder met the prince and did not immediately call her to tell her: “Ugh. I hate you. It’s official, I hate you. Are you going to see him again? I mean, you’ll have to, right? I might be able to stop hating you if you promise to bring me with you, all right, deal?” (Meyer 37, emphasis original). While Peony flutters around her asking questions, Cinder merely does her job, searching a junkyard for a magnetic belt in order to fix her stepmother’s car. She muses to herself that “Prince Kai had long been one of Peony’s favorite topics” and that Peony “was probably in every one of his net fangroups” (39). She does admit to herself that she “might share the admiration,” and she gives in to a brief fantasy that, since they have met, perhaps he is not as out-of-bounds as she originally perceived (39).

The banter between Peony, Cinder, and Cinder’s android-helper Iko during this scene is reminiscent of any conversation among friends who have a crush. Peony badgers Cinder for information, Cinder answers briefly and points out that Kai only asked her to fix his android, not get married, and Iko dreamily comments on how cute Kai is. It is a charming scene that allows readers to feel the joy the characters feel at their brush with celebrity, while also feeling Cinder’s hesitant but extant feelings for Kai. In this way, Meyer sets up her readers to expect some sort of delivery on this brewing love story. However, this short scene is the only one with this dynamic, as shortly thereafter, Peony comes down with the plague, and the novel shifts from love story to fight-for-life story.

_Cinder_ also deviates from the norm in that its narrative follows Prince Kai in addition to Cinder. While other versions of Cinderella have attempted to humanize the prince—Prince Henry has his own scenes with his parents in _Ever After_, and the prince has charming discussions with his sardonic father in the Faerie Tale Theatre version of “Cinderella”—few focus on the prince beyond his royal need to find a wife. Despite clever dialogue, the princes still suffer from being relegated to what Tatar calls “the mere function
of prince-rescuer waiting in the wings for his cue” (“Born Yesterday” 101). Prince Kai, conversely, has his own narrative, with six chapters that follow his point of view. Additionally, the dystopian scenario creates much higher stakes for Kai, resulting in the romance being less of the focus. With the untimely death of his father, Kai becomes the emperor of the Commonwealth, and the onus falls on him to both make peace with the evil Lunar queen and find a cure for the plague that is sweeping not only the nation but the entire world. The scenes from Kai’s perspective offer no melodramatic pining for Cinder, but rather insecure concern for how he can possibly run a country.

Kai needs Cinder in more ways than one. She is, in a sense, his rescuer, but the resolution of the first book does not allow for this just yet. Cinder’s role as Kai’s savior begins when they first meet, as he brings her a task to complete, one that only she can do and that he desperately needs. Placing a broken android on the table at Cinder’s booth at the marketplace, he tells her the android “contains top-secret information. It’s a matter of national security that I retrieve it before anyone else does” (Meyer 10). Cinder asks why the royal mechanics cannot fix her, and Kai admits that they tried but failed. As the most skilled mechanic in the city, Cinder is Kai’s greatest need.

Furthermore, due to the ease of their friendship, Kai confesses that he needs Cinder to be his date to the festival, so that he can avoid the machinations of the evil queen. He does not care that she is a commoner, and he tells her not to worry about dancing; he just wants his friend there with him. In a clear reversal of the typical YA love story, wherein the enigmatic guy keeps the interested girl at arm’s length, Cinder features a relentless Kai asking Cinder to the ball no less than four times. Cinder tells him “Trust me—you don’t want to go with me” and “I can’t go to the ball with you. You just have to trust me on that” (Meyer 225). Her asking for his trust with no questions speaks to her own trust in him—she expects that the friendship they have built will warrant such behavior.

Their flirtation with romance comes to a head—and an end—at the ball. On the night she was planning to make her escape from the Commonwealth, Cinder instead learns that the Lunar queen is planning to overthrow Kai and wage war on the world. Instead of selfishly escaping, Cinder selflessly rushes to the ball to warn her friend. No fairy godmother arrives to dress Cinder in diaphanous sparkles. Instead, she dons the dress her stepsister Peony, who died from the plague, was supposed to wear, which is wrinkled from being tossed aside.
Having had her new, good-fitting cyborg foot taken away and sold by her stepmother, Cinder steps back into the too-small foot she discarded at the beginning of the novel. (In a way, Cinder takes the place of the stepsisters in the Grimm Brothers tale as the imposter in the ill-fitting “shoe.”) Finally, she puts on gloves—a gift from Kai—that are smeared with grease stains from her mechanic’s booth, thrown there by her other stepsister in a jealous fit. A car crash followed by a downpour completes her transformation from girl to “walking disaster,” and she arrives at the ball ironically willing herself “be graceful” (Meyer 325, 329).

In a perverted version of the show-stopping entrance of Disney’s Cinderella, Cinder stands at the top of the grand staircase “with damp hair and mud splatters on the hem of her wrinkled silver dress” (Meyer 336). Kai looks at her with “something almost like amusement, as if such a ragged appearance was all one could expect from a renowned mechanic” (337). The whispers and stares that follow Cinder as she makes her way through the ballroom to Kai are not ones of awe and admiration, but rather of disdain and mocking. The heroine’s big moment in *Cinder* is not the magical transformation we expect from the Cinderella tale, but rather the kind of embarrassing experience teenagers have nightmares about. But the fact that our protagonist rallies against the stares and does not flee the scene in humiliation shows us what a plucky heroine she is; saving the world is much more important to this Cinderella than looking pretty and impressing the royal subjects.

In this version of Cinderella, Cinder simply looks like herself when she arrives at the ball, which is in opposition to the original fairy tale. In both the Perrault and Grimm versions, Cinderella is so breathtaking that even her own family does not recognize her at the ball. She is essentially in disguise as a princess, and her true identity is not revealed until the prince fits her foot to the slipper. Conversely, Cinder’s cyborg self, the part of herself she has tried to keep hidden from Kai, is revealed and exposed at the ball. When she falls on the steps of the palace after trying to run away from the Lunar queen, who would kill her, it is because her too-small foot has come loose. Crippled on the steps, Cinder reveals “a gleam of metal fingers, the wires sparking at the end of her battered metal leg” (Meyer 366). Horrified and shocked, Kai turns away from Cinder, condemning her to the Lunar queen’s machinations. Their love story is over.

At least for book one.
CONCLUSION: THE END IS NOT THE END

In the world of fairy tales, the ending of *Cinder* is an unhappy one. The heroine does not find and marry her prince; rather, she is rejected and ostracized by said prince. But we as readers have spent nearly 400 pages getting to know this cyborg girl, and thus we have accepted and identified with her otherness. An ending like this reminds us of the injustice and narrow-mindedness humanity is capable of. Additionally, the science fiction and dystopian aspects of the novel make this unhappy ending a far more appropriate one. Mendlesohn tells us that science fiction “is curious, it wants to know how the world works, and it assumes that *out there* is where the interest lies (although *out there* may be the inner workings of the brain [...]” (15, emphasis original). In the case of *Cinder*, “out there” is in Cinder’s cyborg interface and in the threat of Lunar takeover. “Out there” is far beyond the fairy tale romance, and it essentially requires that the romance be postponed while its participants tend to more important things.

In true science fiction fashion, the consequences of Cinder’s appearance at the ball will be far-reaching with repercussions that will instigate social change. First, she can no longer hide her cyborg nature. Second, the prince has ostracized her. And third, the evil queen has learned that Cinder is the long-lost Princess Selene, the only being in the immediate universe who can challenge her claim to the throne. The end of book one is poised on the precipice of a major change, and that change rests on Cinder’s shoulders.
CHAPTER 4

HALLS OF HORROR: BLUEBEARD’S
DYSTOPIAN, ANTI-FEMINIST CASTLE

While in the previous chapter I argued that Cinder is a successfully subversive Cinderella tale for the twenty-first century, I also have to acknowledge that it is a relatively cheerful story in the grand scheme of young adult dystopias. Even with the threat of the plague and the Lunar villains, it is light on the dystopia and tragedy, heavy on the sci-fi and humor. With its scrappy heroine and the inherent notions of happiness and transformation that come with a Cinderella tale type, Cinder fits more with the “hope” element of my thesis title.

With its allusions to a distinctly darker fairy tale, Lauren DeStefano’s Wither offers a horror story that builds a sense of ominousness not with blood and gore, but with a claustrophobic, gothic setting that suppresses its female characters. The novel evokes the secrecy, misbehaving heroines, and pervasive death that saturate Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” and examines female powerlessness in a patriarchal society. Wither focuses on the struggle for female agency and offers a heroine who rails against her circumstances, but it falls short of joining the string of dystopian novels with impressively strong heroines. Part of that is due to its associations with “Bluebeard,” which is a disturbing tale of oppression and murder. Wither also brings to mind other versions of the “Bluebeard” tale, and the similarities with each one again reveal that Wither is ultimately an anti-feminist text. With its negative female relationships, weak heroine, and inessential love triangle, Wither lacks the power of many other dystopian novels.

While dystopian fiction does not necessarily have to be subversive and feminist, it is actually primed to be so. The genre has a unique ability to critique social concerns and illuminate the conflict between “individual desire and societal demand,” a friction often calibrated through gender (Booker, “Woman” 337). Additionally, dystopian feminist writing emerged from its sister utopian writing, in which, according to Keith Booker, women aimed
to “[imagine] alternative societies that surmount the prejudices and conventions of the status quo” and “[think] beyond thousands of years of patriarchy” (“Woman” 338). If utopian feminist writing envisioned societies with true equality, dystopian feminist writing highlighted the roadblocks to such equality.

At first glance, using the “Bluebeard” story in a dystopia makes sense, as it is already well-suited to the dystopian atmosphere. It is one of the few fairy tales that is explicitly horrific, revealing the heinous capabilities of humanity. Additionally, it exemplifies the claustrophobia of being unable to escape a distressing situation. In fact, the tale of “Bluebeard” is essentially a domestic dystopia. Hardly the symbol of domestic bliss and peaceful prosperity, “Bluebeard” carries with it the dread of having to fight an opponent whose lies and secrecy are well-crafted, just as heroines in YA dystopias usually do.

*Wither* tries to highlight social issues by drawing on this claustrophobic domestic scenario. Instead of featuring a quest to overthrow a dystopian government, *Wither* focuses on the home and the horrors that can lurk within. The novel’s evocations of “Bluebeard” emphasize the gothic conventions of being trapped in one’s home and realizing that the greatest horrors are often inescapable. As Maria Tatar points out, citing Maggie Kilgour, “the Bluebeard plot confines the scene of action to the domestic arena and ‘enables us to see that the home is a prison, in which the helpless female is at the mercy of ominous patriarchal authorities’” (*Secrets* 69). The protagonist’s fight to escape those authorities should be the site of hope and triumph, but in *Wither’s* case, the protagonist succumbs to the patriarchal authorities instead.

With its harsh dystopian setting wherein women are especially marginalized, *Wither* seems to want to say something about women and contribute to the canon of strong dystopian heroines, but its “Bluebeard” tropes stymie its progress. Entrenched in a domestic environment and perpetuating a patriarchal perspective, *Wither* ultimately feels like an anti-feminist novel, a regression from the progress made in the third wave of feminism. In this chapter, I will examine *Wither* in the context of feminist dystopias and fairy tales, looking closely at how the Bluebeard tale type perpetuates patriarchy. First I will situate “Bluebeard” in young adult literature, then I will appraise *Wither* as a potential feminist text. Next, I will provide a brief historical overview of the waves of feminism, and finally I will critique *Wither* by highlighting the areas where it fails to push beyond patriarchy. By situating *Wither*
among its dystopian peers, I will conclude that the fairy tale elements in *Wither* work against its ultimate message of hope and undermine the heroine’s strength as a protagonist.

**BLUEBEARD FOR ADOLESCENTS**

Written by Charles Perrault in the seventeenth century, “Bluebeard” has a winding history and seems well-poised to be integrated into the young adult market. Initially deemed inappropriate for children, the tale “got lost on its way from adult storytelling cultures to children’s books,” but it is has reappeared in numerous contemporary stories and films (Tatar, *Secrets* 13). It is especially suited to the young adult genre, since it overtly “engages with the nexus of knowledge, sexuality, evil, and mortality” and offers more mature themes than the standard fairy tale (Tatar, *Secrets* 3). Furthermore, considering the popularity of monster stories and the supernatural in the young adult market, “Bluebeard” seamlessly fits into the world of monsters and “dark” fiction. “Bluebeard” is primed to be retold, as it mines gothic fear, sexism, and frightening male power.

“Bluebeard” is infused with secrets, badly behaved heroines, and bloody horror. In this tale, a young woman marries a murderous merchant with strangely colored facial hair that she initially finds off-putting. But the merchant is charming, and when they marry, the young woman is given wealth and riches beyond her wildest imagination. Before he leaves town for business, Bluebeard gives his wife keys that will allow her into any area of the castle, with the exception of one room. When the young bride succumbs to curiosity and investigates the forbidden room, she finds the rotting corpses of Bluebeard’s previous wives. Returning early from his trip, Bluebeard threatens to kill our heroine, who is saved at the last minute by her visiting brothers. As Tatar points out, the standard happy ending of this fairy tale is “effaced by the images of horror embedded in the tale” (*Secrets* 5). Even though the villain dies before he can harm the heroine, he has already done great bodily damage to his previous wives and psychological damage to the surviving heroine.

However, the characteristics that make “Bluebeard” so compelling also make it nearly impossible to subvert. Two recent retellings bring “Bluebeard” into the consciousness of YA readers, and both implicitly emphasize patriarchal power and the gender norms for which fairy tales are often criticized. Both also create Bluebeard characters who are especially alluring, which seems to cater more to the contemporary popularity of romance in YA than to
hold true to the original story of “Bluebeard,” in which the Bluebeard character is mainly frightening. In Sarah Cross’s *Kill Me Softly* (2012), the teenage protagonist, Mira, discovers that she is among a number of marked humans who are actually fairy tale archetypes. A Sleeping Beauty archetype herself, she falls for a Bluebeard archetype who charms her, seduces her, and tries to kill her. The fact that Mira’s archetype is one of the most passive of fairy tale heroines reinforces the patriarchal power that infuses “Bluebeard,” as Mira is automatically set up with the need to be rescued by a prince. In a different take on the tale, Jane Nickerson’s *Strands of Bronze and Gold* (2013) follows the “Bluebeard” story very closely, transporting it to the Deep South in the 1800s for a Southern Gothic atmosphere. Like Mira, the main character, Sophia, is drawn to her Bluebeard figure, discovers his secret, and just barely escapes danger. In this retelling, Sophia manages to save herself from Bluebeard’s treacherous clutches, but the novel resets the status quo at the end, when Sophia gets engaged to a decent man. Additionally, her positioning as a young woman in the Victorian era highlights the powerlessness of women.

As these two novels reveal, the overarching patriarchal power that accompanies the original “Bluebeard” tale remains with it centuries later. The very fact that Bluebeard has already killed previous wives reinforces his power over women. Maybe one of the revisionist heroines can finally stand up to the villain, but she cannot change the past. Additionally, the way these young adult novels emphasize the romantic aspect of being courted by an alluring killer – an effect, I would posit, instigated and perpetuated by the popularity of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* and its vampire love interest – downplays the horror of patriarchal oppression. In our culture, and especially in young adult literature, romance features a hero who “is always older, taller, and richer than the heroine, and usually moody, dark, and inscrutable” (Dubino 103, emphasis original). This template reinforces Tatar’s claim that “the Bluebeard plot competes with the Cinderella story as our culture’s paradigm for romantic excitement” (*Secrets* 8). Whether we like it or not, popular culture shows us that the rich and powerful man is likely to show up in a romance plotline to carry on the pattern of “eroticiz[ing] women’s powerlessness” (qtd. in Dubino 116).
**Wither Wants To Be Feminist**

DeStefano’s *Wither* attempts, at first, to circumvent this romantic standard by vilifying the powerful man. Indeed, the dystopian society in *Wither* is a fruitful backdrop for feminist commentary. In twenty-second-century America, the human race is close to extinction. The twenty-first century saw scientific progress that eradicated cancer and created a perfect human being, but a genetic glitch has resulted in every generation after the first perfect one dying young. Males die without fail from the unnamed virus at age 25, and females die at age 20. North America is isolated and desolate, the rest of the world having been destroyed in World War Three, according to our narrator. The options for the female denizens of this ravaged America are limited: they can look for the odd job to earn enough money to eat, but many young women turn to prostitution and others are dragooned into slavery. Sixteen-year-old Rhine has been kidnapped and sold into marriage for the sole purpose of procreation, along with two other young girls, who will become her “sister wives.”

The particularly anti-feminist environment of this futuristic society is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which also focused on women’s powerlessness in a dystopian setting. The bleak America that Atwood paints offers unfortunate women three potential career tracks: babymaker, prostitute, or nun. The way Atwood develops her dystopian world is jarring and disorienting for the reader. The main character, Offred, describes the world she knew just a few years before, and it is the world we know. It was normal, she had autonomy and a career and her own money. Upon a governmental overthrow, however, women were denied every fundamental right until they were reduced to the sum of their lady parts. Atwood’s claustrophobic tale depicts a totalitarian patriarchy where women are bereft of rights.

*Wither* offers a similar kind of jarring glimpse into a despicable future. However, in *Wither*’s case, it is not a failed government that disrupts life as we know it, but rather, it is science. Progress that seems like a profound benefit to public health—the eradication of cancer—has backfired and led to a genetic crisis. As *Wither* is book one of a trilogy, we do not get the full reveal of just what caused this genetic breakdown, but we do know that decades of scientific research of the virus have not led to any cures, and the best anyone can do is to keep making babies. To perpetuate procreation, bounty hunters called “Gatherers”
track and kidnap able-bodied young women to sell them into forced marriage and reproduction.

The world of Wither is desperately awful, and the “Bluebeard” elements enhance the dreadful and hopeless atmosphere. Like Atwood’s novel, which described American society “before” the dystopia and thus emphasized the horror of “after,” DeStefano’s dystopian America has hints of our own society in it. Reality TV is evoked in the first few pages, when Rhine comments that she has seen the forced weddings of many reluctant brides on television. But the extremity of horror in Rhine’s world is described shortly thereafter:

The other girls never make it to the television screen. Girls who don’t pass their inspection are shipped to a brothel in the scarlet districts. Some we have found murdered on the sides of roads, rotting, staring into the searing sun because the Gatherers couldn’t be bothered to deal with them. Some girls disappear forever, and all their families can do is wonder. (2)

In Rhine’s world, women are carelessly discarded, shuttled off to prostitution or killed outright, and there is no recourse or justice for those who bother to be concerned. As in “Bluebeard,” where there is no hope for justice for the women the merchant has already killed, Rhine’s power is severely limited. Additionally, Rhine’s own trauma at being taken is compounded by her knowledge that the other girls who were kidnapped along with her and not selected for marriage were instead shot to death in the van that brought them to their location. The sound of the gunshots will haunt Rhine for the rest of the novel and serve to set up the villainy of the man who bought her and her sister wives.

The murder of the discarded girls evokes Bluebeard’s carelessness for his former wives, but it also sets Rhine up for having knowledge and not needing to seek it, as Bluebeard’s wife does. Rhine knows from the outset that her captor has murderous capabilities, which contributes to her desperation to escape her imprisonment and to our revulsion of the villain. When she gets to the mansion where she has to marry her unwanted husband, she despises him on sight. However, we learn soon enough that the main villain in Wither is not the husband, Linden, who is actually harmless, hapless, and so frail he looks as if he “is a few pounds from blowing away” (DeStefano 128). He is described as effeminate and non-threatening. Instead, Linden’s father, Housemaster Vaughn, looms large, terrifying the help and obliquely threatening Rhine when he realizes she is trying to flee. He is the one
who ordered both the gathering of Rhine and her sister wives and the murder of the girls in
the van. He is the powerful Bluebeard character, and he is not alluring.

Vaughn’s description evokes the “revulsion” that the young wife feels for Bluebeard
in Perrault’s tale (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 175). Rhine must keep herself from “squirming”
when Housemaster Vaughn takes her hand and kisses it in greeting, and his “papery and
cold” lips make her “think of a corpse” (DeStefano 49). Accompanying his “sickly pallid”
face and “low and raspy” voice is a general air of intimidation that keeps the servants
subdued and makes Rhine “sense something dangerous in him” (49, 51). Rhine’s discomfort
with Housemaster Vaughn increases as she becomes aware that “there are ugly, dangerous
things lurking beneath the beauty of this mansion” (143). Vaughn’s character is more
complicated, though, than a sociopathic serial killer. A scientist, Vaughn purports to be
working on an antidote to the disease that strikes everyone down in the prime of youth.
Because he is, in fact, a doctor renowned for his skills, he embodies not the simple serial
killer of the original “Bluebeard” tale, but rather a character who kills for the greater good.
As Tatar points out, “Bluebeard, once an iniquitous brute who had excited the popular
imagination with his bloody deeds, developed an intellectual side that aligned him with
reason and cunning rather than with passion and wrath” (Secrets 133). Vaughn is a more
advanced version of Bluebeard, one who will prove to be a formidable adversary to Rhine.

The basement laboratory is off-limits to Rhine and reminiscent of Bluebeard’s
forbidden room. Eventually Rhine is given a key-card that signifies her status as Linden’s
favorite wife, but when he gives it to her, he cautions “Now, it won’t take you to every floor”
(DeStefano 249). This reminder, while gentle coming from Linden, reinforces to Rhine that
she has only limited freedom. When Rhine inevitably gets to the basement, she sees evidence
of disturbing experiments on bodies. Most significantly, she sees the body of Linden’s first
wife, Rose, “blond hair trailing” beneath the sheet covering her face, “her cold, white hand,
with fingernails still painted pink” flopped to the side of the gurney (96). Since Vaughn had
already given Rose’s “ashes” to Linden to bury, Rhine knows that Vaughn is lying to his son
and ostensibly has plans to dissect Rose’s body.

The circumstances that bring Rhine to the mansion are not far off from those that
send fairy tale heroines into marriage. Tatar points out that “often they have been coerced
into marriage by a father who…seeks financial gain through the favorable marriage of his
daughter,” concluding that consequently “heroines perceive their grooms and husbands as beasts and monsters” (*Hard Facts* 170). Considering that Rhine is taken by bounty hunters and sold into marriage, hears the murder of the other girls who were not picked, and is imprisoned by her husband and father-in-law, she has numerous reasons to consider the authoritative men in her world as beastly murderers. And by extension, so do we. By highlighting the horror of what men do, *Wither* sets itself up to be a text that calls for feminist outrage.

The text also sets up Rhine to be an admirable heroine. She epitomizes Tatar’s description of Bluebeard’s wife, who “is at once victim, trickster, and survivor,” someone who “must size up her situation and improvise a solution, making up a way out as she goes along” (*Secrets* 6). This is Rhine exactly, as she is a victim of her society’s callous treatment of women, a trickster who manipulates her husband’s affections to get what she wants, and a survivor who refuses to spend the rest of her limited life in captivity. However, that limited life is one of the narrative choices that makes *Wither* an anti-feminist novel. First, whatever strides Rhine makes in grasping autonomy are undermined by the fact that she will die shortly. Second, women die younger than men—they get five fewer years, which is never explained. It, like patriarchal power, is simply a fact of life.

At face value, *Wither* should work as a feminist tale. It is positioned as a peer to dozens of other dystopian novels with female heroines, and considering that its female heroine is a more “typical” girl who is not trained to kill, it could offer commentary on how to be “female” and still escape oppressive situations and instigate social change. In this sense, it fits well with third wave feminism, which prides itself on being a more inclusive form of feminism. Additionally, since its older, richer man is quite clearly the villain, *Wither* initially sidesteps the romantic trap that befalls so many other novels. But again, its associations with “Bluebeard” and similar tales keep it from working well as a feminist text.

**BLUEBEARD, FEMINISM, AND ADOLESCENCE**

“Bluebeard” has certainly had its feminist retellings, most notably Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Robber Bride* and Angela Carter’s short story “The Bloody Chamber.” Atwood’s novel takes on a different version of the “Bluebeard” tale, characterizing a femme fatale who plays with the hearts of two young men. Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” fleshes
out the tale from the young woman’s perspective, and the heroine is saved not by her brothers but by her fierce mother. Both versions contribute to a glut of feminist fairy tale revisions that became part of the feminist movement in the 1970s. Writers like Atwood, Carter, and Anne Sexton “regenerated [fairy tales] to comment politically on the situation of women in their times and on the struggles between the sexes” (Zipes, Relentless 126). For these writers, the task was to respond to feminist critiques of fairy tales and create new versions, and these new versions paved the way for third wave feminism and new kind of heroine.

While a full analysis of the progression of feminism and fairy tales is out of the scope of this chapter and has already been explored by numerous scholars, it will be beneficial to provide a brief overview of how fairy tales are situated in the feminist canon, and how the different waves of feminism have affected pop culture. Donald Haase examines the origin of feminist fairy tale scholarship in the 1970s, noting that it “[asked] important questions about sociocultural institutions and the process of socialization” (31). Haase explains, “early feminist criticism of fairy tales…was principally concerned with the genre’s representation of females and the effects of these representations on the gender identity and behavior of children in particular” (2-3). If early feminist scholarship aimed to dispute the status quo of princess-finds-her-prince submitted as truth in fairy tales, feminist fairy tale revisions offered tales from the perspective of a complex female heroine, with her own conflicting desires.

The 1990s saw an attempt at creating stronger heroines in fairy tales, as Disney’s Beauty and the Beast tried to do with its bookish Belle. However, as June Cummins points out, it was still “the same old story, a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality” (22). While fairy tales perpetuated the myth of the necessity for a girl to find her prince, other areas of pop culture were offering a new paradigm for women. The 1990s brought with it the so-called third wave of feminism, in which the “Riot Grrrl” took the stage—literally—in punk rock bands like Hole, Jack Off Jill, and Pussy Riot, and in which “girl power” became a common refrain. The third wave of feminism is known

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3 See Christina Bacchilega, Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies; Donald Haase, Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches; and Sharon Rose Wilson, Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women’s Fiction
to be more inclusive of multiculturalism and variegated shades of sexuality, with, as Elizabeth K. Keenan writes, “a focus on acknowledging the intersectional aspects of identity” (46). Keenan also points out that “the activities of the Third Wave often operate through youth culture,” which allows music, television, film, and literature to serve as platforms for third wave feminism (46). Additionally, the late-1990s rhetoric of girl power proffered the assertion that “femininity does not preclude power, agency, or aggression” while at the same time encouraging normative femininity, “suggesting that because patriarchal culture often rewards a feminine appearance, females can use femininity as a tool without being ashamed of reaping such rewards” (Hains 7, 23). Thus the 90s ushered in an assortment of feminist definitions, from angry Riot Grrrl musicians to femme fighters like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, all attempting to offer an alternative to the fairy tale romance plot that Cummins decries.

What girl power offered young women was the assertion that being feminine did not have to mean being submissive, docile, and in some cases, self-hating. As Rebecca Hains notes, Mary Pipher’s and Peggy Orenstein’s mid-90s studies on female adolescence revealed that “a crisis...occurs when girls reach adolescence at approximately eleven years old: their self-esteem plummets, academic achievement drops, and concerns with appearance increase” (4). The rhetoric of girl power served as a panacea to this crisis, offering young women a sense of empowerment. However, the fact that emphasis on appearance and “girlishness” was still part of this “girl power” was (and, frankly, still is) of concern. Third wave feminism has received its fair share of criticism, since embracing that normative femininity determined by the patriarchy went against second-wave feminists’ instincts not to allow patriarchy to dictate gender norms.

But because third wave feminism is defined as inclusive and “focused on the individuality of experience,” girl power is just one of many culturally acceptable versions of being female (Keenan 49). Over the years, young adult literature has tried to engage with this ostensible standard of inclusion, with notable works like Malinda Lo’s Ash and Jessica Spotswood’s Born Wicked offering a non-normative and multi-cultural cast of adolescents.

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4 Malinda Lo’s Ash features a “Cinderella” retelling in which the Cinderella character falls in love with her female best friend. Jessica Spotswood’s Born Wicked offers an alternate nineteenth-century Massachusetts
But those books share the shelves with more conservative texts like the wildly popular *Twilight*, whose protagonist, Bella, is submissive and seemingly under the thumb of her domineering vampire boyfriend, Edward. Critics bemoan the “outdated and troubling gender norms” in the *Twilight* series, concerned that “the books promote retrograde ideas about female submission to male authority” (Silver 122). In what feels like Bella backlash, the dystopian novels that have overrun the young adult publishing market since the mid-2000s feature much stronger, more independent heroines who are focused less on their quest of finding a prince and more on their quest of saving society from its anti-utopian ills.

Indeed, I would argue that we can look at contemporary dystopian heroines as part of a new wave of feminism, one that embraces strength and savvy. Even if the heroines are not physically imposing, they are quick, smart, and often lethal. While not all YA dystopias are created equal, a common characteristic of the genre is the lethal female protagonist.\(^5\) To name a few, Saba in *Blood Red Road*, Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Tris in *Divergent*, June in *Legend*, and Pressia in *Pure* are all shrewd and physically skilled, using their talents in non-gender-normative scenarios like cage fighting and front-line combat. Their journeys track their inner strength as well, allowing them to be teenagers who make mistakes and have infatuations, but who still redirect their energy when it is needed for their survival and others’ protection. The twenty-first-century YA dystopian heroine has her roots in 1990s girl power, and she is also a descendant of the re-imagined fairy tale heroine that writers like Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter envisioned nearly thirty years ago. Beyond “girl power,” the heroines in YA dystopias offer positive and empowering role models for adolescent girls.

Theoretically, as *Wither* features a heroine who fights against the chains that bind her, the novel should be part of the lexicon of standard dystopias. But because its fairy tale influences come from “Bluebeard,” that tale with its roots in Gothic horror and domestic oppression, *Wither* offers less of a kick-ass perspective and more of a quiet desperation wherein women are not ultimately triumphant. Instead of putting forth another kick-ass

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\(^5\) In Chapter Two of this thesis, I describe some of these characters in more detail. See pages 12-13.
dystopian heroine, *Wither* explicates a world where women are devalued, with little hope for change.

**BLUEBEARD’S BROTHERS AND *WITHER’S* WEAKNESSES**

Even as YA literature has changed to incorporate inclusion and strong heroines, it has still kept a rather didactic tone. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, books for young adults “have many ideologies [and] spend much time manipulating the adolescent reader” (x). These varying ideologies (such as reinforcing gender norms, subverting normative femininity, inculcating consumerism, or preaching against sex and drugs) have been complicated over the years by the feminist movement, and young adult literature—as well as fairy tale retellings—has been a primary site of advocating social change. Dystopias in particular serve to encourage a greater awareness of problems in our world. As Kay Sambell points out,

dystopian futuristic literature’s “purpose” or “function”…is usually perceived to be twofold. First, the literature primarily cautions young readers about the probable dire consequences of current human behaviors. Second…it is driven by the impulse to counsel hope and present the case for urgent social change. (163)

This expectation of offering a didactic lesson and a new way of examining human behavior is what makes *Wither* so disappointing when it does not deliver. While *Wither* does offer the cautionary tale of “Don’t Play God,” as it was the advancement of science that led to the degradation of society, it does not provide hope, nor does it proffer commentary on female repression. Its “Bluebeard” associations show the reader that patriarchal power is too great for the heroine to overcome, but patriarchal power is not solely to blame. Associations with two other Bluebeard-type tales, “Fitcher’s Bird” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” reveal the lack of female agency in *Wither*. Additionally, Rhine’s trauma as a kidnapped wife in Bluebeard’s halls of horror leads her to irrational thinking, which makes her an unreliable narrator. Coupled with an environment in which sisterhood is devalued and polygamy is supported, *Wither* fails to be a subversive text with a positive message.

Perrault’s tale is iconic for its moral of “don’t be curious.” For her curiosity, Bluebeard’s wife is nearly murdered. In most dystopian novels, however, curiosity is not something to be punished. These stories frequently feature a heroine whose curiosity leads her to helping instigate a revolution. But in *Wither*, curiosity is worthy of punishment.
Furthermore, Rhine’s curiosity in *Wither* is selfish and negative, and the moral of the original “Bluebeard” is applicable to Rhine’s situation. According to Tatar, the moral that accompanies the story is as follows: “In spite of its great charms, curiosity / Often brings with it serious regrets.../ For once satisfied, curiosity offers nothing,/ And ever does it cost more dearly” (*Hard Facts* 22). This moral implies that the young woman was wrong for disobeying Bluebeard’s directive, and that succumbing to her curiosity “cost [her] dearly.” Rhine’s curiosity with Vaughn’s forbidden chamber—his basement laboratory—actually becomes a terrifying preoccupation for her, as she becomes fixated on envisioning what it down there. All she ever saw with her own eyes was Rose’s trailing blonde hair and pink fingernails, but that glimpse was enough to send her into a whirlwind of imagination.

Rhine’s morbid descriptions—which we as readers have no way of knowing are accurate—push her into the realm of unreliable narrator, further weakening her position as a dystopian heroine. She pictures Rose’s “cold stiff body being pushed into a basement laboratory” and thinks of “Housemaster Vaughn dissecting his daughters-in-law one by one” (DeStefano 109). She sees “Jenna’s cold body in the basement, under a sheet and awaiting the knife” (344). She thinks she hears “Vaughn coming to finish us off, or worse, to drag us into his basement to torture us, mutilate us, strap us to operating tables in the same room as Rose’s and Jenna’s corpses” (350). She also links Vaughn’s potential experimentation with the gothic novel *Frankenstein*: “It was about a madman who constructed a human out of pieces from corpses. I think of Rose’s cold hand with its pink nail polish, and Gabriel’s blue eyes, and the stone-small heart of a dead infant” (143). But Vaughn is not the one creating monsters—Rhine is, in her mind. In a way, Rhine is aligned with Frankenstein, as she is so fixated on what is possible that it drives her mad.

For all her morbid fantasies, when Rhine envisions Vaughn being vanquished, it is with an almost silly scenario that evokes *The Wizard of Oz* and its tornado. “I want him to get blown away,” Rhine thinks. “I want for the roof to be ripped away, and for him to be pulled up, getting smaller and smaller until he’s nothing” (DeStefano 154). Her fantasy simply minimizes Vaughn, makes him small and non-threatening. We do not get a sense of Vaughn being a Bluebeard-ian villain who needs to be rent through with a sword as he is in Perrault’s tale. While the Bluebeard tale conjures images of horror, it is mainly Rhine creating the visions of horror in *Wither*. 
In addition to her fixations on horrible images, Rhine also has a fixation on escape. She has no interest in settling in the rest of the house or exploring the amenities; instead she is always searching for her way out. For Rhine, the remote forbidden chamber is not represented solely by Vaughn’s basement of potential horrors. It is also a metaphor for the outside world. Even as she grows to care for her sister wives—one of whom begs her not to leave—and even for her husband, Rhine’s desire for her forbidden departure burns within her to the exclusion of everything else. Because Rhine’s decision to leave has adverse effects on people she has grown to care about, Wither supports the concept that female individuality and curiosity have negative consequences.

Curiosity and female agency are viewed more positively in the Brothers Grimm versions of Bluebeard. First, the villain in “Fitcher’s Bird,” instead of a seductive baron of wealth, is a sorcerer who tricks and murders his lovers. Because he uses sorcery to coerce the females to join him, he is more of an outright monster. The heroine is different in this tale, too; instead of one young woman who is saved by her brothers, “Fitcher’s Bird” features three sisters, the youngest of whom tricks the sorcerer and saves her sisters by putting them back together after they have been sliced apart. The youngest sister is more hero than victim, as Tatar points out: “Unlike her French counterpart, she takes on the role of savior for her unhappy predecessors and through her own quick-wittedness escapes the fate of her sisters” (Hard Facts 157). Rhine also plays the role of quick-witted survivor, but her skills lie more in manipulation than heroics. Additionally, instead of saving her surviving sister, Cecily, Rhine abandons her. (Rhine has also indirectly killed Jenna, who allowed herself to be experimented on to keep Vaughn’s attention away from Rhine, which I will explain in a moment.) Ultimately, Rhine is more trickster than savior, contributing to the terrible situation of her sister wives and selfishly fleeing instead of fighting the patriarchal power within the mansion.

The Grimms’ second Bluebeard-like tale, “The Robber Bridegroom,” follows a young woman who is betrothed to a cannibal. She is not tricked as the heroines are in “Fitcher’s Bird,” but she is essentially sold into marriage by her father. What is most notable about “The Robber Bridegroom” is that the heroine has a female helper. When she arrives at the cannibal’s house, she finds an old woman in the basement, who says “Oh, you poor child…Do you realize where you are? This is a murderers’ den!” (Grimm, “Robber” 143).
The woman then helps the young bride hide, and the two escape together. The character of Jenna in *Wither* is suggestive of the helpful old woman. Her language echoes the woman’s when she says of Cecily, “Poor kid…She doesn’t even understand what kind of place this is” and when she claims baldly, “this is an awful place” (DeStefano 70, 110). And significantly, she ends up helping Rhine: she orchestrates distractions so that Rhine can see her love interest, Gabriel, on the sly, and she allows herself to be experimented on as a way distract Housemaster Vaughn from tracking Rhine as she plots her escape.\(^6\)

But it is also in the character of Jenna that *Wither* departs from “The Robber Bridegroom” and misses its chance to be subversive. Despite the fact that she is Rhine’s greatest ally, Jenna is described not as a heroic helper, but as abject, painted either as disgusting or overly sexual. Rhine first notices that Jenna smells “like cinnamon bath soap and vomit” and that “her cheeks are hollow and sharp” (DeStefano 85), giving her an emaciated, sickly appearance. When Jenna has fleeting moments of beauty, it is sexual in nature. Rhine observes Jenna after she has just had sex with their mutual husband: “Her body shimmers in a layer of sweat; the hair receding from her face is damp; the buttons on her nightgown don’t align. I’ve never seen her this way, so wild and beautiful; Linden must be the only one who usually sees her like this” (242). Jenna admits to Rhine that she hates Linden, but she is an experienced prostitute, and she easily falls into playacting the part of sexual satisfier. Her hypocrisy is highlighted and makes her weak.

Even though Jenna summons a comparison with the helpful old woman in “The Robber Bridegroom,” she is really drawn as a whore in *Wither*, and her demise is gruesome and more evocative of the deaths of the previous wives in “Bluebeard.” Because of Vaughn’s experimentation, Jenna contracts the virus at age 19, a year ahead of when she is scheduled to be afflicted. While Bluebeard’s chamber reveals “clotted…pools of blood” that reflect the images of “the corpses of several woman, hung up on the walls” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 177), Jenna’s bedroom—site of sexuality—is home to the horrors of *Wither*. Jenna’s once-beautiful skin “has paled and taken on a cruel yellow tinge,” with “fester[ing wounds]” amassing “across her throat and arms” (DeStefano 302). Her body is quickly taken by the virus, her

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\(^6\) While Rhine in Book 1 infers this, we learn it as a fact in Book 3.
skin “bruised everywhere…translucent and marbled with veins” (305). Rhine, aghast, observes that “some of the bruises have started to bleed. It’s like her body is rotting from the inside out” (305). Even her death reminds readers that Jenna was a skilled seductress, as Rhine observes the aromatic contrast between “that light, airy collaboration of perfumes and lotions that made attendants blush” and the medicinal ointment rubbed on her skin (325). Ultimately, Jenna’s abject characterization and violent death keep her from being a worthy heroine in the manner of the old woman in “The Robber Bridegroom.”

Rhine’s other sister wife, Cecily, is also abjectified, caught between innocence and sexual maturity. At their wedding to Linden, Cecily’s contrast between childhood and womanhood is overtly described. Rhine notes that “on tiptoes she wouldn’t even reach my shoulder…she is clearly too young to be a bride” (DeStefano 41). Yet Cecily is dressed in finery appropriate for a fairy tale wedding: “her dress is white with just a slight glimmer of rainbow hues when she moves. The bodice has big translucent butterfly wings in back that seem to be hemorrhaging glitter” (41). The innocence of rainbows and glitter is contrasted with the descriptive word “hemorrhaging,” which evokes fountains of blood and foreshadows Cecily’s difficult pregnancy.

Cecily embraces her newfound status as a wife, disregarding any concern that Rhine has that she is too young. She has sex with Linden before Jenna does, and she is the only one to bear his child. In what seems like a critique of the wrongness of 21-year-old Linden having sex with 13-year-old Cecily (and indeed Rhine considers Linden “a monster…a vile man” for doing so [DeStefano 117]), Cecily’s pregnancy actually turns her into an abject creature. Rhine observes that “her stomach looks like an overblown balloon…the skin around her belly button is stretched so far that it shines painfully” (243). Additionally, when she goes into an early, bloody labor, the blood pools around “her lacy white socks,” again contrasting childhood with abject sexual maturity (259).

Cecily’s situation could be construed as feminist social commentary, since she is essentially a child who is forced into marriage. However, the fact that she enjoys her newfound position as a wife and that she instills jealousy in Rhine undermines any potential commentary. Rhine’s sexual anxieties are heightened by Cecily’s willingness to plunge into womanhood, and she bristles when Cecily calls her “a prude” (DeStefano 89, 244). As a virgin who refuses to become intimate with Linden, Rhine manages to hold on to some
aspect of strength and individuality, but her shame at being called a prude undercuts it. Additionally, she becomes closer to Linden, allowing him to kiss her and feeling conflicted about her the growing emotion she has for him. Rhine’s quick shift from being disgusted with Linden for having sex with Cecily to being interested in Linden herself unveils her as a weak character.

Through Cecily and Rhine’s conflicted attitude toward her and Linden, we see again how *Wither* actually endorses an anti-feminist agenda. Not only is Linden absolved of being a villain, but he also becomes a love interest for Rhine and her sister wives. Little narrative attention is given to the strangeness of polygamy, possibly because it is normal in Rhine’s world. However, Rhine is frequently preoccupied with her memories of stories her parents told her of the way the world used to be, and she is outraged that women as young as twelve or thirteen—essentially children—are forced into marriage. If Rhine’s perspective on the sanctity of childhood comes from her knowledge of the past, it is unclear why her perspective would not include the sanctity of marriage. Regardless, Rhine’s attitude about polygamy reveals only that she feels jealous of her sister wives. Indeed, the sister wives essentially play a game of competing for Linden’s attention, which pits them against each other.

Here again we see “Bluebeard” at work against *Wither*. Tatar points out that the tale can be viewed as “a metaphorical enactment of the issues that arise in marriages between men with a past and young women without much life experience”; for the young, inexperienced bride, the dead wives in the forbidden room symbolize “women who played a powerful role in her husband’s past and who, additionally, have a real physical presence in the day-to-day routines of her own life” (*Secrets* 66). For Rhine in *Wither*, her inexperience is highlighted by her sister wives. Even though the thought of kissing Linden “puts [her] stomach in knots” (DeStefano 141), her revulsion dances the line of jealousy, especially after she becomes Linden’s favored wife. She notes that Jenna “could become my rival to be Linden’s first wife easily,” and she “push[es] back a wave of jealousy” when she knows Jenna and Linden are sleeping together (248, 242).

The references to “Bluebeard” are so evocative in *Wither* that it is difficult to view it as a dystopian novel that could provide social commentary. In a book examining successful feminist fairy tales, Sharon Rose Wilson notes how Margaret Atwood uses Bluebeard’s various iterations in her fiction to “dramatize women’s feelings of being monstrous,
dismembered, and cannibalized” (14). Unfortunately, Wither does not use fairy tale intertexts to this effective end. Considering that Rhine projected monstrosity onto three varied characters—her kind sister wife Jenna, her quasi-love interest Linden, and her captor Vaughn—the “Bluebeard” references dramatized the protagonist’s weakness. Pauline Greenhill also notes that when Bluebeard is used well, “connections with female characters…give or demonstrate the heroine’s power; connections with male characters remove her autonomy and may even threaten her life” (147). In Rhine’s case, her rejection of her sister wives, her affinity for Linden and Gabriel, and even her yearning to return home to her twin brother, align her with male characters and, as Greenhill says, “remove her autonomy.”

**CONCLUSION: INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH**

What is ultimately distressing about this book is that it seems as if the author really wanted it be a story that could shed light on women’s rights. Rhine can be seen as a strong female character in that she refuses to cede her body to her husband, and she is almost single-mindedly focused on escaping her luxurious prison. On the other hand, she wishes to escape so that she can be reunited with her male twin, and she starts a relationship with her male servant, Gabriel. I briefly mentioned Gabriel in the previous section, and I would like to discuss him further here as part of the conclusion. The romance between Gabriel and Rhine smacks of the typical YA love plotline, as there seems to be little reason for them to fall for each other aside from creating a love triangle as Rhine grows increasingly fond of Linden. Elizabeth Vail claims that the love triangle trend in YA has caused the genre to suffer, noting that “for every one YA novel with a well-integrated and beautiful romantic element, there seem to be three where a romance or, worse, a love triangle is gracelessly shoehorned into a story that neither requires nor develops it.” This is precisely the problem with Wither. The ending would have been stronger if this book had featured Rhine escaping on her own. It seems that at the end of it all, Wither is not quite sure what it wants to say about women.

I cannot help but think about how this could have been a better book. By focusing less on the male-female relationships and more on the female-female ones, author DeStefano could have contributed to the conversation about contemporary feminism. Perhaps Rhine’s twin could have been female, with the story alternating between their two points of view,
observing their struggle for survival in a misogynistic world. Or perhaps Rhine could have forged a strong relationship with one of her sister wives instead of Gabriel. She does grow to care for Jenna and Cecily, and she even asks Jenna if she would like to join her when she makes her escape, but Jenna, conveniently, is not interested. Instead, Rhine encourages her love interest, Gabriel, to join her. And he doesn't take much convincing.

Gabriel's flatness as a character aside, he adds nothing to Rhine's growth as a character, and his presence undermines her strength. Unfortunately, this book reinforces a heteronormative and white-middle-class perspective, a trite romance, and a weak heroine. Given the Bluebeard tale’s legacy of strong, evil male and weak, curious female, it requires finesse and a better narrative than Wither to climb away from its patriarchal origins. As Tatar writes, “Feminist rescriptings of Bluebeard stress the resourcefulness of the heroine, yet they also reveal the degree to which women are complicit in perpetuating the fatal repetition of patriarchal values, foremost among them the self-immolating nature of romantic love” (Secrets 8-9). By not focusing enough on Rhine’s resourcefulness and by including an inexplicable love triangle, DeStefano herself falls prey to the repetition of patriarchal values.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When I started researching this thesis, I was not quite sure in what direction I was headed. I knew I wanted to write about fairy tales, as my graduate work has led me into scholarly analysis of them, and I really wanted to write about dystopian YA novels, because, frankly, I loved reading them. What I have discovered throughout the course of this project, though, is how much more complex a story becomes when fairy tale references are unearthed. With their varied morals and mutable storylines, fairy tales provoke allusions and images that allow a novel to transcend a standard plotline. Fairy tale tropes instill in their readers an expectation of hope and a reminder of life’s difficulties, which makes them an ideal companion for dystopian literature.

As fairy tales evoke the thrill of besting a villain, so too do dystopias evoke the thrill of traversing and surviving frightening future scenarios. The overly structured societies, excessive rules, and insidious surveillance in dystopias present a rigid society that feels deliciously disturbing. The best dystopias, I have found, are the ones that offer a future scenario that could be ours, should our country go just a hair in one partisan direction or the other.

Carrie Hintz describes dystopias as the space where “readers encounter such elements as a rigorously planned society, charismatic leaders or masterminds, control of reproductive freedom, and the prioritization of collective well-being over the fate of the individual” (254). The two books I examined in depth, Marissa Meyer’s Cinder and Lauren DeStefano’s With, offer portions of Hintz’s defining characteristics. In Cinder’s case, the protagonist herself has the opportunity to become a charismatic leader. She is poised to supplant the Lunar mastermind who is currently lording power over society, and she must also consider the greater good over her own interests. Cinder is quite a revolutionary tale, as it features a heroine who is not only powerful, but also not-human. The fact that the Cinderella story makes an appearance—and does not end the way we expect—strengthens the thought-provoking nature of the text.
*Wither* focuses on reproductive freedom, developing a United States in which women are prized for their uteruses and little else. While I critiqued *Wither* for its anti-feminist bent, I do want to point out that the selfishness of the main character is understandable and a provocative quality for a protagonist to have. Considering that adolescents are generally consumed with discovering their own place in the world and testing the limits of the power they have, a character like Rhine offers a realistic examination of how someone might respond in a dystopian scenario such as hers. She is lonely, she is scared, and she uses her femininity to her advantage. She is probably not so different from a lot of contemporary teens.

Additionally, even though I condemned *Wither* for being too consumed with the patriarchal origins of its fairy tale, I also appreciate that the folklore associations allowed me to look at the story in an entirely new light. Moreover, examining what a tale like “Bluebeard” can bring to a text reminded me that not all fairy tales offer hope. I originally thought that my ultimate, admittedly sweeping conclusion about the research I have done is that fairy tales provide a sense of hope and wonder in an otherwise bleak dystopian narrative. But after examining *Cinder* and *Wither* closely, I have realized it is much more complicated than that. Fairy tales may frequently have happy endings, but for every marriage, there is a grisly demise of an antagonist. Dystopias, especially when combined with fairy tales, offer a reminder that not every antagonist is entirely bad. Dystopias frequently examine the nature and origin of a villain’s intentions, reminding us that sometimes a person just needs to survive, and he or she will do whatever it takes to do so.

Occasionally, the protagonist will also take on the role of villain, as I argued that Rhine did to an extent in *Wither*. DeStefano’s novel drew on a fairy tale with dark origins, which complemented its narrator’s negative traits, but even tales with more positive fairy tale associations can provide complex protagonists who tread the line between good and bad. Two novels that fall into this category are Julianna Baggot’s *Pure* and Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*. Baggot’s novel, set in a post-apocalyptic future where the United States has survived a devastating nuclear detonation, invents a fairy tale that one character uses to unlock the mystery of his existence and to find a long-lost sister. The fairy tale language also imparts a delicate, gentle dissonance into a harsh environment. In *Pure*, the narrative switches between several characters, male and female, and not a single one of them
is entirely virtuous or entirely villainous. And they all come together when one character tells
the fairy tale, captivated by its simple prose and determined to unlock its metaphor. In the
case of *Pure*, the fairy tale opens a gateway to a different story while enhancing the primary
one. Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* calls on a familiar fairy tale, “Little Red
Riding Hood,” and on a familiar trope—that of straying from the path. Ryan’s novel takes
rather jaunty fairy tale illusions and turns them into horror scenarios that complicate the
protagonist’s character growth. In another post-apocalyptic environment, this one with
stringent and archaic rules for marriage and family, a frightening fast zombie in a red coat
torments the protagonist, Mary. The red-coated zombie propels Mary onto a path that leads
out of her village—one that nobody is supposed to travel—starting her on a journey of self-
discovery and knowledge. Both *Pure* and *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* use fairy tales to
complicate the protagonist’s motivations, reminding us that even happy tales can serve to
highlight unhappy things.

Additionally, all of these novels successfully illuminate the essential characteristic of
a dystopia—the tug-of-war between the individual and the society. This very aspect makes
dystopias relevant to contemporary teens, regardless of what era they live in. However,
because teens today *do* live in a post-9/11 society, where their sense of safety has been
compromised, and because teens are increasingly exposed to and skilled with technology,
dystopias are especially pertinent. They provide an avenue for readers to examine where their
hyper-technological and bellicose society could end up, and they provide characters through
whom readers can speculate on their own behavior.

In Chapter Two, I concluded that contemporary YA dystopias are particularly
germane because of our society’s reliance on technology, and because they provide a
scintillating, postmodern amalgamation of the real and the illusory. By examining the
dystopian genre and noting where it intersects with the fairy tale classification, I surmised
that both promised safety and comfort for their readers. But in working together, they also
create a sense discomfort, clashing and mashing to remind readers that nothing is ever what it
seems (which is, of course, a long-standing moral of many fairy tales).

Chapter Three focused on the Cinderella tale and how it affects not only fiction, but
also reality and young women in particular. If “Cinderella” in pop culture imposes an
impossible ideal that any significant social event—a prom, a formal, a wedding—is a young
woman’s chance to become a princess, “Cinderella” in Cinder shatters that ideal. Because Cinder offers an entirely new vision of the princess – one who honestly does not care about shimmering with beauty at the prom, one who picks herself up and carries on after not winning the guy—it offers an entirely new version of the traditional tale. Since the Cinderella story is so well-known and commercialized, it is especially significant that Meyer managed to subvert it as well as she did. This is no easy feat, as Jack Zipes points out:

for the most part, the fairy tale has become commercialized in America, and the majority of the fairy tales produced for children and adults pay lip service to feminism by showing how necessary it is for young and old women alike to become independent without challenging the structural embodiment of women in all the institutions that support the present socio-economic system. (Relentless 129)

According to Zipes, the paradox of commercial fairy tales is that they are supposed to teach women how to be feminist and strong while also not toppling the hegemonic order of society. Because Cinder, a commercial success, uses “Cinderella,” a wildly popular tale, to advance the idea of individual strength, noble self-sacrifice, and posthuman acceptance, it manages to challenge societal norms both gender and structural.

Less successful at challenging gender norms is Wither, which I critiqued in Chapter Four. Wither most blatantly does not subvert any norms. Ann Martin claims that in order to be subversive, a fairy tale romance needs to depict “a mutual passion that depends on the equality of both parties” (17). In Wither, the passion between Rhine and her compulsory husband is unequal not only because Rhine reluctantly falls for Linden, but also because she is his prisoner. Their relationship could not get any further out of balance. And in response, Rhine takes her power over Gabriel, her servant, and uses that to coerce him into escaping with her. There is very little romantic or interesting about Wither’s love story, in which the equilibrium of all parties involved is warped.

All of this is not to say that in order to be a subversive text, the story has to feature a non-gender-normative heroine. While there is certainly an influx of so-called kick-ass heroines in dystopias, one could argue that there is little nuance to simply endowing the feminine population with typically masculine traits. I do not have a proposed solution, but I do think that dystopias open up the dialogue about gender normativity, and if they offer girls
role models who are strong both physically and mentally, they are worthy contributions to the pantheon of young adult novels.

In addition to examining gender and power in dystopias, each chapter touched on the idea of the happy ending, discussing the conflict between the fairy-tale expectations of happy endings and the dystopian YA novel’s position as the first in a trilogy. Neither *Wither* nor *Cinder* ends on a traditional happy note, as their dystopian scenarios complicate the concluding narrative and also lay the groundwork for the next book in the series. Rhine escapes her captivity, but due to the dystopian world in which she lives, she is doomed to die in a mere four years. Cinder is humiliated in front of the prince and forced to confront a frightening future. But each one ends on a note of hope—Rhine might be reunited with her brother. And Cinder might save the world. Since these books are the first in a series, that hope brings with it the promise of a resolution. It may not be the tidy ending we find in fairy tales, but ideally, it will offer the reader a satisfactory answer to the questions that have arisen in the course of the series. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has paved the way for children’s books not to shy away from depicting the consequences of battle. This newer crop of literature reminds young readers that not everything ends happily, but that even the worst pain can be endured.

Examining the expectation for hope that accompanies dystopian novels for young readers, Kay Sambell notes that

the convention of the happy ending, in which answers or solutions are eventually supplied, a reassuring return to normality is secured, or a successful outcome to the hero’s quest is achieved, is so pervasive that it amounts to an unwritten law in the production of children’s books. (165)

Disney would have us believe this is true for fairy tales as well, but in many of the fairy tales that are part of our knowledge, a happy ending is not always the case. In the original “Little Red Riding Hood,” Red and Grandmother are eaten, and that’s the end of it. In Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” the titular marine creature loses her chance at immortality and becomes sea foam. We tend to forget that fairy tales have their own harsh realities, and not every piece of literature for young people ends with contentment. Young adult dystopias, since they are aimed at older readers and provide a stark futuristic landscape for their lessons, are also inherently more likely to remind their readers that life can be grim.
But young adult dystopias can still provide hope. What dystopias can do well, with the help of fairy tales, is to offer an ending that is not *only* devastating or didactic or gratifying. They can merge all three of those elements into a thought-provoking conclusion that “emphasizes the inconclusive nature of all stories and experiences” (Martin 13). The difficulties that arise for a reader expecting an orderly ending can lead to puzzlement and ultimately to wonderment, reminding the reader that storytelling is more than a conclusion—it is a journey.

No story exists in a vacuum. Fairy tales bring with them dozens of associations that can be applied to any aspect of the story, and dystopias carry with them the shadows of science fiction and adventure. Additionally, each reader will bring with them certain expectations and hopes. But by engaging with the tropes at their disposal, authors and readers alike can find something that transcends their expectations.
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