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# The Stories We Tell Matter: Finding the Real Hero in American Pop Culture

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The Stories We Tell Matter: Finding the Real Hero in American Pop Culture

By

Madisyn Dowdy

Regis University Honors Program

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## Acknowledgments

I have to first thank my mom, Beth Dowdy, who despite not being a nerd, has always supported me enthusiastically even if she doesn't know what the hell I'm going on about half the time. I want to thank my sister, Alyssa, who sent me many Tik Toks and memes she thought were relevant to this project and was a reliable wall I could bounce even my craziest and dumbest ideas off, especially when this project was initially about Tony Stark. I want to thank Taylor Valliere, my best friend, who never believed me when I said I would get this thesis done over winter break and every weekend after that but still listened to my many plans and always provided useful insight. I want to thank my friends, Beth, Monse, Haidyn, Celine, Grace, Tom, Ferris, Rachel, who supported me through every breakdown and breakthrough. I have to thank all my teachers at Regis University; Dr. Narcisi for helping me discover my passion for stories and for giving me the opportunity to read so many good books, Dr. Dimovitz for making me think way too much about films, Professor Knorr for always being ready to talk writing, pop culture and *Star Wars* with me, and of course Dr. Palmer, my advisor, who was the Giles to my Buffy and who gave me the story and the quote I based this thesis around, provided much-needed advice and help and who without this thesis just would not exist. This is for middle school me who never in her wildest dreams imagined being allowed to write about the things she loved in such a serious way. I have to finish by dedicating every word of this piece to my dad, Richard (Rick) Dowdy, my hero. He not only gave me the stories I've come to define myself by but proved himself to be just as good if not better than the many heroes that populated them. I hope this makes him proud.

## **My Heroes**

What is a hero? I imagine your answer is something like one of your parents, one of your family members. Maybe it's a politician or a leader or a celebrity or a scientist. For an eleven-year-old me the answer was easy, my dad, Commander Richard Dowdy, usually called Rick, of the Navy. My dad was a soldier, fighting for freedom and liberty, taking down foreign terrorists and enemies: the ideal American hero. In my mind, he had a job like a hero out of an action movie. He was the computer guy hidden in Cheyenne Mountain watching the skies for enemy planes and bombs, blowing them sky high when they got too close.

Now I find the question much more difficult. My answer, if there is an answer, is steeped in nostalgia and idealism and longing. The thing about heroes is that they are deeply personal. A hero is not merely a hero to a person. They are representative of what one thinks the ideal person is. A hero is a hero because they act in the way we think is right. They think the right things. They act with the right intentions. They believe in the right causes and ultimately they improve the world they live in. Heroes are an ultimate and idealized version of what we want to be.

And with my dad, as an active soldier, we heard all the time how much of a hero he was. Even though to me, that was the last thing that made him heroic. In fact, as a child, I resented that picture. My dad was deployed to Iraq for a year in 2009 and while he was gone I stood aside bitterly as strangers would tell me what a hero he was for undergoing such a perilous journey at the cost of leaving us. Of course, the world and the

military especially are never so simple, and this disconnect introduced me early to the shifting definition of what a hero is within a wider context.

But while everyone was telling me my dad was a hero because he was a soldier, he was busy actually being my hero by introducing me to many of my other heroes from fiction. My dad filled my head with the stories of heroes from a young age. He was a vigorous sci-fi and fantasy reader; and when he wasn't singing to me, he was reading books of far-off planets, futuristic technology, and people who tried to do good in a world against them and against odds. He introduced me to the world of *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Lord of the Rings* and *Farscape* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

My dad could find heroism in anyone. He often liked side characters like Cordelia, a mean girl who was half antagonist, half ally depending on the episode in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Pippin and Merry from *The Lord of the Rings*, who he thought were unfairly dismissed in the movies. In fact, he often saw heroism in characters who weren't typically considered that way. The only exception to this was *Game of Thrones*. My dad did not hate *Game of Thrones*; it was more like he was disgusted by it and he only kept up out of obligation. When I asked him once about reading the books he told me, "why read it when there is no one to root for? Every single character is despicable and at this point. I'm just hoping the ice walkers will wipe them all out." Here I was thinking heroes were representative of what one thinks the ideal person is, but my dad found characters to be someone to root for not to admire, almost seeking to displace them of that value. This was one of my many complications to the idea of a hero.

My dad believed in heroism but he never seemed to buy into the idea of heroes. He could find heroism but had a harder time pinpointing individuals or characters as heroes. My dad could find the best in the worst of the characters but he always seemed to have a hard time finding a hero. I always wondered if this impulse had to do with pressure of wearing the hero mantle. Especially when it became clear in my later years just how heavily my dad's place the military weighed on him. I suppose if you're looking for solace in fiction, you don't want to saddle the characters you admire with the baggage you can hardly carry.

I, on the other hand, find heroes in everything. I only read works that I thought contained characters that I not only rooted for but aspired to emulate. *Harry Potter* is such a text. It is a fundamental text of my being, tied up with key memories and lessons and ideas and beliefs and morals that foreground my identity. I modeled my life after bookish Hermione, keeping my hair long and bushy and always jumping to answer a question in a class. I admired Harry's bravery and resilience and even appreciated his special kind of obliviousness because it made him all the more human to me. I loved Professor McGonagall's no-nonsense attitude hiding deep care for her students. I loved Neville's growth and effort to succeed despite the many obstacles. I loved Lily Evans, Narcissa Malfoy, and Molly Weasley for fighting for their children above everything else. *Harry Potter* taught me what a hero looked like, but it also showed me what a hero wasn't. Heroism isn't obsession or jealousy or hatred or bigotry or ignorance, it's love and being a light in the darkness. These ideas have influenced my heroes and my villains

ever since, even as my relationship with the series has grown more complicated as I've grown up.

Life isn't that simple though, because even heroes should evolve. My dad and I eventually branched off into our own interests when it became clear I found the stories and worlds he liked to inhabit places I didn't want to spend too much time in. He initially tried to get me into the works of H.G Wells and Orson Scott Card and Robert Heinlein, but I found the plots convoluted and the protagonists less than heroic and the villains not completely in the wrong. I imagine my dad was disappointed, but I was happy with my heroes who only needed love and friendship to overcome evil. That was until *The Hunger Games*, a series that restructured everything I thought I knew about what a hero was, yet reaffirmed my inherent belief that the core of any hero is rooted in love and empathy. A belief that always seemed to wrap back to my dad's kindness and love of stories that would be a constant home for me.

*The Hunger Games* complicated my definition of what a hero is and should be, but it also complicated my understanding of who heroes are within the wider cultural context. The endless debate of Team Peeta vs Team Gale made me realize that not only did people have different heroes but had different heroes because of their personal values. Both characters represent very different things and a choice of either seems to represent the choice between those two ideals. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, for some people, it seemed to be hot, angry, violent men (Gale) and for me, it was soft, caring, and kind men (Peeta). Our heroes reflect who we want to be and who we want to be around. In choosing a hero, whether consciously or unconsciously we are choosing a representation



of the ideal we desire. An individual's hero can tell someone a lot about their morals, values, beliefs, and ideology, thus an individual's rejection of a hero can then point to an ideology they reject.

I saw this disconnect in my own life. Heroes are personal, but they're also examples of the ideal person within the culture, in this case specifically in America. My dad is my personal hero for the stories he gave me, but to the wider culture, he was a hero because he is a soldier. Yet growing up it seemed people were uninterested in the parts of my dad I found heroic. During hero day, my peers didn't want to hear about my dad teaching me to play the piano or to sing or always taking time to read aloud to me. They wanted to hear war stories. They wanted to hear about the missions he ran and the weapons he designed. They didn't want softness or kindness or care. They wanted the interesting bits. Violence and danger and war. The bits I never cared for and the bits that I think took him away from me in the end.

People project personally onto certain heroes while rejecting others, but heroes in media are ultimately produced as representations of a specific ideology, for good or bad. These are my heroes, but what do these heroes mean within a wider context?

### **Joseph Campbell and the Evolving Idea of the Hero**

Any discussion of heroes must bring us to Joseph Campbell. His most well-known work, first published in 1949, *The Hero With A Thousand Face* explores how myth across cultures and across the world often follows a common “hero-path” or an overarching narrative that chronicles the journey of an ideal hero. Campbell created this path by identifying common and similar themes, motifs, and crises that spanned across thousands of works, cultures, and places, that despite some differences seem generally universal to human life.

Campbell finds and explores common humanity and the fundamental questions of living. Who are we? Why are we? What is our place? Campbell finds that heroes are the outlet and the representation of those questions and their answers. After all, heroes are found everywhere and despite the difference in culture, land, and place, our heroes, across time and across the world, have more in common than we may think and thus say something about human nature beyond those boundaries.

According to Campbell, heroes fundamentally represent the unconscious of the individual and of the society. Their obstacles, struggles, desires, morals, and quests are all rooted in the society’s unconscious obstacles, struggles, desires, morals, and quests. Campbell begins his work with an exploration of the unconscious and how the unconscious influences and creates myths. He argues that myth is one of the ways humans have tried to acknowledge and deal with unconscious feelings and thoughts that might upset the status quo. Heroes are allowed to acknowledge unconscious difficulties, usually rooted in sex, violence, lust, desire, jealousy, and hatred, and deal with them as an

individual in order to then present a solution or a way of coping for the audience. Heroes serve as representations of ideal people reflecting the ideal visions of human life who are then able to deal with the big issues and problems that exist within a society that a normal individual cannot. They are able to transform themselves from a raw ideal to a refined one and then come back and show us our society as something transfigured and new.

Campbell defines a hero:

“a man or woman who had been able to battle past his personal and local historical limits to the general valid, normally human form. Such are one’s visions of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psych, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn” (14-15).

A hero is not only able to triumph over their own personal problems and difficulties but also achieve something or discover a state that is beyond the normal person. They are still a character themselves but they also hold and represent the entirety of a society’s psyche. They are a symbol as much as they are a person, representing the good and facing the bad of society and then harnessing that knowledge to teach society about itself.

Heroes are vehicles for individuals to engage with and understand more broadly their society and what it values and what it fears. Campbell says of the reader engaging in reading myth:

“the individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula [The Hero’s Journey ultimately] and let it assist him past his restricting walls. Who and where are his ogres? Those are reflections of the

unsolved enigmas of his own humanity. What are his ideals? Those are symptoms of his grasp of life” (101).

If individuals can find their place in myth, then they can see their place in society. Placement is key because certain figures are placed in specific locations for specific reasons, all ultimately representing a higher ideal. Odysseus is placed as the hero for the same reason Circe is placed as the villain. Odysseus is the ideal Greek man: clever, violent, determined, and, blessed and cursed by fate equally. Circe is a powerful woman, who is able to trick Odysseus from going home by keeping him in too much comfort. Odysseus points to what a hero should be and Circe warns of indulgence and a loss of purpose. Odysseus is positioned as the ‘ideal’ and Circe as the ‘ogre’ to triumph over. These positions then demonstrate the desired traits of a hero and the undesired traits of a villain.

This is where some criticism of Campbell has appeared. Campbell describes a hero as the “perfected unspecific, universal man,” which complicates some things (15). Since nothing can ever be fully unspecific or universal, what’s universal is what’s most commonly seen and accepted. And in the case of heroes, the most universal heroes, in the Western world, are usually honorable fighters who for a long time have been exclusively white, young, handsome, heterosexual men, limiting the definition of hero. We see this more specifically in criticisms of how Campbell incorporates gender.

Ultimately Campbell speaks of the hero as male and many of the steps of the hero's journey are specific encounters with specific female figures, the mother, the seductress, the wife, steps that cannot just be simply reversed for female heroes. That

doesn't mean Campbell doesn't see women as potential heroes; he does or he tries to at least. It's just in the larger context of his work, it seems myth doesn't have a real place for women. Sarah Nicholson in "The Problem of Women in the Work of Joseph Campbell" shows how Campbell attempts to show the women as heroes but is ultimately undone by the position of women as mere enablers for male heroism.

By the very setup of Campbell's hero's journey, women are set up as obstacles and/or helpers and are incapable of exerting any agency, even as heroes. For example, when the hero comes to the meeting with the goddess he is able to transform and gain knowledge through understanding her. If the hero is not a man and she has the proper qualities "the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed—whether she will or no" ( Nicholson 99). The female hero is "conducted" by only being given the choice of whether or not to go. While the male hero isn't given a choice he just gains what he needs from the woman. Nicholson sums this difference up as: " it is she who will be acted upon, she who will be the subject of male heroic action" (189). The ability of heroes to act and make choices is a key part of why we care about them and why we project on them. But if female heroes are not able to act and can only be the extension of male heroic action, then women within the very structure literally don't have a place as a hero.

This goes to a bigger problem with Campbell, which is that for all he seeks to be universal and as wide as possible, the very nature is that certain hero types will be deliberately displaced because they don't fit his constructed narrative. A woman's hero journey looks different from a man's and Campbell seems uninterested in trying to adapt

another journey or even to write a new one completely. Essentially, he refused to give women representation. Nicholson points out, “Woman....lacks a mythic figure that can represent her as a female subjectivity capable of taking shape within her own symbolic order” (191). Women lack representation as heroes and thus lack a place within the heroes narrative. This lack of representation comes from Campbell’s deliberate displacement of those stories. They are hero myths around women. They just don’t fit the construct Campbell has created. So they are not told. If a culture’s myth displaces or ignores stories of heroic women, then it seems, culturally, there is no real place for women within it. We see this proven further in the absence of any discussion of race and sexuality.

There is an absence of discussion of race within Campbell's work that must be acknowledged but due to the scope of my work, focusing on gender and to a lesser extent sexuality, I will not have the room to do the work the issue deserves.

Sexuality however comes up explicitly in Campbell’s work in the usually heterosexual connection between male heroes and various female figures. Specifically in the idea of women as sexual temptresses. Looking back to Sarah Nicholson’s work, we see the absence of women as heroes, but we do see their presence in their role as sexual beings either rewarding or tricking the male hero. An encounter with a temptress is always a reminder of the hero's weakness, usually sexual desire, and the hero's subsequent overcoming of it is further evidence for their role as the hero. This encounter by its nature is traditionally heterosexual with women as a temptress and men as a hero for overcoming his sexual desire for her. This step deliberately displaces heroes outside

straight men. If overcoming sexual desire for a woman is an important step for a hero to prove their heroism. Then anyone not having sexual desire for a woman becomes displaced. This lack of place for heroes outside straight men points to a key, yet unspoken observation in Campbell's work. If the heroes and stories of a culture point to the implicit desires, fears, and beliefs, what does the absence of other desires, fears and beliefs mean?

Campbell by claiming to be universal and unspecific, accepts specific traits as universal and rejects others and as a consequence creates a narrative that has no place for women, people of color and LGBT+ people. Michelle Kenney, a 9th-grade teacher points to this reason as to why she doesn't teach Campbell or his hero's journey in her class. She argues, "I want all my students to not only recognize themselves in their reading, but also to learn about the world beyond, acknowledge their responsibilities to each other, and learn how to come together to shape the world that they live in" (Kenney). Kenney points to a large flaw in Campbell's narrative. Campbell's hero's journey is the story of one person's, usually a man's, road to self-discovery. It's inherently a selfish and individualistic narrative.

Kenney asks the question if we focus or only idealize one specific individual and their journey how do we learn to treat those around us? Especially when that narrative is so exclusionary. Campbell props up the stories of men and displaces women. It has no room for LGBT+ individuals due to reliance on compulsive heterosexuality and a strict gender binary. Kenney believes that the universal appeal of Campbell's work is not nearly as universal as it claims and is in fact very limiting in its representation and thus a limiting narrative to teach her students.

While these criticisms are valid and well-founded. I believe Campbell creates a useful lens we can use to examine America's own myths and stories. Campbell's biases and the absence of any critical examination of race, gender, and sexuality just prove Campbell's point. His displacement of woman in the myths he examines, the lack of reference to the impact race has and complete erasure of non-heterosexual individuals demonstrates how stories and culture displace the perceived other.

Who our heroes are and who our heroes aren't says something about us as individuals and us as a society. They represent our ideals and they fight our fears. Now more than ever. Campbell finishes his study by looking at the place his mythic hero's journey might have in a world with no mythology. He writes, "then all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forums, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group—none in the world: all is in the individual" (334). With no common mythology or religion or even narrative, all that seems left of the hero is in the individual. With science and technology, humanity has no need for the sweeping mythologies of exceptional people with exceptional powers, teaching us what is ideal in society and what is wrong. No, now it is up to the individual to create that narrative for themselves. The problem of course is that this is wrong.

Heroes have become much more deeply personal and varied over the years, but they are still vehicles for larger societal ideals and fears. We may not have a large encompassing mythology, but we still have just as many encompassing narratives and stories that are told over and over showcasing our societal fears and ideals. Meaning can still be found in our shared stories. Even with our advanced science and technology,



we're still telling the same stories all seeking answers to the same age-old questions. Who are we? Why are we? What is our place? We're still sharing stories in all kinds of new forms to try and answer them. Having laptops or vaccines doesn't erase this impulse. In fact, it makes the questions all the more urgent and complex. Even if it looks a little different.

Traditional mythology may no longer exist as we knew it in modern-day society, but I believe that there is still the existence of mythology in a new form, specifically in that of American pop culture. In a series of interviews with Bill Moyers, titled *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* Campbell and Moyers discuss myth as "life models" (Campbell). Narratives that have been cultivated a certain way by a certain society and sustained by a certain way of living that are then representative of that society specifically. Myth as a life model both illustrates and demonstrates how one should live in the society it was created for. Heroes should teach the responsibilities one has to their community. But life models can't just be copied and pasted from culture to culture. They're specific to their society. They change and evolve to better exemplify and reflect the ideals and people of the society they're created by and for. They're a model of what's good and bad in society. So, if myth is a model, then myth can be any sort of media that seeks to represent the society that creates it.

In a way, Campbell's work has become a life model for American culture. Campbell may not think there is any modern-day mythology, but his very work has become a myth in a storytelling and cultural context. The hero's journey is one of the most popular and well-known structures for narratives in American culture, and once you

become aware of it you see it everywhere. Some of America's most popular franchises and movies follow the pattern. Think *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion King*, *Harry Potter*, *Iron Man*, *the Matrix*, and probably dozens of others. Most of these works follow protagonists who leave their normal life behind in pursuit of something life or society saving and cross over into new worlds to find it. There's usually a denial of the call and a mentor figure of some sort to push the protagonist forward. There's a series of tests and obstacles and encounters with friends, allies, and enemies. Ultimately ending with the protagonist facing the villain and defeating them only to return changed to their previous life.

In fact, George Lucas was directly inspired by Campbell's work basing much of his *Star Wars* trilogy on it. Lucas even viewed Campbell as a mentor figure, calling him "his Yoda" (Lucas). Neither *Star Wars* nor any of the mentioned movies follow all of the steps exactly, but that's not the point, no myth matches another exactly. What matters is that they follow the same loose structure and that they all showcase ideal heroes to represent and stand up for the societal values of the culture that creates them. Ultimately Campbell's work serves not only as a lens to view our culture's stories, but the very life model they are based on.

### **Heroes and Us**

Campbell's Hero's Journey proves that the stories a culture tells are representations of a society's true values, ideals, beliefs, and fears. This means then that the heroes within those stories are representations of how we think we should live out our values and ideals and how we should face and overcome our fears and obstacles. Popular works like *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* and their attached heroes contain life models of 21st-century American ideals and fears. They explore large looming issues of destiny and choice, love and hatred, war and peace, freedom and fascism, the individual and the communal. More importantly, their heroes and villains serve as life models of what is good and evil and what is desired and what is rejected, within modern-day American society. The heroes in these works represent us, good and bad.

Who our heroes reflect our own real-life morals, values, ideals, and fears. Heroes are created and defined by a collective understanding of what is good and what is wanted in culture. Think back to my first question, what is a hero? If you thought doctor, policeman, firefighter, soldier, politician, etc. I imagine, unless you are consciously aware of these biases then maybe you didn't, you subconsciously imagined white men in those roles. You also probably weren't even aware of the characteristics I named. You didn't see them as a white man, just a doctor, or a soldier. That's because that's who, most generally, America's most unspecific, most universal hero is. Much like how Campbell's hero's journey, purposely or not, positions straight men as the main and ideal heroes, American culture does the same but with the added dimension of race, usually making straight white men the common, hero figure in American culture.

Let's look at some of the works I mentioned earlier. The original *Star Wars* *Trilogy*'s hero was Luke Skywalker, played by Mark Hamill, a white man in his 20s at the time. Almost all the supporting and side characters are aliens or white men, with the only exceptions being Princess Leia, played by Carrie Fisher, a white woman and Lando Calrissian, played by Billy Dee Williams, a black man.

All the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* movies are white men and there are only four total named women (Eowyn, Arwen, Galadriel, and Rosie), all of whom are white. Tolkien in the books didn't seem too focused on race, but he defaulted all the good characters to white and all the bad men, specifically, as darker or coded Middle Eastern. We see the same coding in the movies, where the bad men are darker skinned and the good men are all white. There is also some subtext within the novels implying that Sam Gamgee, Frodo's servant in the books less in the movies, might actually have darker skin than the rest of the hobbits. This was ignored because I imagine the creators didn't want their sole character of color to play a servant. The heroes in *The Lion King* are lions so their race is irrelevant, but almost all the characters are male, except for the female love interest and the mom.

In *Harry Potter*, there's a little more gender diversity. There are a variety of female characters, and one of them, Hermione Granger, played by Emma Watson, is one of the main protagonists. But all the important characters are white men (Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Severus Snape, Dumbledore, Voldemort).

On top of that, not a single one of these works has a queer character. Dumbledore does not count, since he isn't queer in the actual text. Ultimately, the majority of heroes in

these significant cultural works gain their universality by being young, heterosexual, white men.

While heroes show the ideals, feelings, and actions that are accepted. Villains and characters that are not viewed as heroic show the ideals, feelings, and actions that are not. Characters like Voldemort, President Snow, and Palpatine are all evil dictators who force their violent will on people who disagree. They have no regard for human life and are equally cruel to their allies as they are their enemies. They're usually ugly or old or fat and have some sort of disfigurement or disability to symbolize otherness to the heroes usually attractive, young, white self. Scar from *The Lion King* is othered by a scar on his face and is drawn much darker than his heroic brother and his son. Darth Vader in *Star Wars* is contained in an intimidating black machine suit because he has had all his limbs cut off and been maimed and burned. His face is grotesque and ugly and he is ashamed for it to be seen. Villains are given certain traits and coded with othering qualities, to both establish their evilness and represent the traits that are unwanted and despised by the larger culture.

This doesn't mean that certain characters are heroes because their existence as young, heterosexual, white, men make them that way or that villains are villainous because they are not young, heterosexual, white men. It just demonstrates those are the traits that are most often portrayed as heroic or villainous. This also doesn't mean that people who are not heterosexual, white men can't be heroes. Even in these works mentioned, there are a few exceptions to the 'straight white men' rule and slowly it seems that those exceptions are becoming more and more the rule. In fact, over the past twenty

years, we've expanded our definition of hero to be a little broader than that. However, that doesn't come without a lot of pushback and controversy. A key part of Campbell's definition of a hero is that a hero is 'unspecific' and 'universal' and heroes who are not heterosexual, white, men are not the norm and thus too specific and not accepted as universal. This is demonstrated in the reception a female hero receives in pop culture.

*The Hunger Games* and Disney's *Star Wars* Sequel Trilogy showcase women as their protagonists. They were some of the biggest and the most profitable female lead franchises, but they also faced controversy because of their gender. When *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was released by Disney in 2015, there was immediate backlash from older, male fans about Rey's role as the protagonist. They claimed she was overpowered, boring and poorly written, and not deserving of the hero title. Along with that, Disney itself didn't think she was very profitable and literally displaced her from most of the merchandise that came from *her* movies. There was of course outrage about this, prompting social media campaigns like #wheresrey and drawing attention to the ongoing problem of cutting women from toys and merchandise that has been traditionally targeted at men, even though there is a female audience (Framke).

*The Hunger Games* didn't have the same widespread dismissal, but the series was always viewed on the same level as *Twilight* with many reviews, criticisms, and general opinions comparing the two, despite the fact the series shared very few similarities (Dockterman). This comparison mostly seems rooted in the fact that both series feature a female protagonist and have a love triangle (Harper). There's also a lot of criticism of Katniss's character, especially from male fans and critics, saying she is too boring or too

stoic, which is then twisted into criticism of her being too emotional and too shallow in the last book when she is suffering from debilitating PTSD (Marceau).

Too often, criticism of female heroes is rooted in criticism not of their character or role but of their gender. Two big examples of which are Rey from *Star Wars* and Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel*. Rey is demeaned and dismissed as a ‘mary sue,’ a perfect character who excels at anything, by male critics because of her unfairly good pilot skills and force ability (Lindsay). Even though she exhibits the same power and ability level as Luke Skywalker does in *New Hope*. The only difference between the two characters is Rey is a woman and Luke is a man, highlighting that the criticism is inherently based in sexism.

Captain Marvel faced the same criticism of being too powerful and boring. But also received a lot of hatred for not looking ‘sexy’ or feminine enough. She wore a very gender neutral suit that deliberately doesn’t sexualize her in the way past female heroes have been. Then when the trailer originally came out, many men complained about Captain Marvel not smiling enough. So actress Brie Larson, who plays Captain Marvel, hit back, editing all the other male heroes with smiles to highlight how ridiculous and sexist the criticism is (Alexander).

So while the female protagonists of *Hunger Games*, *Captain Marvel*, and The *Star Wars* Sequel Trilogy are just as heroic as the male heroes from other works. It is clear they are not accepted in the same way. This is because they don’t match the universal values, beliefs, and morals of American culture. They are not an ideal hero, because they are by their gender incapable of being seen as universal and unspecific.

They are highly specific by their deviation. Within the strict gender binary context American culture generally accepts, women by not being men cannot be universal. That's not to say Rey, Captain Marvel and Katniss are not heroes. They are. The problem is when the culture struggles or refuses to accept them as heroes. A refusal that demonstrates the society's values and ideals that does not allow for heroes like them. Whether unconsciously or consciously, audiences find ways to dislike and dismiss female heroes for sexist reasons. We see this in the criticism of a lack of an appealing (usually feminine) appearance, in judging their skill level as beyond a woman and for being present when a man could just as easily fill the role. Audiences then displace women as heroes because they view the role of a hero as implicitly masculine roles and are thus uncomfortable with women filling those roles.

Yet there seems to be a slow but steady attitude change towards such heroes. Society is evolving and our heroes are too. Just in the past five years Hollywood has leaned into the female hero and made a lot of money doing it. Rey's inclusion in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, despite the many controversies, ultimately boosted major profits for Disney, drawing in a record amount of female audience members and ultimately grossing Disney 4.475 billion dollars (Forbes).

Women are becoming more and more represented in superhero movies. *Wonder Woman*, the first major female lead superhero blockbuster was released in 2017 to rave reviews and eventually grossed over 800 million dollars, becoming the highest-grossing movie by a female director. Wonder Woman is a unique hero, in that she can embrace her feminine side while still standing as the most powerful warrior who ultimately saves the



world through the recognition and acceptance of love. *Captain Marvel* made even more money, grossing over a billion dollars showcasing a more masculine female hero, who is closed off and less emotional, but no less powerful.

Before Covid-19 broke out and ruined everything, 2020 was supposed to be the year of female superheroes and protagonists, with the release of a record-breaking amount of movies starring women. There were going to be a record three female-fronted superhero movies released, *Birds of Prey*, *Black Widow*, and *Wonder Woman: 1984*. Disney's live-action remake of *Mulan* was set to break records with an all-Asian cast and a female protagonist. Netflix's superhero blockbuster, *The Old Guard*, focuses on a group of immortal soldiers led by the oldest female warrior of all time who mentors the protagonist, a young black woman. A lot of money is being made by telling the stories of female heroes, indicating a change in culture large enough to redefine our definition of what a hero is and what it can be.

However as female heroes are being accepted as more universal, there is still a rejection of heroes with feminine qualities, both male and female. All of the female heroes I have mentioned previously still fall into a very specific type of hero, that of the warrior patriot. The heroes American society has looked up to have for a long time been violent white men and while there are moves away from that, the hero type still seems to be that of a soldier. A soldier by their very nature conducts violence for the sake of the greater good. Whether that be for a personal connection to a person or a group or a higher cause like one's country. Rey, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Mulan, etc. are all

warriors and the violence they cause, regardless of their gender, is still associated enough with masculinity to allow them to be considered heroes.

When female heroes are criticized, and they often are, they are criticized for their feminine traits, like showing emotion, giving empathy to strangers or even their villains, or not looking traditional feminine. They are more accepted when they conduct themselves as merely female versions of male soldiers. Rey is the hero because she is a Jedi and she overcomes her ties to the dark side to kill Palpatine. Wonder Woman is the hero because she uses love to redirect violence and kill Ares. Captain Marvel destroys her enemies' ships and defeats her previous captor with violence. Mulan is literally a soldier, fighting the Huns to save China. These characters are only a perceived displacement that ultimately still upholds and proves the fundamental values of masculine violence. That's not to say these characters don't have other values or can be simplified to masculine violence. But to show that even attempts to undercut or redefine America's definition of a hero through the use of gender, still seems to define heroes by their ability to do violence.

One of America's key values is that of rightful violence. Our country was born on the idea of fighting and violently overthrowing cruel authority. The second rule in our constitution is the right to keep guns in order to protect an individual's right from the government. Prioritizing the people's right to own weapons and conduct violence against perceived threats to their security over every other amendment. Our famous figures and heroes are all soldiers or war conductors. Think George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Our president, our highest leader is the Commander in Chief of all our armed forces. The USA is one of the only countries to still

have and use the death penalty. In 2019, the USA executed 22 people becoming the sixth country with the highest number of executions putting us behind China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt (*Death Penalty Information Center*). We are the country that dropped the first atomic bomb without a warning on Japan and declared war on Afghanistan barely a few weeks after 9/11. Rightful violence is our life model and American heroes are always the ideal conductors of that righteous violence.

In American culture, heroes are then defined by their ability to conduct violence. Violence is inherently masculine, not just because of its long history of traditionally being conducted by men, but because violence comes from a place of strength and proves strength. Masculinity then comes from strength. The ability to conduct the best violence shows strength and inability/refusal to do so shows weakness. Anything besides violence is not masculine and not unacceptable and thus not heroic.

This is why traits like empathy, mercy, and kindness are rejected as weak. They are not violent and they don't exhibit strength. So those traits become associated with femininity and then weakness until they become traits that the American culture does not desire and might outright demean. Masculinity and its associated traits, (strength, violence, superiority) are idealized and femininity and its associated traits (love, empathy, kindness) are displaced and demeaned. Our heroes then become the masculine ideal even if they aren't men.

Yet non-masculine heroes exist. In fact, they seem to be thriving. The biggest star and hero of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Tony Stark/Iron Man, is very different from traditional male heroes. His powers aren't rooted in physical strength but in his brain and

skill. He seems to genuinely love and respect his wife and clearly adores his daughter and tells her that explicitly again and again. He is aware of the violence he causes and cares about the consequences and works hard to mitigate it as much as possible. Tony Stark represents a new kind of ideal hero. One that's leagues above the long traditional emotionally repressed, gun-slinging Western cowboy or the really hot, action film star or the PTSD-ridden soldier plagued with trauma that prevents him from forming real connections. Even Captain America/Steve Rogers, in the same franchise, is a representative of the evolution and growth of American ideals since his original conception. No longer a soldier punching Hitler for World War II propaganda, Captain America in a post 9/11 world doesn't trust the government and stands up for the little guy. Our heroes are evolving and representing our new, much higher ideals, ones that go beyond the violent, masculine hero. American values seem to be shifting!

Except they aren't. Iron Man and Captain America are still at their core masculine heroes, made heroic by their righteous violence. And if either of them were as revolutionary as I entertained they wouldn't have become as popular as they are or even be considered heroic. If Iron Man really cared about the violence he caused, he would stop committing violence. If Captain America really cared about the little guy, he would be defending protestors and fighting police or advocating for the marginalized. Not invading foreign countries for the sake of his own personal mission. But those characters would never do those things because those things are not heroic. Captain America is not Captain America without fighting Nazis or defeating HYDRA. Iron Man is not Iron Man

without blowing things up or making weapons. These characters, regardless of anything else, are heroes because of the violence they commit.

America's idealization of violent white men had never totally allowed for any other type of hero. Even though those heroes exist. They're forcibly displaced by a society and a culture that is not quite so accepting or desiring of those values. However, I think the existence of an alternate kind of hero, of a better hero, can give hope for a better America. Righteous violence doesn't have to be our life model. We have other examples. Yet we cling to a toxic story and an even more toxic hero ideal.

I have put together two case studies on two major cultural artifacts, where wider culture has propped up the wrong person as the ideal hero at the cost of displacing the real hero. I demonstrate how and why certain heroes are accepted and why others are not. Then I will examine what our chosen heroes and what our rejected heroes say about us. Ultimately I will then examine the wider cultural consequences of choosing the wrong story and rejecting the right one.

Vietnam War writer Tim O'Brien in his novel *The Things They Carried* tells a variety of different stories. Some true and some not to demonstrate the power of stories. He argues it doesn't matter how real or not real the stories or accounts or conversations are because regardless they have an impact on a reader. In fact, O'Brien seems to think regardless of truth, "stories can save us" (O'Brien 230). And I believe this to be true of the stories we consume, on a personal level and on a cultural one. The stories we consume matter. *They mean something*. Whether they are real or not. They can save us, but they can just as easily destroy us. If we accept the dangerous story, if we idealize the

toxic hero and accept righteous violence as the only heroic thing, our stories will erode the things that really matter. Things like connection, love, and empathy. They will allow us to prop up false heroes and accept dangerous people as our saviors. Luckily the stories we tell ourselves do contain that story that can save us. They have the heroes we really need. We just have to choose the right one.

## Chapter 1: The Responsibility of Love in *Harry Potter*

*“Harry, suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human.”*

~Albus Dumbledore to Harry Potter, *Harry Potter: The Order of the Phoenix*~



It was 2007, the best year of my life I decided one July night. We were set to go to Disney World in the fall, I had recently gotten news that my best friend Avery and I were set to be in the same third-grade class, I had found a battered copy of the first *Harry Potter* book at a garage sale and finally begun the series with my dad who had lost his copy a long time ago, and that night my dad was taking me to Borders *Harry Potter: The Deathly Hallows* release party. He had convinced my mom to let me out long after my bedtime and attend the party and then help him buy the book promptly at midnight.

I was ecstatic bouncing in my seat the whole way there asking probably too many questions and hardly listening to one of the *Harry Potter* audiobooks playing in the background. My dad seemed to me just as ecstatic, though I believed adults were hardly

allowed to show it so blatantly, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and answering my inane questions with careful thought and consideration like the questions meant something. I'll never forget how he smiled, something he didn't do as often as I liked, even before we arrived.

Arriving at Borders I could only describe my feelings as similar to how I imagined Harry Potter felt seeing Diagon Alley for the first time. There were crowds of people all dressed up, wearing robes and costumes some ridiculously obscure and some bluntly obvious. I remember thinking that I saw too many Snapes and too many Dumbledore's and not nearly enough Hermione's. There were games themed after Quidditch where kids could win candy by throwing the snitch through a small hole and others just Harry Potter spins offs of regular games like cornhole or hopscotch. There were multiple different themed trivia tables. One where my dad won me a bookmark for knowing the spell Harry used on Draco in *The Half-Blood Prince*. I read signs cursing Severus Snape or predicting his double-cross. I heard predictions for characters and things I didn't know. And for how mysterious and confusing so much of the content was, I was enchanted by the costumes, the atmosphere of anticipation, and how much everyone loved these characters, but especially by how genuinely excited my dad was for it all.

My dad was like a kid in the candy store. He pointed things out, helped me read signs I could barely decipher, explained things I didn't know, and answered my questions with, "you'll just have to read to find out," and a knowing grin. The funniest thing was he hadn't even preordered the book at Borders. He had actually bought it at King Soopers



even though you had to have preordered a book from Borders to get into the party. When I pointed out this inconsistency, he just told me with a mischievous grin that technically he had preordered the book and it wasn't like King Soopers was having a party.

We left the party late to get to King Soopers by 11:30 which was open exclusively for people to buy the book at midnight. Even though I was exhausted, I stood in the line for the book and even let my dad convince me to read a few pages of *The Sorcerer Stone* to an eager crowd so excited for the newest book they listened attentively to a nine-year-old stutter through the paragraphs. Then after hours of anticipation, we finally got the book and he allowed me the honor of holding it on the drive home as long as I didn't try to read ahead and spoil it for myself.

I watched my dad devour the book over the course of three days enviously. We were barely halfway through the first book and making no real progress and it felt like it would be years before I knew why people believed Snape might be a good person. Something I adamantly saw no real potential for. We read half a chapter a night, which was by no means enough, and this slowness in part was due to me. Part of our deal of reading the series aloud together was that I had to read every few pages and at the time I was struggling badly with reading. So much so that my parents were worried I might never learn. I loved *Harry Potter*, but I resented having to decipher and stumble through the words when my dad was much more capable of reading the story for me. When I complained about this, he would tell me that wasn't the point. He warned me that he wouldn't always be there to read the words for me. He asked, "didn't I want my own

direct access to the world, instead of being dependent on him for stories?” I was very unhappy with this initially, but he was right. He usually was.

One day something clicked and suddenly I understood. I could see the letters and the words and the sentences and the paragraphs and I knew the stories. They had been unknowable, and then I knew them. As a kid, I thought it was magic, that *Harry Potter* by proximity gave me the power to understand the words or that maybe my dad handed off some of his power to me. It was really the hard work and dedication of both of my parents who pushed me to read anything and everything and got me the help and resources I needed so I wouldn’t fall behind. It was my dad taking time to teach me, to give me space and opportunity to learn with and from him.

My dad and I read *Harry Potter* off and on over the next few years. Some weeks we’d read a chapter a night, sometimes he’d get so busy at work the books wouldn’t be touched for weeks at a time. But despite my growing need to devour every text ever to make up for the years I spent resenting books, I never read *Harry Potter* without my dad. It was a tradition, not a consistent one, but one regardless. We’d sit on the couch or on my parent’s bed, and we’d switch off chapters, except for when I was ‘too tired’ from reading during the day, and I demanded he read. He saw right through my excuse, but he’d read anyway. He wouldn’t always be there to tell me the story, but for the moment he was so he’d read.

We made it halfway through *The Goblet of Fire* when he was deployed to Iraq in 2009 for twelve months. Everyone told me he was a hero, but I thought if he were a real

hero, he wouldn't have left. That's the complication of heroes. They change as we face our own challenges and battles.

After he was gone, I refused to touch the books even though he gave me explicit permission I could and should continue them without him and I was dying to know how Harry was going to defeat his dragon. I went so far as to never even read anything even vaguely associated with him. He would send me books back from wherever he was stationed and I just wouldn't touch them, leaving them in a little stack by my bed next to the *Harry Potter* series.

About halfway through his deployment, one night I awoke from a nightmare that I could remember nothing of except how afraid I was for my dad, stuck across the world in a country that didn't want him there. I didn't want to wake my mom, so I did the only thing I felt like I could do. I wiped the dust off of *The Goblet of Fire* and I read for hours using the flashlight I had hidden for this purpose until the sun crept over the mountain and I fell asleep slumped over the book. My mom was unhappy to find the dead and stolen flashlight the next morning.

Once I started though, I couldn't stop, I finished *The Goblet of Fire* within the day and sped through *The Order of the Phoenix* in a week. I imagined I looked like my dad speeding his way through *The Deathly Hallows* those few years ago and the thought made me happy in a way I couldn't explain. I liked the feeling of being like him.

While overseas my dad was deployed in Iraq he participated in this program where he was recorded reading books to be sent back to us, so we could see him and listen to him. Across the world, thousands of miles away, sitting in a barren white room

in front of a camera he read just like he had all those years ago with me draped over his shoulder, furrowed brow in all glaring as he read the scribbles on the page. After feeling nothing but the ache of separation and loneliness and fear, I finally found comfort in the shared words, the shared story, and the shared heroes. My dad might have been a faraway hero in a desert land, but even thousands of miles away he could still gift me the stories of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger and the Weasley Family, characters who could take care of me until he got back.

*The Harry Potter* series was where I learned what heroes were. Harry Potter is one of those truly earnest books that genuinely believes love and empathy and connection are the most powerful forces in the world. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, after revealing the prophecy, Dumbledore explains to Harry why he is the only one who will be able to defeat Voldemort: “you are protected, in short, by your ability to love” (Rowling 511). Love becomes protection and the ability to love despite pain becomes a defense against the most corrupting forces. Heroism is found in love and fostered by love. It is where the loving good stands against a hateful evil. Being a hero is to love and protect your family, your partner, your friends, your acquaintances. In *Harry Potter*, heroism is simple as loving and caring for someone else. After all, the battle between Harry Potter and Voldemort was always about love and what kind of love was more powerful, the selfish love for your own self-preservation or the love you have for the people who have died for you and the people who have fought for you. And love always wins.

J. K. Rowling makes it no secret that at its heart *Harry Potter* is about the heroism of love. The very series begins with an act of love that is so powerful it saves Harry and

kills Voldemort. Lily Evans Potter so loved her son she died for him and her sacrifice was strong enough to protect Harry even after Lily was long gone. In the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry is able to gain the Sorcerer's Stone through his sole desire to protect his friends. In the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry and Hermione risk their lives to save Sirius and Buckbeak from unfair fates. In the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry ties for first in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament because he loves too much, desiring to protect both his friends and then saving Fleur's sister because he didn't want her punished for Fleur's failure. In the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is able to subvert Voldemort's possession of him through the very act of loving and grieving. Finally, in the last book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, sacrificed himself in order to save his friends. Over and over Harry is not heroic because of his strength or his intelligence or his circumstances but because he cares so much for the people around him. It is Harry's love that makes him so powerful and it is what makes him a hero.

But it is not the mere presence of love that makes Harry heroic; it is the acts of love that give him his power. The *intention* of love is just as important as the *act* of love; in fact, intention is what colors the action and makes it as powerful as it is. We see this most plainly in Harry's final face-off with Voldemort in the last book.

‘I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people—’

‘But you did not!’

‘—I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did.’ (738)

Harry meant to die when he faced Voldemort, that is after all the point of a sacrifice. And his intention comes not from wanting to gain power or stand victorious over Voldemort, but from the desire to stop him from hurting people. Harry's love is responsible in that it is for other people. It is a selfless love fully dedicated to the people Harry loves. In that way Harry's sacrifice then mirrors Lily, creating protection for the people they held more dear. It doesn't matter that Harry doesn't die, all that matters is that *he meant to* and it is this intention that allows him to live and to defeat Voldemort.

Yet this isn't fully true. J.K Rowling seems to be at war with herself about what kind of love is good and what kind of love is not. Specifically in regards to the inclusion of this responsible love which is solely a selfless love and desire to care for other people. Bringing us to the great complexity of this series. In *Harry Potter* it is not merely love that makes a person a hero; it is a specific kind of love from a specific kind of person that makes someone a hero. Meaning that only very narrow kinds of traditional love qualify as heroic and anything else doesn't count. We see this in how certain characters are celebrated and elevated by their love while other characters are dismissed or demeaned for their less traditional kind of love. We see this in how maternal love saves over and over, but paternal love either doesn't exist or isn't relevant. Traditional love trumps responsible love and heroes defined by responsible love are displaced by those motivated by traditional love.

An important part for understanding which kind of love is acceptable and which is not is understanding the difference between what I have come to define as traditional love and responsible love. Within this context, love is defined by connecting with other people

and it does not indicate emotion or the validity of said emotion. I've also chosen to use traditional as being most commonly accepted, which does not make it bad or good on its own. It's just the common type of love that is accepted and praised by the author, the narrative, and the audience. Traditional love is a protective, strong love and it is also only allowed in the context of romance or familial ties and is most associated with the male characters of the series. We will see in my examples how more often than not traditional love is selfish and more focused on how the love affects the person exhibiting it and not the people they are loving. This then means traditional love is tied with common ideals of masculinity, as it is protective and is often dismissive of those it is protecting.

In opposition to traditional love, responsible love is associated with femininity and entirely selfless. Responsible love in *Harry Potter* seems to be more focused on feelings and caretaking, marking it as feminine. Responsible love is a love that is given freely to other people. It is usually in the service of others. Yet the feminine coding of it is seen as less than the traditional masculine love, which is active and protective.

Female characters showing this kind of love are usually allowed such displays of emotions. As long as it is displayed in traditional ways usually violently. The way Rowling uses maternal love is such an example. Molly, Lily, and Narcissa are allowed to care about their children. Their intentions come from a feminine coded love, maternal, but their actions are violently protective of those children. They are not merely taking care of their children. They are actively and often violently protecting them, making their actions more masculine and thus more acceptable and heroic.

Male characters showing responsible love are either side-swept in the narrative or punished for demonstrating such a love. In fact if men are allowed to love at all, they have to suffer to prove it. James Potter dies to give Lily and Harry time to escape. He protects them using his literal body instead of any violent means. So his sacrifice is hardly acknowledged by the narrative. In fact, Rowling goes out of her way throughout the series to make James unheroic by portraying him as an arrogant bully. Hagrid's caretaking efforts towards the various monstrous creatures (Nobert, Fluffy, Aragog, Grawp) in the book are often met with dismissal, ridicule and condemnation. Sirius's care for Buckbeak distracts him from being there when Harry calls to see if his nightmares about Sirius being taken by Voldemort are real. Cedric Diggory's compassion for Harry in the maze ends up with him murdered thoughtlessly by Voldemort. All of these are acts of selfless service, taking care of the people/things these characters care about and each one ends with the character at best being mocked for it and at worst killed for it. Clearly responsible love as demonstrated by male characters is not the kind of love that Rowling thinks is powerful and in fact must be punished or pushed aside.

Now you might think that Dumbledore and Snape both exhibit forms of responsible love. After all Snape is a character completely motivated by love and Dumbledore is driven by love and the loss of love. Especially compared to many other conventional male characters. If Rowling was so dismissive of responsible love, wouldn't Snape and Dumbledore be dismissed or punished for their demonstrations of such a love? Or maybe, do they in fact subvert that issue and prove the power of responsible love?



No. They don't. Dumbledore and Snape only have illusions of responsible love and in fact do not subvert ideals of traditional love, but uphold it. The only male character who may come close to embodying responsible love is actually Neville Longbottom. Until Rowling displaces him and doesn't allow him to be a hero until he rejects responsible love and embraces the masculinity of traditional love.

We must start by talking about the illusions of responsible love of both Dumbledore and Snape. I personally despise both Dumbledore and Snape. I have despised them since first reading the series and my feelings after multiple rereads have never changed but grown more hostile. Yet the world and my friends insist on arguing the point with me. They say in fact Snape and Dumbledore are heroic because of their capacity to love. Especially Snape. After all, Snape becomes a double agent because of his 'love' for Lily. He saves Harry multiple times throughout the book and kills Dumbledore to preserve Draco Malfoy's innocence.

Dumbledore is the one who recognizes the power of love, who acknowledges it in the text explicitly and is able to harness the power of it. He tries to protect Harry from all the terrible details and things that will only weigh him down. And for all they make bad choices and mistakes their intentions of love redeem them and allow them their places as heroes.

Just a few weeks ago, an Instagram account I follow posted a picture of Snape protecting Harry, Hermione, and Ron from Lupin in werewolf form captioned, "SNAPE IS THE GREATEST HERO OF ALL TIME! Change my mind in the comments"

(@storybook.erin). Considering my topic, I was of course very interested in what discourse would be stirred, so I looked at the comments.

There was a lot of arguing. Some comments were along the lines of just agreeing. “You speak the truth” (@arprincess24). “I can’t. He is the greatest hero of all time” (@theoriginalstrawberry). “Best character in the HP series. No one can tell me otherwise” (@\_tyralivingston). “Agreed! Unsung hero!” (@kriiiziaaa)! Very few people gave reasons as to why they agreed, but some gave a defense. “Honestly he’s great because he was so behind the scenes about it and NOBODY knew until the end what he REALLY did to keep Harry safe, despite his feelings towards James” (@hannahlexus.p). “He didn’t want to be known or remembered as a hero. He just wanted to do right by Lily” (@lucyluvzpprlngold). “I think despite all the bad things Snape did and was, and all that he did to Harry....he still did the right thing in the end and he really did try his best to protect Harry in the end. All his efforts in training Harry to keep Voldemort out of his mind and all was done out of tough love. Maybe a small part of him really did WANT to protect and love all that Lily loved” (@cazm579). These defenses didn’t do anything to change my mind, but they highlighted the reason people considered Snape was a hero: the intention of his love for Lily. All of the substantial defenses reference Lily and imply that his desire “to do right by Lily” or protect Harry for Lily, is enough to justify his other actions because ultimately he is acting from a place of love.

But for every agreement, there was also fierce disagreement. “He bullied a child because he didn’t like the boy’s father and couldn’t separate his contempt” (@theexquisitewitch). “Snape was an incel. He didn’t love Lily, he was obsessed with

her. He was willing to let Harry and James die as long as Lily didn't" (@kenabw). "He created toxic relationships with everyone and was dangerously possessive of Lily. He punished a child for having been born to the wrong parents and put his trauma on Harry instead of learning to cope" (@deathhiccup). "Snape was a wizard supremacist who joined the Death Eaters in response to being rejected by Lily (after feeling entitled to her affection even though he called her a slur)" (@taylorlynnpeterson). The arguments and such go on. Many of which I agree with. But the most interesting thing to me was people who seemed to recognize the complexity of the label of hero, whether they realized or not.

Because while there was a lot of total agreement and disagreement, there were also a lot of mixed feelings. "He was a hero but he was mean and awful to Harry. Both statements are true" (@\_nilgem17). "He was a hero but he was also a terrible and unfair person who was mean to children" (@evyorwin). "Yes I'm a hero. Yes I'm a horrible person. Yes we exist" (@\_made.to.run.wild). This last one fascinates me, because generally heroes are not supposed to be terrible people. They're heroes, they're supposed to be the ideal person. That's the whole point of heroes after all. Heroes are supposed to be the idealized person, yet Severus Snape is decidedly not.

Now, this may be indicative of some kind of responsible love. A lot of the reasons Snape is seen as a hero is because he was motivated by his love for Lily to protect her child, despite his hatred for James. One could say that is pretty selfless. Snape is also a male character completely motivated by love, which doesn't happen a lot. Male characters are rarely defined by their ability to love and when they are those characters

are seen as weak or boring or feminine. Yet the discussion of Snape's heroism or lack thereof always comes back to his love for Lily. Snape saves Harry because he loved Lily. He betrayed Voldemort because he loved Lily. He does what Dumbledore asks because he loved Lily. These actions are heroic because of his motivation and his less kind actions are excused then. Most seem to agree that Snape's actions are not heroic, but that doesn't matter because it is his intentions that excuse them. After all, even the comments that are aggressively opposed against Snape being a hero, always acknowledge the power of Snape's love of Lily. Implying that once again it is the intention of love that allows Snape to be heroic. His entire motivation of protecting Harry for Lily, could be seen as selfless and responsible. After all he dedicates his life to the cause and even dies for it. So his seemingly responsible love of Lily justifies his less heroic actions and better explains his actions. It is love that redeems him, not power or violence, making him an unconventional male hero.

Snape is a complex character and he just may be a hero motivated by responsible love, but he is first of all and most prominently a bully. In the broadest sense it is his abusive behavior that we see most often and most prominently. Before Rowling reveals the more 'heroic things' he does in later books. In the first two books, Snape is a simple bully. He mocks and demeans his students, constantly insulting and badgering them for youthful mistakes. He continually harasses and abuses Harry and seeks to get him expelled and punished. In the third book *Prisoner of Azkaban*, things become much more personal. He is seen as Neville Longbottom's greatest fear. A really messed up thing is that it is Snape, a cruel teacher who scares him when Neville's parents were tortured to

insanity by Bellatrix. This is played off as a joke by the narrative despite the terrifying implications. Snape exposes Remus Lupin as a werewolf, something that would cause Lupin not only to lose his job but to be exiled from the wizarding community. In the fifth book, *Order of Phoenix* he abuses Harry while teaching him Occlumency, raiding his memories and demeaning his feelings (which is especially abhorrent considering the terrible emotional state Harry is in at that point). Snape also baits and bullies Sirius, who is clearly suffering from depression and suicidal ideation from being locked up in the home of the family who abused and disowned him, leading to Sirius' rushing to Harry's rescue and eventual death. In *Half-Blood Prince*, Snape murders Dumbledore and allows Death Eaters in Hogwarts. So from an initial glance, not a great track record as far as heroic action goes.

But we must of course acknowledge all the good things that Severus Snape has done. The main ones being all those times he saved Harry. We're not looking at intention here but the actions Snape takes. It doesn't matter how much Snape resents Harry or treats him terribly, what matters is Snape saves Harry. Snape tries to protect Harry from Quirrell in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. He seeks to help/save Harry, Ron, and Hermione from Sirius Black (thought mostly because of his desire for revenge) in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. He alerted members of the Order so they could go and help Harry and his friends in the Ministry of Magic in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Finally, he plants the decoy plan to help protect Harry from Voldemort's attack, he gives the Sword of Gryffindor to Ron, and he gives Harry his memories so Harry knows what he has to do in *The Deathly Hallows*.

The thing about all these actions is that, up until the last book, despite being good, maybe even heroic actions, they are not enough to make Snape an ideal hero. They prove he's on the good guy's side, but they are not enough for the characters to totally trust him or even like him let alone look at him as an ideal. Even the older characters are not completely swayed by Snape, agreeing only to trust him because they trust Dumbledore. They don't excuse his abusive behavior or encourage people to look up to him. Harry, even after Snape's many rescues, still doesn't trust Snape and questions Dumbledore's judgment to the very end. Snape's own heroics, up until his memories are revealed, are not enough to prove to anyone he's a hero. They prove at best he's an ally, but then we learn of Snape's *intention* and that is what makes Snape heroic and his love responsible, because he is working in service for someone he loves.

In *Deathly Hallows*, Snape gives Harry his memories laying out not only the actions he took but the reason for what he did. Snape did everything for Harry because he loved his mother, Lily Evans. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear," Dumbledore tells Snape after Voldemort successfully kills Lily and James, showing the importance of intention (678). Dumbledore by implying the path of action, instead of demanding it, forces Snape to make a decision motivated by his own feelings. If Snape's love is true then he would protect Harry for Lily's sake and he would then be motivated by the truest, most powerful love. So his actions gain a heroic gleam. Yet the most powerful moment is the strength of the love Snape seems to have for Lily is how he proves that it has endured and transformed him. Dumbledore asks,

'Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?'

“For *him*?” shouted Snape. “Expecto Patronum!”

From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office and soared out the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.

“After all this time?”

“Always,” said Snape. (687)

This performance of love and dedication proves the nobleness of Snape's intentions. His love for Lily is so deep that his Patronus takes a shape resembling and memorializing her. He cares not for Harry but for the loss of *Lily's son*. It's romantic and it's the grandest kind of dedication. It makes his bad actions forgivable and his ignored or unseen actions heroic.

Yet I go back to the beginning of the quote. When Snape declares it is not Harry that he cares about: “for *him*?” He declares in what can seem like shock or anger. “For *him*?” Like Snape couldn't imagine Dumbledore really missing the point. Which is that it's not Harry Snape cares for, it's Lily. Harry's only importance in Snape's motivations is his place as Lily and James's son. He never sees Harry outside either of these qualifiers, either saving/protecting him for Lily or punishing him for being James. Snape may be motivated by love, but it is specific kind love and specific in its application. Dumbledore asks Snape if “he's grown to care for the boy.” Dumbledore doesn't bother to name Harry and he asks if Snape cares, not if he loves. And Snape doesn't care, not for Harry, not for

anyone but Lily. He loves Lily. He'll do anything for Lily. But he is incapable of caring for anything else.

Snape's only explicit association with love is in regards to Lily. He steals the letter with her signature: "Snape took the page bearing Lily's signature and her love...ripped in two the photograph he was also holding, so that he kept the part from which Lily laughed, throwing the portion showing James and Harry back onto the floor" (689). Snape literally steals Lily's love. He covets her love for himself and cares for nothing else. He metaphorically and physically rips Lily from the people she loves and takes her for himself with no care to anyone else. Snape's love here is not responsible. It's selfish and toxic.

Yet Harry doesn't seem to care about that, ultimately focusing on Snape's love for Lily and glorifying it. In the epilogue, Harry tells his son Albus Severus, "you were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew" (758). In a series that extolls bravery as one of the most heroic traits, Snape being the 'bravest man' has heavy implications. Not only did Harry name his son after Snape, implying significant importance. He did so because Snape, in Harry's eyes, is a hero and deserving of a legacy. Snape's love for Lily is enough for Harry to sweep aside years of distrust and abuse and give Snape the privilege of being the name of one of his children. Snape's love was not enough to save him, but it was enough to redeem him and to give him a legacy in the family of the woman he loved. Rowling endorses this form of love through Harry's elevation of it. And while it may



seem to be an elevation of a responsible love. It is actually glorifying a selfish love that ultimately stems from a toxic obsession.

If we consider Snape's love and life heroic and maybe even as a life model, we must see how American culture celebrates individualistic obsession disguised as love. Snape's 'always' line is one of the most popular and well known quotes and it is often used in a romantic context. It's not hard to find the quote inscribed on signs and jewelry, used in weddings, and captions for couple photos. No other romantic love is treated so reverently in the series. In fact Snape's 'always' is seen as the highest, most romantic kind of dedication. Yet the 'always' comes at the dismissal of Harry, which is why Snape's love/obsession for Lily can never be seen as responsible. It's too selfish and shortsighted. Snape does not really care for Lily. He has no desire to love the things she loves or protect her unless it benefits him. The only love Snape has for Lily is a selfish one. Yet it is his love that is unjustly celebrated by the series, the author and the audience.

Dumbledore is in a similar place, in that his intentions of love might seem to embody responsible love but actually just serves to validate and justify his general terribleness. He crafts a facade of care for his students, for Hogwarts, for Harry and for the wizarding world, but ultimately works only for himself.

Dumbledore manipulates the people around him for the sake of his grand plan even as he preaches the importance and power of love. In fact, descriptions of Dumbledore seem in constant conflict between these ideas: Dumbledore's work towards the greater good regardless of the cost, and his 'love' for the people around him. In *The Deathly Hallows*, a friend of Dumbledore's writes, "he died as he lived: working for the

greater good and, to his last hour, as willing to stretch out a hand to a small boy with dragon pox as he was on the first day I met him” (20). An interesting oxymoron. After all, how does one work for the greater good while being concerned with those not important to it? In Dumbledore’s case, he gives the appearance of caring and demonstrates the intention of love while ultimately choosing the greater good at any cost.

Dumbledore talks a lot about the power of love. After Voldermort returns in *The Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore announces to the gathered groups, “we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust” (723). It’s pretty stock sentiment. As long as we stick together despite our differences we will be able to triumph.

But then, Dumbledore complicates this sentiment in *The Half-Blood Prince* where he continues to insist to Harry:

“So, when the prophecy says that I’ll have the ‘power the Dark Lord knows not,’ it just means—love?” Harry asked, feeling a little let down.

“Yes—just love,” said Dumbledore. “But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldermort made it so.” (509)

Here Dumbledore complicates love. He’s slowly moving from broad generalizations, a speech to a grieving group of students, to how intention plays into love. It is Voldermort’s lack of intention that made Lily’s love so powerful and allowed Harry to live and temporarily defeat Voldermort. Then it is Harry’s intention of love, towards his friends, his dead parents and the innocent people that Voldermort will hurt that motivates Harry to

not only defeat Voldemort but serves as a kind of protection from him. Dumbledore continues, “you are protected, in short, by your ability to love” (511). It is Harry’s *ability* to love that is so powerful (like it is Snape’s ability to love Lily that allows him to be a hero) not love as an abstract power in itself. Love is nothing without intention; to love is not enough, to act in love is what matters.

Which moves us to Dumbledore’s capacity to love. Dumbledore claims to act out of love. It is what makes him a mentor figure to Harry and a heroic leader for The Order, for Hogwarts, and for the Ministry of Magic. He even embraces love in a way most masculine characters wouldn’t dare. Dumbledore is more emotional than any male mentor figure generally seen in pop culture. He cries, he admits wrongdoing, and he tells Harry that he loves him. But what is Dumbledore’s true ability to love? I would say there is not one. He claims he is acting from and for love, but he is in fact only acting for his own self-interest and from his guilt around the loss of the familial love in his life. Ultimately all feeding his desire to achieve what he has deemed the greater good. A goal which love can only get in the way of.

One of the first times Dumbledore explicitly acknowledges his own capacity for love is in *The Order of the Phoenix* when he explains to Harry why he’s kept him in the dark. “I cared about you too much... I care more for your happiness than your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed” (838). Dumbledore admits to caring but he also admits to the issues with that care. He loves Harry and wants him to be happy even though for the greater good, Harry must suffer the knowledge. It’s also selfish, in that Dumbledore

doesn't want to be responsible for either Harry's suffering that comes from knowing or the suffering of those who will be hurt if Harry doesn't know. All ending with Dumbledore caring too much and allowing Harry to blindly walk right into a trap that ended up killing his godfather. But of course, at the realization of these consequences, Dumbledore rectifies it all, explaining everything to Harry. Right?

No, of course not. In fact, I don't think Dumbledore's care for Harry was ever that considerate. There are two points in *Deathly Hallow* that imply to me that not only did Dumbledore not really care for Harry as much as he claimed but also that Harry subconsciously understood and accepted that lack of care. I think the most obvious proof of Dumbledore's lack of love is from Snape's memories. Right before Snape confesses to still loving Lily, Dumbledore explains that Harry must die.

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

(687)

Somehow Snape, who notoriously hates Harry, is more disgusted by the fact that Dumbledore raised Harry to die than Dumbledore is. In fact, Dumbledore seems to have no emotional reaction or acknowledgment of that fact. He pushes aside the necessary death of Harry as hardly special by pointing out all the people who have already died for this cause. After all, what is one more death really? There is no sadness, no devastation, no real care in how Dumbledore tells Snape Harry has to die and by extension tells Harry who watches the memories. One could argue that in the context it wouldn't make sense for Dumbledore to be so emotional around Snape. I would argue though that Dumbledore

is actually the most honest with Snape. After all, Snape is the only one at all aware of Dumbledore's plans. If Dumbledore really cared about Harry, if at the bare minimum he even felt bad that Harry had to die, he wouldn't hide it from Snape. But instead, he dismisses Snape's bitter sympathy and shock with a sweeping comment about all the other people who have already died, making Harry's death just as unimportant.

Even Harry seems to see the lack of true care, considering on his way to death, "Dumbledore's betrayal was almost nothing" (692). Even meeting him in the after-life, whether or not Dumbledore loved him was not a pressing enough question to bother with. Implying that Harry already knew the answer or that Dumbledore's love just didn't end up mattering much to Harry anyway.

Even earlier, Aberforth, Dumbledore's brother, compares Harry to his sister and Dumbledore's lack of care for both of them as proof that Dumbledore never loved Harry.

"How can you be so sure, Potter, that my brother wasn't more interested in the greater good than in you? How can you be so sure you aren't dispensable, just like my little sister?"

"I don't believe it, Dumbledore loved Harry," said Hermione.

"Why didn't he tell him to hide, then?" shot back Aberforth. "Why didn't he say to him, 'Take care of yourself, here's how to survive'?"

"Because," said Harry before Hermione could answer, "sometimes you've got to think about more than your own safety! Sometimes you've got to think about the greater good." (568)

A few important things happen in this exchange. You have the explicit confirmation of Dumbledore's unfortunate role in his sister's death and by extension confirmation of his sordid past with the dark wizard Grindelwald. This doesn't make Dumbledore unheroic but, in the opposition of Snape whose backstory added a gleam of heroism, still adds a gleam of uncertainty to his heroism.

We also have a conflict between what it means to be loved, specifically by Dumbledore. Aberforth seems to think if his brother really loved Harry he would have protected him, taught him to defend himself and hide, so that he could survive. And that has been the power of love so far, to protect and defend; Lily's love for Harry protects him from Voldemort and Harry's grief for Sirius defends him against Voldemort's attempt to possess his body. Yet Harry rejects that, even going as far to push aside the sentiment and focus on the intention. Harry doesn't argue that Dumbledore loved him, he argues that it is Dumbledore's intention for Harry to defeat Voldemort for the greater good, which is what really matters.

This is the problem with Dumbledore's love. He is too selfish to truly love. Dumbledore admits to Harry in their final meeting at King Cross, "I loved them. I loved my parents, I loved my brother and my sister, but I was selfish" (715). Dumbledore is capable of love and he understands the importance of it, but it is not enough to outweigh his aspirations and goals. Even after he realizes the consequences of his ambition, proven by the death of his sister, he merely redirects his selfishness to a noble greater good, protecting the wizarding world from Grindelwald and Voldemort. Just as Aberforth says, Dumbledore loves Harry like he loved his sister. Falsely. Dumbledore feels and

understands the attachment but still uses it to justify his wider actions with no real regard to the people he claims to love. He justified his desire to rule over muggles by imagining his sister will achieve true freedom in the world he would make. He justified his treatment of Harry by saying he cared too much to curse Harry with the knowledge and then revealed the ultimate truth without a single acknowledgment of Harry. He may have loved them, but he loved them selfishly and for his own ambitions.

Yet it is Dumbledore and Snape's love that is enough for Harry to name his son after the two of them. It is Dumbledore and Snape who, to Harry, are the bravest figures in his life deserving of a legacy. As much as people like to joke or dismiss this writing choice as ridiculous or stupid, it has monumental implications about heroism in the story. It makes Snape and Dumbledore's selfish love the most important and heroic examples of love.

And it is this kind of love, self-centered and conditional, that is the only kind of love men are allowed to be motivated by in *Harry Potter*. So while it might seem like Dumbledore and Snape embody responsible love through their intentions of love. Their type of love still ultimately upholds masculinity and displaces the more feminine form of responsible love. Dumbledore and Snape are not caretakers and their love is never for the sake of the people they claim to love. It is selfish and even cruel. Proving that male heroes in *Harry Potter* are not heroic for love, but for merely upholding a masculine and traditional version of it.

While Dumbledore and Snape just don't embody responsible love. It's important to note that the male heroes of *Harry Potter* are not allowed to be motivated by that kind

of love. Responsible love, when exhibited, is hardly seen as heroic; in fact it is seen as a weakness to care about other people so selflessly. We see this most clearly in the evolution of Neville Longbottom. Neville starts as the softest and weakest male character who is punished and mocked for his lack of masculinity until he evolves into a strong, masculine hero that stands up to Voldemort and kills Nagini. The problem is not with this evolution but that Neville is not taken seriously by the other characters or the story itself until he starts showing masculine strength. He shows feminine traits, softness, weakness, and fear but he is not allowed to be a hero until he grows out of them and literally displaces himself in order to earn the mantle of being a hero. He exhibits responsible love but is not embraced by the narrative until he rids himself of the weakness associated with responsible love and embraces traditional love by becoming more masculine through the use of violence.

Starting in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, Neville is introduced as a “round faced boy” whose “tearful” as he searches for his lost toad, marking him immediately with physical and emotional weakness (104). He is incapable of the simple task of keeping track of his toad and repressing the emotions that make him seem weak or annoying. Because of this he is generally looked down on by his peers and ostracized because of his incompetence in pretty much every area. Even his moments of bravery are shrouded by his clumsiness and lack of masculinity. When Neville gets caught out of bed trying to find and warn Harry, Hermione, and Ron of Draco's intentions to get them in trouble, Harry still derides his effort, “poor blundering Neville,” dismissing his act of bravery because it was clumsy



and unneeded (243). Generally painting even the positive aspects and actions of Neville badly, because his weakness and lack of masculinity always end up invalidating them.

We see this again when Neville tries to stand up to the trio when they leave to try and steal the Sorcerer's Stone. He puts up a fight but his attempts are dismissed and demeaned by the three. Ron tells him, “don’t be an idiot” and Harry asks Hermione to “do something” clearly seeing no reason to even entertain Neville (273). Even Neville’s attempts to fight them are a little pathetic, he challenges “‘go on then hit me!’ said Neville, raising his fists” (273). The mental image of a pudgy eleven-year-old holding his hands up ready to throw a punch is almost as funny as it is unrealistic and the characters treat it as such. None of them entertain his challenge and Hermione pushes him aside easily casting a full body bind spell to leave him frozen and helpless for his efforts. However, Neville is rewarded for this act of bravery, gaining the house points Gryffindor needs to win the house cup though he’s no better viewed for it.

His act of bravery seems to be a one-time thing and then for the next few books he stays the clumsy, awkward, emotional fool. He doesn’t do much in *Chamber of Secrets* except mess up in classes and get bullied by Snape. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Neville’s weakness causes him to be both mocked and shunned. While Neville successfully faces off Snape as a boggart the novel still makes his deepest fear of his professor the butt of the joke. When Lupin asks Neville his biggest fear he says “‘Professor Snape.’ Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically” (135). This comes right after Snape threatened to kill Neville’s pet toad if he didn’t brew the potion correctly. Yet Neville’s fear is viewed as funny and ridiculous, so much so that he can’t even defend the

fear to his classmates who laugh it off. He just has to endure dismissal and apologize for his very valid fear. Implying that his weakness and fear is not only something irrelevant but something to be scoffed at and dismissed.

Then when Neville's forgetfulness and inability to remember the passwords gives Sirius Black access to the Gryffindor Common Room, he is shunned and his incompetence is punished harshly. McGonagall goes as far as to publicly humiliate him for the weakness forbidding "anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in" (271). Neville's weakness either makes him the butt of the joke or deserving of cruel punishment. Rowling over and over punishes Neville for weakness and his lack of masculinity, making him the example of how not to be.

This negative view/portrayal of Neville does not let up until *The Order of the Phoenix* when Neville begins to mature and demonstrates certain traits of masculinity, specifically in regards to taking action and doing violence. But it becomes more obviously motivated by his love for his parents. This sudden change though at first seems out of character. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Malfoy is baiting Harry and Ron by mocking people broken by magic and causing Neville to violently lash out. "Neville had just charged past him, heading straight to Malfoy...Neville struggled frantically, his fists flailing, trying desperately to get at Malfoy" (361). Such an outburst is surprising in both the intensity and intended violence of Neville's actions but also that it is *Neville*. The boy that is usually cowering on the sidelines. After Snape breaks them up Ron asks bewildered, "what in the name of Merlin...was *that* about" (362). Everyone seems not

only surprised by the seeming overreaction but that it is Neville doing the reacting.

Pointing to an initial disconnect between Neville of the past defined by his softness and weakness, to this angry, violent Neville that he evolves to be.

This doesn't last long though. Neville reverts back rather quickly to the incompetent, too soft self he's known for. When Dumbledore's Army begins to practice, Neville still struggles with combative and defensive magic, and when he succeeds he is dismissed by his peers. "'I DID IT!' Neville said gleefully. 'I've never done it before—I DID IT!' 'Good one!' Harry said encouragingly, deciding not to point out that in a real duel situation Neville's opponent was unlikely to be staring in the opposite direction with his wand held loosely at his side" (393). This dismissal by Harry and the narrative shows Neville's lack of awareness and lack of skill. Of course, he can only succeed when his partner isn't really trying. Of course, he'd get too excited about being able to do the bare minimum. That's who Neville is. He's always trying and too often that's not enough.

These traits could almost be charming if Rowling didn't keep on dismissing them. Neville is a kind, caring character who does his best. He is soft and passionate (but about things no one cares about) and regardless of how often he is pushed down he gets back up and keeps trying. He cares so much for his friends and his house and the plants he tends. Yet Rowling dismisses and punishes these traits, because the very act of caring is not enough to constitute bravery or power. We see this in a small moment when Neville is visiting his parents at St. Mungos and his mother reaches out to give him a candy wrapper.

Neville has already stretched out his hand, into which his mother dropped an empty Droobles Blowing Gum wrapper.

“Very nice, dear,” said Neville’s grandmother in a falsely cheery voice, patting his mother on the shoulder. But Neville said quietly, “thanks mom.”

His mother tottered away, back up the ward, humming to herself. Neville looked around at the others, his expression defiant, as though daring them to laugh, but Harry did not think he’d ever found anything less funny in his life.

“Well we’d better get back,” sighed Mrs. Longbottom, drawing on long green gloves. “Very nice to have met you all. Neville, put that wrapper in the bin, she must have given you enough of them to paper your bedroom by now....”

But as they left, Harry was sure he saw Neville slip the wrapper into his pocket.

(515)

This exchange highlights the smallness of Neville’s care. I don’t mean small as in unimportant or meaningless, but small as intimate. Compared to Dumbledore’s obsession with the greater good, Neville’s acceptance of his mother’s gift, an empty wrapper, is much more powerful because that wrapper means nothing. It has no great meaning, no part in a big plan. It’s not an elaborate demonstration of love, like Snape casting his Patronus. It is just a damaged woman giving her traumatized son the only gift she’s capable of. It’s a sign of the truest love and it is an empty wrapper. Neville understands this, accepting it with gratitude and love. He refuses to even entertain the dismissal of his friends. He expects their laughter and instead of joining in as he usually does (Neville’s boggart is an example of this) he warns them against it. But even Harry understands the

gravity of this moment and for once respects Neville for it. Yet Neville's grandmother dismisses it. She doesn't understand and she doesn't care about the intention or the love of the gift, treating it as plain trash. She acknowledges it with false cheer and dismisses the gift, telling Neville to just throw it away. Just like Rowling dismisses acts of love like this throughout her novels.

Another example of this is when Neville, Luna, and Ginny escape Malfoy and the other inquisitors and demand to come with Harry, Hermione, and Ron to the Ministry of Magic to save Sirius. Harry makes it very clear he doesn't think any of them would be particularly helpful. "If he could have chosen any members of the D.A. in addition to himself, Ron and Hermione to join him in the attempt to rescue Sirius, he would not have picked Ginny, Neville or Luna" (761). Implying that Harry doesn't believe any of them capable or talented enough to be anything more than a burden. Once again dismissing not only Neville's genuine desire just to help but Ginny's and Luna's as well.

In some ways Neville proves Harry right, he isn't much of a fighter and he causes more problems in the battle than he helps. He tells Harry, through his broken nose, "you're bedder at fighding dem dan I ab" (794). And while Neville is not a good fighter here, he stands up for his friends anyway, facing off with the Death Eaters with no way to fight them. Even as his parent's tormentor Bellatrix seeks to torture him too he tells Harry,

"DON'D GIB ID DO DEM," roared Neville, who seemed besides himself, kicking and writhing as Bellatrix drew nearer to him his and his captor, her wand raised. "DON'D GIB ID DO DEM, HARRY!" (798)

Neville isn't a good fighter in the traditional sense but he still seeks to protect his friends at the cost of himself. Even faced with the woman who destroyed his parents, he tells Harry not to give in, to not allow his pain to force Harry to give up the prophecy. Neville is not strong in the masculine sense of being a good fighter, like Harry and the Order is good at, but he is strong enough to endure anything in order to protect his friends.

But ultimately Neville has to grow out his softness and endure a lot of pain in order to be the heroic figure he ends up as in *Deathly Hallows*. To merely stand up is not enough. Neville must also suffer and face violence and return violence in order to become a hero. Showing that his growth comes at the cost of his precious softness, implying the necessity of moving on from said softness. Neville can't be a hero if he's too caring or too soft. He can no longer just love or care, he has to embrace violence, both in facing it and causing it.

Towards the end of *The Deathly Hallows* Harry describes Neville, "one of his eyes was swollen yellow and purple, there were gouge marks on his face, and his general air of unkemptness suggested he had been living rough. Nevertheless his battered visage shone with happiness" (571). Gone is the soft, plump-faced boy now replaced with a battle-hardened warrior marked by all the violence he's endured and survived. One who relishes in causing discourse and problems and is at ease with the violence that surrounds him. Neville explains to the three how terrible things have gotten at Hogwarts, speaking casually of how students are beaten and tortured and what he's endured standing up to the Death Eaters running the school. When Ron points out exactly how much damage Neville has dealt with. Neville tells him casually, "they don't want to spill pureblood, so they'll

torture us a bit if we're mouthy but they won't actually kill us" (574). Neville's acceptance of and pride in this violence proves his bravery. He takes the violence as proof he's doing the right thing, the brave thing. He's standing up for people and he's fighting Voldemort and his followers directly. Neville still cares for the people around him, but this change in attitude and acceptance of violence allows the narrative to finally have pride in Neville because now he is being brave in the right way. He cares but he embraces the violence to prove that care and is embraced as a hero for it.

Neville shares that his grandmother wrote him a letter telling him, "she was proud of me, that I'm my parent's son and to keep it up" (576). Neville's grandmother's approval of him and his action proves that Neville is then doing the right thing and that he has finally become a hero by embracing the violence. We are meant to see Neville's development from scared, incompetent, soft boy to battle-hardened, scarred man as a positive thing. As a person finally stepping up and outgrowing their childish ways and becoming the person they were always meant to. Such a belief makes the violence Neville experiences and inflicts a key part of his development, as he wouldn't achieve such growth without it.

We see this growth most explicitly when Neville stands up against Voldemort and breaks through a full body bind, mirroring his first act of bravery from *Sorcerer's Stone*. Neville recklessly breaks from the crowd and charges Voldemort who defeats him easily. Voldemort gives Neville the chance to join him, but Neville refuses. So Voldemort summons the Sorting Hat and forces it on Neville's head hoping to have him serve as an example of what happens when you stand up to the Dark Lord. Harry watches

in horror as “Neville was aflame, rooted to the spot, unable to move,” frozen just as he had been by Hermione's curse all those years ago (732). But instead of being abandoned and left frozen on the ground, Neville this time is strong enough to break free.

In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering rubied handle—

The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing giants or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke Neville sliced off the great snake's head. (733)

This is the ultimate hero moment for Neville. He overcomes the curse he fell victim to as a soft child and is finally deemed brave enough to pull the Sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat and kill Voldemort's final Horcrux. This is the moment when Neville becomes a hero and firmly leaves his weak, past self behind. All of Neville's life has led to this moment of ultimate bravery. And Rowling directly parallels this moment with his first act of bravery in *Sorcerer's Stone* with the use of the full body binding spell demonstrating just how much Neville has grown and improved as a man. One that can now withstand all kinds of violence and dole it out in equal measure.

But why is it this moment that makes Neville a hero? Why is it overcoming Voldemort's curse that is his ultimate act of bravery? After all Neville's spent the last year facing off with the Death Eaters, standing up to them, protecting other students, and enduring their torture. Why is this act of desperation and recklessness Neville's hero



moment? Why isn't it protecting his classmates or just standing up to Voldemort and telling him no? After all isn't love supposed to be the most powerful thing? So why is it not Neville's love and protection of the students of Hogwarts that make him worthy of the sword?

Because unlike Dumbledore and Snape, whose love is hardly so true, Neville's love is not heroic in this narrative. It is a sign of weakness and it must be eradicated before Neville is allowed to be a hero. Neville wouldn't have been allowed to kill Nagini, he wouldn't have charged forward recklessly, he wouldn't embrace and revel in the violence he endured if he maintained the softness that haunted him through childhood. Neville was punished over and over and over for that softness and if he wanted to gain any power or agency in his own story he had to stop being soft and he had to fight.

Dumbledore tells Harry as he grieves Sirius's death in *The Order of the Phoenix*, "suffering like this proves you are still a man," associating the pain of love and losing with being a man (824). Instead of comforting Harry or telling him his feelings are valid and fair, he tells him that this suffering is what makes him a man. Not the love of Sirius or the care for other people, but the suffering that comes from grieving lost love. Men are allowed to love in *Harry Potter* as long as they suffer for it and prove it through violence. Soft, feminine love is not love for men. It is a weakness. Snape's love for Lily is heroic because he pays for it. He is made miserable and bitter by it even as he is motivated by it. Dumbledore is tortured by his love and the loss of his family. Their love is heroic because they suffer for it. Neville's love is not heroic until he suffers for it and until he proves it through violence.

Responsible love is to care about someone for the sake of caring about them does not encourage such a development of masculinity. These three men can't become the heroes they are without fighting for love. To merely care for a collective, to work for others is just not as heroic. Both because of the feminine coding of caretaking but because love for the sake of love is not enough.

The debate seems to then end on not whether or not Neville, Snape, and Dumbledore are heroes, most would say in some form they all are and Rowling certainly frames them that way, but on what makes them heroes. Rowling's central thesis of the books seems to be that it is love and the ability to love that makes them heroic. Yet that doesn't seem to be true. It's the specific masculine coded love they embody that allows them the status of hero. It is Dumbledore's selfish love, Snape's selective love and eventually Neville's reckless and violent love that define them as heroes, not love itself. Showing that in order for men to be heroes they can only love if their love proves their masculinity.

## Chapter 2

### *The Hunger Games: Righteous Violence vs Radical Love*

*“That what I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that.”*

~Katniss Everdeen, *Mockingjay*~



I had been waiting for this day for months, ticking the days down on the *Harry Potter* calendar I had gotten for Christmas. My dad had pre-ordered the tickets as soon as they were available, joking he only got them as a present for himself since the movie was being released on his birthday. We spent the week leading up to the premiere watching fan made videos covering the various songs from the book and fiercely debating the adaptation. I dreaded the movie messing up Peeta's character and he wondered how they'd adapt the first person perspective to screen. My mom waffled back and forth about me seeing something so violent; and my dad would just wink at me as he talked her

down, reassuring me that some pesky violence wasn't going to get in the way of us seeing the movie.

I had been assembling my costume for days. My babysitter at the time made me a T-shirt, which I tied up in a style that was very popular with all the girls at my school. My mom had traced a mockingjay with yellow nail polish and hot glued a safety pin to create a Mockingjay pin. My sister watched in disinterest as I handmade 'buttons' and attached them to my bag with duct tape to firmly establish where I stood in the fierce debate of Peeta vs Gale. And now the time had finally come. My mom helped me braid my hair as my dad argued with someone on the phone. When I asked about the call, in the way middle schoolers ask about something that only matters because it might affect them. My dad waved it aside, telling me now to worry about it. And before I knew it, we were in the car, listening to the movie soundtrack on our way to the premiere of *The Hunger Games*.

Looking back I think my dad was only excited because I was. I knew he enjoyed the books and that he would probably like the movie, but I always felt like he didn't get it in the way I did. He didn't seem to care about the series in the way I wanted him too. He was so busy with other things. I was in middle school, he was back from Iraq, we had long finished the Harry Potter series and we didn't read together anymore. Not that it mattered. I was practically a teenager, I didn't need my dad to read things to me anymore. That's what I told myself anyway. I'm not sure if that was just selfishness of youth, so obsessed with finding your place and too often making your feelings and problems the

end and center of the world or if it was the beginning of a rift; but either way things were changing.

But not on that day. Nothing mattered but the premiere. We arrived at the theater super early, wanting to find the best seats. We watched groups arriving in costume, admiring the well done recreations of the tribute outfits and laughing at the Capitol themed ones, which were as wacky and fun as you could imagine. We talked as we waited. It was the first time in a while. My dad had been away on reserves in DC and I had been busy struggling to fit in at school and moping about how I was clearly failing. He listened to me intently complain about the mean girls and this one boy in my class who had it out for me. We talked way too much about math which I was slowly falling behind in and my dad promised that he would help me as soon as he stopped being so busy.

As time ticked closer to the start of the movie, I quickly shoved aside anything that wasn't about the *Hunger Games*. My dad shifted too, not quite adopting the carefree excitement of the *Harry Potter* release party, but something resembling it. We sat eagerly through the trailers until the movie finally began. I was so invested that I didn't notice my dad becoming more and more distracted. At least until he had to leave to take a phone call during the bloodbath scene. Then I put the hurt that came from him leaving me in the movie theater on the backburner so I could focus on what mattered.

I wasn't angry about it until after the movie was over and my dad asked what he missed in the car ride back. We didn't get in a fight, but I think he knew I was upset even though he didn't know why. I didn't know why. It was a bitter feeling that just sat with

me for weeks. Even long after my dad made up for it. We never really talked about it and in the scope of everything, it was practically nothing. But years later I can see it now as a reminder to me of the consequences and effect of stories and how in the same way stories can save and help you, they can also take things away. My dad never told me stories of Iraq. But I knew they were there and they were not the stories I liked. They were ones that burned and weighed someone down and infected everything good like a mold. But I always believed stories and books are supposed to be sacred. They are supposed to be safe places and suddenly they were not. They impacted people in different ways, some that healed as often as it hurt.

It would make sense that *The Hunger Games* would be the place for this subconscious realization of the danger of stories, both in fiction and real life. Because it was for lack of a better word, revolutionary when it came out in the early 2010s. It singlehandedly triggered both the rise of the very popular young adult dystopian genre and proved that there was a large audience and a desire for female protagonists and heroes. It created a market for just as popular and profitable, but not as good. Copy cats (*The Divergent Series*, *Maze Runner*, *The Immortal Instruments*), made the young adult genre lucrative, and created the template for ‘strong female heroes.’ The books were of course adapted into a series of four movies that became the highest-grossing female-led franchise of all time.

A friend suggested the series to me in our fourth period English class in sixth grade by describing the grisly scene at the end of the first book where Cato, one of the tributes, is slowly torn apart by the mutts in a quiet voice between cautious glances at our

English teacher like it was something forbidden. I borrowed the books from the library that day desperate for that forbidden feeling. It took me less than three days to speed through the whole series the first time. Then I'd spend every day after that rereading the series under my desk, at lunch, and waiting for the bus.

Initially, I read the series and detested every character but Peeta and Prim. It was very hard to verbalize why I liked Peeta so much as a sixth-grader, especially considering the loud Team Gale girls I was surrounded by, but it was the same reason I admired Harry and Hermione and Neville. They acted out of empathy and for the love of their friends and family. Peeta loves Katniss so much that he does whatever is necessary to save her and help the people she loves, despite and even in spite of her confusion, anger, indifference, and bitterness. He loves her without asking for anything in return. And even after being tortured and brainwashed into hating her, (the only way I might add that would stop Peeta from loving Katniss), Peeta loves her so much he is able to break the brainwashing and save her.

After a few more rereads, I eventually found the same devotion and love in Katniss. The girl who sacrifices herself out of love for her little sister and who acts for the love she has for Peeta, Gale, her family, and her friends and allies. She is not always successful, but love is always motivating her decisions. Sometimes even to her detriment. Peeta and Katniss as heroes were a little more complicated than those from *Harry Potter*, having occupied a much morally ambiguous world, but the core was still the same. They were not heroes because they won The Hunger Games or helped orchestrate a successful revelation, they are heroes because they acted out of and for love and empathy.

However, the shock came when I found that the general culture didn't agree with me. My heroes were not heroes to the people around me. My friends liked Gale more than Peeta. A comparison I didn't even contemplate, considering how much I detested Gale. I discovered quickly that all my friends liked Gale because he was 'the hot one' and he wasn't 'whiny' and 'weak' like Peeta. I got in countless fights with my best friend about how if anything Gale was the villain, not a hero, and thus certainly not comparable to Peeta, the real hero. Gale was too angry and bitter and lashed out violently with no regard for human life, eventually indirectly murdering Prim. He demanded and pushed Katniss into loving him and would be angry when she didn't give him the love he thought he deserved. But my best friend would just claim that Peeta was just as pushy, whining, and clinging to Katniss until she had no choice to give in. Then throw in that Gale didn't kill Prim directly so it wasn't really his fault and ultimately Gale was just the hotter one. We would scream at each other on walks home, arguing in circles and ultimately forcing our other friends to abandon us so they could talk about more important subjects.

Yet it wasn't just my friend. Wider pop culture was obsessed with this idea of Team Gale and Team Peeta and too often Gale won when, in my humble opinion, he shouldn't have even been a choice! This summer even, in the year 2020, I conducted a poll on my Instagram seeking to see where people stood years later. Team Peeta won but only by a narrow margin (43% were Team Gale and 57% were team Peeta) and scrolling through the list of my friends I watched in shock as people I liked and respected chose what I deemed the wrong answer.



The debate captivated me as a kid and interested me today because while it was framed as which love interest deserved the female protagonist I viewed it as a competition of heroes. Ultimately answering the question of who was the true hero and thus deserving of Katniss? The kind and caring baker who abhorred violence and acted out of love or the angry, bitter, soldier who acted for revenge and fought violence with more violence without a second thought to the consequences. It shouldn't even be a question, let alone a debate, but here it is still polarizing and still debated even years later.

So that must mean that the debate means something beyond which character people think is the better option for Katniss, because ultimately regardless of your side, Peeta wins. Katniss chooses Peeta and Gale skulks off to brood about the violence he chose to enable. The debate is decided. Yet we're still arguing, making it feel like it's less about who is the right option for Katniss and more like who is the better character or even who is the more appealing hero? The debate of Team Peeta vs Team Gale is a debate about who the male hero is in a story about a female hero. Gale represents the traditionally masculine choice, the usual hero model, and Peeta represents something outside that model, a feminine coded male hero or at least a non-traditionally masculine hero.

But before we talk about the men, we have to talk about the main hero, Katniss Everdeen. Katniss was no different from any number of action heroes or young adult protagonists, but she was a new kind of hero solely because of her gender. If Katniss had been a man not much would change, at least in the text. Outside it though, her very existence challenges culture's traditional understandings of female heroes. Linda Holmes

in her article “What Really Makes Katniss Stand Out? Peeta, Her Movie Girlfriend,” explains it best: “Much has been said, and rightly so, about Katniss Everdeen and the way she challenges a lot of traditional narratives about girls. She carries a bow, she fights, she kills, she survives, she's emotionally unavailable, she'd rather act than talk, and ... did we mention she kills” (Holmes)? Katniss challenges the traditional narrative of being a female hero by acting like a man. All these traits Holmes extols are all traditionally male ones: fighting, killing, not showing emotions, not wasting time with feminine practices like communicating. Outside of her actual gender, Katniss fills all the usually male hero boxes. She was a fighter, she's very good at conducting violence, and she's motivated by love but she's not too emotional. She fought for a just cause, to protect her family and loved ones, and to bring down a tyrannical government. The violence she conducts overshadows all her moments of emotion and weakness. She had enough masculine traits to outweigh her feminine ones. She is a male hero inside a woman's body.

That's not to say that Katniss totally fits that mold either. One of the major themes in the books, less in the movies, is this idea of performance and pretending to be something you're not in order to attract help/allies or downplay and/or encourage rebellion. Katniss is a lot deeper than the average masculine soldier. She is motivated entirely by love and her emotions. She volunteers to replace her sister at the reaping at the cost of her own life. She allies with Rue solely because she reminds Katniss of her sister even though they'll eventually have to turn on one and another. She saves Peeta because she cares about him even though he's a hindrance. She pulls the Nightlock berries at the end because she can't imagine living without Peeta and that's just in the

first book. She is known for her stiff and harsh unlikability yet she looks out for the weak and broken. Katniss doesn't commit violence for some higher ideal or to overthrow the government. She does it to protect the people she loves.

Yet this is not how audiences fully seem to perceive her. The problem is not that Katniss is merely the violent male hero in a woman's body; the problem is that is how she is *perceived* by the audience that consumes her story. This harkens back to the idea that society's understanding of myth is as important as the myth itself. Stories are adapted and changed to fit social norms, where parts that work are elevated and parts that don't are ignored and over time erased. *The Hunger Games* text elevated a very specific story and hero, one that is extremely anti-war and anti-violence, yet wider culture, Hollywood specifically, has taken the story and turned it into a narrative more befitting of the righteous violence life myth.

We see this displacement most clearly in the portrayal of Katniss's love interests, Peeta Mellark, and Gale Hawthorne. In the novels, Peeta Mellark is one of the heroes. Yet he is not the popular choice for readers. The popular choice is the much more traditionally masculine Gale Hawthorne. This displacement is then furthered by the movie adaptations, which miss key themes in the text and represent the characters without depth. The audience's rejection of Peeta and preference for Gale shows that regardless of textual evidence or general suitability, more violent and traditionally masculine men will be preferred over male heroes who are deemed too feminine and subsequently weak. Ultimately pointing back to what culture actually values: masculinity over femininity, and violence over weakness.

In the first book of the series, Peeta and Gale are both very different kinds of heroes, motivated by opposite things, and this is made very clear in their introductions through Katniss's eyes. We are introduced to Gale first, as "the only person with whom I can be myself" (Collins 6). He is Katniss's partner and friend. A fellow hunter, and the only person she can share her potential treasonous thoughts with. He is capable and strong and sharp and can keep up with her in the woods. He balances Katniss out. In many ways, he is her equal. Yet he is simmering with righteous anger and resentment of his place in District Twelve where they have to commit treason every day to keep their families fed. Katniss is less than impressed with his anger for all she agrees with it: "His rage seems pointless to me...what good is yelling about The Capital in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything" (14). In the first pages, Gale is defined by his rage in a way that Katniss sees as fair but unnecessary. It is this rage though that proves to readers he's a good person. Who wouldn't be angry at such a position? Any moral person would be furious. So Gale's rage is righteous and defines not only his character but his potential to be a hero that is motivated by it. In later books we see this rage funneled into extreme acts of violence that eventually lead to the death of Prim.

Peeta on the other hand is introduced and defined by his act of kindness. When Peeta is called to join Katniss in the arena as the male tribute, Katniss is devastated though she's never spoken to him. Instead, she recalls a fateful day in the rain when Peeta saved her life. Months after her father died in the mines and her mom disappeared into a paralyzing depression, Katniss was desperate for a way to save her family. They had no money, and they were slowly starving to death. On her way from one last failed attempt

at acquiring food, Katniss ended up outside the bakery half dead and desperate. She found nothing in the trash and she was screamed at by the owner. She fell to the ground defeated and ready to accept her fate.

Then Peeta, after being hit and yelled at by his mother, leaves the bakery to give burned bread to the pig. He throws it to Katniss instead. Katniss only knows this boy in passing yet when no one else would, he is the only one who helps her. Katniss doesn't seem to know why he does it, just that "he didn't even know me. Still, just throwing the bread was an enormous kindness that would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered" (32). Katniss defines Peeta by this act of kindness, one that was unexpected, unasked for, and even dangerous, but was desperately needed all the same. The action is small and subtle but it has a massive effect on Katniss, so much that even years later she grieves his reaping. It is very different from Gale's constant, steady presence, but it helped Katniss, all the same, giving her hope when she had none.

There's also a certain gendered element in their differences. Gale is a hunter. He gains sustenance for his family by killing it. Peeta is a baker. Peeta creates sustenance by making it. Gale is steady and bitter in the face of reaping. Even when he has to rip Prim off of Katniss and send her to her death he is emotionless. Peeta is anything but. In fact, Katniss describes him as having the same "alarm I've seen so often in prey," equating the blatant show of emotion with weakness (27).

Then in what could be Katniss's final meeting with Gale, he remains tough and emotionless. He gives Katniss advice and finally tells her that killing people is probably not that much different than killing animals. Compared to Peeta who after the final visits

with his family, Katniss observes he has “obviously been crying,” implying that such a show of emotions was a technique to be seen as weaker (40). This observation immediately equates Peeta’s emotions with weakness. While Gale’s emotions (anger) are associated with strength. Ultimately establishing Peeta as the feminine choice and Gale as the masculine one from the get-go.

We don’t see much of Gale in *The Hunger Games* (we’ll come back to him in *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*), but we see how over and over again how Peeta, despite Katniss’s distrust, works tirelessly to ensure her victory. He does it, not solely through violence, but by charm and connection. Peeta does not win the games through mere brutal violence but by spinning a narrative that makes the Capital believe and root for the love he has for Katniss. Ultimately causing the rule change that allows them both to win. He then carries this narrative completely on his own for the bulk of the book. As well as works to protect Katniss from the careers. Yet Peeta in the first book is seen by readers as a hindrance and described as annoying, soft, and weak. This is because unlike Katniss, his feminine traits are not balanced out by his masculine traits. He commits violence and acts strong, but his main and often his only role is being in love with Katniss. He is completely defined by his love for Katniss and thus fulfills the usual feminine role as the love interest of the hero.

People don’t usually love love interests. They’re often props in the hero’s story, there to humanize and encourage and enable the hero. If they’re lucky they might get a small part in the final battle or might be able to help their hero last minute, but ultimately they’re in the story as an extension of the hero instead of as their own person. Love

interests aren't usually allowed to be heroes. Both because love interests are usually women and because a hero must be more than an attachment. An ideal hero has to represent a higher ideal, whether that be a desire, a motivation, or a belief. Things that are beyond an attachment to a single person. A love interest is a love interest because that is all they have. Their desire or motivation is the hero. There's also the fact that such an emotional attachment coded feminine. Love interests are usually always women because for a long time heroes have only been straight men and because romance for the sake of romance is distinctly feminine and not heroic.

Men can have romance, but to solely be defined by that or to desire it is not allowed. Simba, in *The Lion King*, can have a romantic duet with Nala, but his main concern should still be regaining his kingdom. Aragorn, in *The Lord of the Rings*, can desire and miss Arwen, but he is not allowed to be consumed by his feelings or even let them get in the way of his higher purpose of becoming king. Harry Potter can desire Cho Chang and fall in love with Ginny Weasley, but that can't get in the way of his being the chosen one.

For a male hero to be solely motivated by romantic love is not only unheard of, but very uncomfortable. Though it is normal for women. Arwen's only role in the movies is to sulk around in pretty dresses and encourage and miss Aragorn from afar. Cho Chang's only purpose is to be unattainable to Harry and then be sad about Cedric. Nala only reappears in the story to encourage and motivate Simba to fight Scar. The role of the love interest is not only an unheroic one but almost always fulfilled by a woman. Yet, Peeta's literal role in the games is to make Katniss look desirable by loving her.

Unlike Peeta, Gale, who, despite his brief appearance in the first book, proves that he has a life and a motivation outside of Katniss. He is not only her friend and maybe potential love interest. He also hunts to feed his family and feels strongly about the injustices he witnesses and is subject to. Gale clearly has a place outside his role as Katniss's friend. Peeta does not have the opportunity for that depth. He is defined completely and only by his love for Katniss. If Katniss were a man and Peeta were a woman, this wouldn't be a revelation or even that noticeable; but because Peeta is the male hero, it makes readers uncomfortable. It makes Peeta much more feminine especially in comparison to Gale and even Katniss and associates his love with that of weakness. Eventually enabling a reader's harsher judgment of his character while encouraging a desire for Gale's more traditional and thus acceptable character.

As I mentioned earlier the love interest is not usually a hero. So if Peeta is Katniss's love interest, as I argued, doesn't that disqualify Peeta as a hero? If he is merely there as a prop in Katniss's story, how could he be the hero? But Peeta is much more than a love interest. In fact, being motivated by love and working solely to preserve that love is what makes Peeta such an unconventional hero and highlights just how toxic the traditional male hero is.

One of the complications in really seeing Peeta is the limited perspective of the book. The entire narrative is told through Katniss's first-person perspective and she has very hostile feelings towards Peeta in the beginning, but obviously struggles with feelings she can't quite name. She is also terrible at reading people, something that is explicitly acknowledged in the narrative and is something a reader can see over and over again as



characters prove Katniss's judgments wrong. So as her feelings about Peeta continually shift and change and evolve throughout the book, it is difficult to really see Peeta without Katniss's internal turmoil muddying the view. The only real way to see Peeta is to look at his actions.

Peeta's most obvious and defining character trait is that he clearly cares about Katniss with absolutely no ulterior motive. He simply loves her. And despite Katniss's judgment and outright hostility, he proves over and over again through his actions how his only priority is saving Katniss. He continually stands aside to allow her to stand out and works to redirect the attention back to her. Starting with their first impressions in the chariot. Peeta is just as decorated with flames as their costumes practically match, but he observes, "I'm sure they didn't even notice anything but you" (72). Katniss is distrustful of this sentiment, but Peeta works to make it true. He talks her up to their mentor, covers for her when she messes up, and is adamant in the belief that she will have no problem winning the games.

The most important thing of all is when he makes her the center of his interview by sharing that he's been in love with her since he was a child. Katniss is furious, thinking the demonstration of love makes her seem weak. Once again framing love and attachment as a weakness and thus a bad thing. But Haymitch points out that in fact, it makes her all the more appealing: "He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in the department. You were as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about" (135). Peeta's love makes her desirable to people who can help her in the games and creates an intriguing

narrative that forces the audience to actually care about her fate. Peeta makes the audience see Katniss as more than a girl in a pretty dress, but as someone to root for: “There I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by Cinna’s hands, desirable by Peeta’s confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all account, unforgettable” (137-138). Katniss is unforgettable and Peeta is the prop that makes her so.

No wonder people only view him as a love interest. Peeta works tirelessly to portray himself as such. Yet as Haymitch observes, “It’s all a big show. It’s how you’re perceived”; and Peeta is the character who seems to understand this the best (135). Peeta is excellent at performing, as Katniss observes over and over: “Peeta laughs and asks questions right on cue. He’s much better at this than I am” (98). He knows how to fake a smile, a laugh, and say the right thing at the right time. He knows how to play the crowd and he knows how to make people pay attention to him. He knows exactly what he’s doing when shares his seemingly unrequited love for Katniss.

And it’s not until the end we see how far Peeta took the performance in the games themselves: “There’s no question he’s carrying this romance thing on his shoulders. Now I see how he misled the careers about me, stayed awake the entire time under the tracker jacker tree, fought Cato to let me escape and even while he lay in the mud bank, whispered my name in his sleep” (363). These are not the actions of someone fighting for their victory, but of someone who's merely trying to do one last good thing by protecting the person they love. Peeta performs not for his survival but for Katniss’s.

It of course must be acknowledged that most of Peeta’s actions are not a performance of love, but love itself. ‘The romance thing’ as Katniss calls it is very much

*a romance* to Peeta. While this is not confirmed until the very end, literally everyone around them sees that Peeta actually, truly loves Katniss. When Katniss tells Rue she thinks Peeta is only pretending to act like he's in love with her. Rue disagrees, "I don't think that was an act" (206). Haymitch when he warns Katniss about the Capital's anger and tells her she has to act madly in love, Katniss asks if he warned Peeta too, he says "don't have to...He's already there," implying Peeta doesn't have to act, because he is actually in love (357). Even Katniss wonders at the reality, "[Peeta] who can spin out lies so convincingly the whole of Panem believes him to be hopelessly in love with me, and I'll admit it, there are moments when he makes me believe it myself" (311). Katniss herself seems to some degree aware of the possibility of Peeta's true feelings but her own confusion and focus on survival forces her to view it as a performance.

The reality of Peeta's feelings, however, are not admitted explicitly until the end when Haymitch praises them for a good performance. Peeta is confused and then devastated by the realization: "It was all for the Games...How you acted" (372). He questions Katniss on how much of it was true but she's conflicted, leaving Peeta to ask, "One more time? For the audience" (373)? Making it clear that he understands now their romance is just an act for Katniss.

Once it becomes clear that Peeta truly believed in the romance they crafted in the arena, where they had to survive a death match with twenty-two other desperate people. It makes him seem at best unfocused and at worst stupid. To perform a romance for the sake of survival is admirable, but to believe in that romance seems silly. Because emotions, real ones like that are a weakness. They're fighting to the death! They're not

supposed to actually care about each other. Caring makes you weak and if you're weak, you're dead.

Katniss initially believes Peeta's confession "made me look weak," by associating her with the very idea of love (135). Even the Careers mock the very idea of love, calling Peeta "loverboy" and saying his ploy at romance "seems pretty simpleminded" and silly (162). Katniss for all she decides to ally with Rue is hyper-aware of problems with such an alliance. "I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child," implying that Rue by the nature of her small size and young age could be a burden (201). Then Katniss considers, "the obvious. Both of us can't win these games," aware that any alliance means the members will have to turn on each other or both die before it matters (208). Attachment has no place in the games. It's a weakness.

For Peeta to be motivated completely by love and only love for Katniss makes him seem weak. In fact, it makes him seem desperate and annoying. Especially after the rule change. By allowing two victors from the same district Katniss is forced to make a choice. In order to keep up the performance of romance and gain empathy from it, she must find Peeta and help him or she has to renounce the narrative and choose to leave Peeta to die and thus lose sponsors and attention. So Katniss is forced to settle down and take care of Peeta. Not only does she have to nurse him back to health but she has to play up the romance for the camera. In the middle of a deathmatch, she has to share comforting platitudes and sweet nothings and words of affection with Peeta. They have to kiss and cuddle and play at romance while other tributes are trying to find and kill them.

Her feelings aside, of which they are many, Katniss now has to show weakness in order to save both her and Peeta.

Katniss is just trying to survive a deathmatch and it seems like Peeta solely wants a romance. No wonder people like Gale better. At least Gale had his priorities straight, survival first, revolution second and maybe kissing third. Yet it is love that allows Katniss and Peeta to survive. Katniss for a character that seems to dismiss love as a weakness, is motivated a lot by love. Just like Peeta. Katniss volunteers for the games out of love for Prim. She takes Rue on as an ally, despite knowing it could be a stupid decision, and genuinely and explicitly grieves her death by singing and surrounding her body with flowers. How is this any different from Peeta? If Katniss is heroic because she protects her sister and allies with Rue. Why isn't Peeta heroic for caring about and protecting Katniss?

Because Peeta is a man and his methods of protection are not very masculine. Katniss is allowed these moments of love because she ultimately acts on them in a masculine enough way. She had a moment of hysteria volunteering for Prim, but she eventually calms down and faces her fate collected and ready. She does not cry or show any other emotion. She cannot save Rue but she avenges her death immediately, killing the boy who killed her without a second thought. She pulls an arrow on Peeta instinctively when the rule change is announced and it is clear both of them can't win. She is the one who chooses death for both her and Peeta instead of killing him to win. These are all actions motivated by love, but their execution is always violent and thus masculine seeming enough to allow Katniss the perceived weakness.

Peeta never has these moments. He is motivated by love, but in a very violent world, he is able to (mostly) succeed without violence. His protection of Katniss is rooted in the more feminine coded art of deception and lying. He charms the audiences and sponsors by spinning an engaging narrative. Even Katniss continually observes how good Peeta is at playing the cameras and talking himself out of difficult situations.

Unlike Katniss's acts of violence that are revisited and acclaimed over and over again, Peeta's moments of violence are largely swept aside by the narrative or even presented as unnatural for him. We never find out how Peeta convinced the Careers to let him join them besides the throwaway comment, "he's handy with that knife" (162). Implying that Peeta's talents with a knife are enough to impress even the bloodthirsty and talented careers. He is uncharacteristically cruel and dismissive when he goes to finish off a tribute the Careers couldn't even properly kill. He's injured by Cato when he covers Katniss's escape but is a good enough fighter to survive the encounter. Something most tributes don't. Peeta is clearly capable of violence and maybe is even good at it. Yet Katniss and the narrative sweep it aside because it's not what defines Peeta. It is not violence that makes him a hero.

Katniss continually calls Peeta the 'boy with the bread' harkening over and over to that simple but crucial moment of kindness that for Katniss defines who Peeta is. Peeta proves his heroism not through violence, but through radical love. Peeta's love for Katniss is unquestionable and he uses it over and over to help her, yet he never asks for love in return. When it is clear in *Catching Fire* that Katniss doesn't return his feelings in the way Peeta would like, he never pressures her or demands it or even guilts her about it.

He just continues working to uphold their narrative and preserve their lives. This is in contrast to Gale who pressures and dismisses Katniss throughout *Catching Fire* and in doing so, fulfills a much more masculine and thus desirable display of heroism.

Katniss returns to District Twelve to find that Gale has been cast as her cousin because “it wouldn’t do, what with the romance I was playing out in the arena, to have my best friend be Gale. He was too handsome, too male and not the least willing to smile and play for the cameras” (12). Already Katniss presents Gale as a very different, much more masculine competitor to Peeta. If Gale were not her cousin within the narrative the Capital creates, then he’d be in competition with Peeta (as he is in reality) because he’s an attractive, strong man. Especially compared to Peeta who has lost his leg in the games and is most well-known for selling a story to the camera instead of fighting. These differences are highlighted in the way each of their first kisses occurs.

In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss finds Peeta after the rule change and he jokes, “remember we’re madly in love, so it’s alright to kiss me anytime you feel it” (253). She treats this as a joke and focuses on examining his wound. When she begins to clean pus from his wound and is clearly disgusted and uncomfortable, Peeta jokes again, clearly trying to help Katniss and play for the cameras: “how about that kiss?” (257). She laughs and seems genuinely amused by the joke. However, they don’t kiss until *Katniss kisses Peeta* in a move that could be pulled from a rom-com: “impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words”(260). Of course, Peeta’s repeated jokes could be seen as badgering or pressuring, but Katniss seems generally unbothered and even amused. It’s clear while he probably means them, it is not a demand.

In *Catching Fire*, Gale, on the other hand, ignores Katniss for weeks after she comes home. Until he shows up in the forest to meet her and then out of nowhere, “he took my face in his hands and kissed me” (27). There’s no pressure or joke or preparation. Gale just grabs her and kisses her and then leaves saying, “I had to do that. Just once” (27). Gale doesn’t seem to care for Katniss’s reactions or feelings, kissing her for no reason but he just had to do it for himself. Just once.

Unlike Peeta, Gale constantly prioritizes his feelings and his desires over Katniss’s and then punishes her when she refuses to give him what he wants. In *The Hunger Games*, Gale throws around plans to run around with Katniss the day of the reaping, but Katniss firmly rejects him. But in *Catching Fire*, when it becomes clear her plan to placate Snow has failed, she asks Gale to run away, agreeing to his long-ago plan. He is initially ecstatic. He gives her the first physical affection they’ve shared since their kiss and hugs her agreeing. Then Gale confesses, “I love you,” and Katniss can only say, “I know” (96-97). She can’t give him an answer let alone the love he wants. He immediately punishes her, withdrawing his affection. Katniss realizes she said the wrong thing and tries to amend: “All I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim’s name at the reaping, is how afraid I am. And there doesn’t seem to be room for anything else. If we could get somewhere safe, maybe I could be different” (97). Katniss explains her feelings, one that has nothing to do with Peeta, but with Prim, and then promises a potential love to Gale. This potential opens Gale back up and he agrees, making her love a stipulation to his agreement, “so we’ll go. We’ll find out” (97). He’s only agreeing to give them a place for her to work out her feelings for him. Not to save



Prim or their families or even their lives. Gale seems mostly concerned about Katniss's feelings towards him.

So when Katniss mentions bringing along other people she cares about, Gale is of course angry. She is no longer considering only his feelings, but that of her mentor and her fiancé. "I'm sorry I didn't realize how large our party was," he snaps at her (98). The idea that Katniss cares about others outside him, his family, and her family seems unfair and unreasonable to him. Especially since one of those people is his competition for Katniss' affection. With this shift the escape no longer becomes about finding a place for Katniss to find her feelings for him, it becomes about people that Gale doesn't seem to think deserve an escape. So Gale punishes Katniss, withdrawing his agreement and becoming difficult.

He questions how valid her motivation is for leaving and her dedication to bringing everyone along until Katniss finally confesses the real reason for the urgency. There is a violent uprising in District Eight. Gale instead of seeing a problem to run away from sees an opportunity: "You've given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it...People want to fight. Don't you see? It's finally happening" (99-100). Everything Gale has desired, the treasonous thoughts he shared with Katniss once, are coming to fruition. He just has to take the opportunity. To Katniss, the rebellion is just violence. Something that is only going to end up with a lot of people dead, the people she loves especially, with nothing gained. While to Gale it seems to be the fight he's been waiting for. It's an opportunity.

Katniss is focused on saving the people she loves because that has always been her first and only motivation. Gale, however, wants justice. He wants to fight. He wants to be a hero. When Katniss reminds him of his family of the danger he'd be putting them in if he fought. He replies, "what about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can't run away? It can't be about just saving us anymore" (100). Gale turns Katniss's compassion against her and uses it to fuel his own righteous desire to fight. Gale sees the violence as an opportunity to help people, to save families from the same violence they have fallen victim to. Though Katniss is wary of him and his new motivation, it doesn't take long for her to come around, realizing he might be right. Because he is right. There's something righteous in his motive. He wants to help those who can't help themselves. He wants to look beyond himself, beyond his family and even his home, and help everyone escape too. It's an admirable motive, maybe even heroic and it makes Gale an appealing character.

But you know who is also motivated by this same compassion? *Peeta*. In fact, Peeta is the first character in *Catching Fire* who both tries to help families who can't help themselves and recognizes the violent unrest as an opportunity. On their victory tour, Peeta looks at the families of the tributes who had to die for him and Katniss to come home and he does something radical. *He is kind*. Hesitantly, he promises, "it can no way replace your losses, but as a token of our thanks we'd like for each of the tribute's families from District Eleven to receive one month of our winnings every year for the duration of our lives" (59). It is a small act of kindness and gratitude. It is unasked for, unexpected, dangerous for all those involved and maybe even life-saving. Just like

another moment with some loaves of bread. Unlike Gale, Peeta doesn't merely talk of helping families, he actively tries to at the potential cost of his life and wellbeing.

It is this same kindness that makes Peeta consider that trying to stop the unrest might be the wrong thing to do. Towards the end of their tour, at a party in the president's house, Katniss and Peeta are offered a drink by their prep teams that would force them to throw up everything they've eaten in order to keep eating. Both are disgusted by this. Katniss considers all the people in her district who starved to death while Capital citizens ate everything they wanted and then threw it all up just to be able to keep eating. It's so deplorable that Peeta wonders aloud to Katniss, "It's just sometimes I can't stand it anymore. To the point where... I'm not sure what I'll do... Maybe we were wrong Katniss, about trying to subdue things in the districts" (81). Katniss shushes him, but the point remains. Maybe rebellion is the right thing to do. After all, how could a government that allowed district citizens to starve while providing so much food at parties that guests have to throw it up to enjoy it all?

Peeta comes to the same conclusion Gale does. Yet they come to the conclusion in very different ways. Peeta comes to the realization after being faced with the sheer inequality of everything. He sees how people in his home are starving to death while people in the Capital have more than enough resources to feel full over and over and over again. Peeta's conclusion comes from a place of compassion and empathy. On the barest level he seems to think people shouldn't act like this when others are starving. He doesn't seem to desire the violence or admire it but he sees it as the inevitable, correct conclusion.

While Gale revels in the violence. He is energized by it. When Katniss tells Gale of the uprising she regrets it immediately, “their effect on Gale is immediate—the flush on his cheeks, the brightness of his grey eyes” (99). Gale is invigorated by the potential of violence. His first reaction is to only mention the injustices that motivate the violence offhandedly before jumping immediately into wanting to start his own uprising in District Twelve. Gale is energized at the idea of violence, not by stopping the injustices or helping people but by fighting back. By returning violence with more violence. And while there is an element of righteousness to the violence, Gale seems much more focused on retribution than justice. But this desire for righteous violence isn’t nearly as heroic as Peeta’s kindness. Peeta and Gale come to the same conclusion but their intentions and their actions are different and one is right and one is wrong.

In the last two books, but *Catching Fire* especially, there is this common theme of Peeta being considered the ‘better person.’ When the 75th Hunger Games begin and Katniss, Finnick, Mags, and Peeta are observing the violence of their fellow tributes, people they once were friends with. Katniss seems to come to an understanding with Finnick about Peeta: “Finnick knows then what Haymitch and I know. About Peeta. Being truly, deep down better than the rest of us” (277). It is clear the idea of Peeta being better comes from the simple fact that he is not a violent killer like them. He became a victor not by chance or luck, but by love. Specifically by loving Katniss. The characters recognize this and seem to agree that Peeta’s compassion and kindness are not what makes him weak, but are what makes him better than all of them. They understand, as killers themselves, that violence is not the better thing, no matter the intention.

Haymitch and Katniss don't agree on much, but they agree easily that Peeta is the best of them. Haymitch tells her, "you could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve him, you know." Katniss replies, "no questions. He's the superior one of the trio" (178). Once Katniss recognizes Peeta as the 'superior one' and most deserving of living, her reasoning is based on Peeta's ability to enact radical change through kindness and his words. Even before Katniss' final choice of Peeta in the last book, she recognizes how unique and powerful Peeta's kindness is in the world they live in. His superiority comes from living in a violent world, having violence done upon him, and still choosing when possible not to enact more violence. Just like Katniss covering Rue in flowers and singing to her, Peeta has a similar moment, comforting the dying morphling who sacrificed her life for Peeta's by describing the colors of his paints. It's a moment that proves Peeta's superiority but also calls back to Katniss's own act of compassion, singing for a dying Rue. Pointing to the superiority of kindness as a larger theme in the series.

Kindness is not only superior to violence. Kindness is more powerful. A lot of dislike of Peeta comes from the perception of Peeta as weak for the same reasons the narrative says he's powerful. Peeta is not a fighter, he has no special weapon or is super good at hurting and killing things. Instead, he is a fantastic liar and storyteller and cares about people. His words and his kindness are not traditionally masculine violence, but they're more powerful. Katniss recognizes this saying, "Peeta would be more valuable alive, and tragic because he will be able to turn his pain into words that will transform people" (244). Katniss sees Peeta's potential not to win or defeat an enemy but to *transform* people. Peeta can make the audience care about things they might not have

otherwise. After all it's how he got the audience to like Katniss. So then he can make people care about the other districts, about each other and help the revolution transform Panem into a unified body.

Peeta's words are more transformative than any violence can be, which is why he is the most powerful character. Power is intertwined with masculinity. To be masculine one must be powerful, usually physically powerful and one must have significant influence over others. Because Peeta is not the most violent or the strongest, people don't see him as very powerful.

Yet it is not his strength or ability to conduct violence that makes him powerful. It is his words and his ability to transform that does. In an arena with some of the strongest and most powerful players. Katniss declares, "Peeta's tongue would have far greater power against the Capital than any physical strength the rest of us could claim" (338). Once again Katniss makes it explicit that it is not physical strength or violence that is powerful. It is words and Peeta's ability to use them that is the most transformative force. Collins tells us over and over again, it is not merely violence that is going to enable the rebellion or keep people alive, it is words that connect and motivate people into doing the right thing. Peeta's words create a connection so strong it is transformative in a way a bullet or an arrow or a bomb may not be. Words, and the ability to create connection, that marks Peeta as distinctly feminine is the most powerful force in the books.

Moving into *Mockingjay*, Collins makes it clear that violence is a cycle and it moves in circles. Marvel kills Rue. Katniss kills Marvel because he killed Rue and it goes around and around. Violence causes more violence and unless one side is utterly

obliterated by the other, violence doesn't ever fully stop more violence. Ultimately creating vicious cycles that strip people of their lives needlessly.

Katniss observes this in action watching the rebels attack The Nut, a Capital held base. She hates the violence for reasons she can't vocalize until a soldier escaped from the attack threatens to kill her. She doesn't try to stop him, seeing his potential violence justified by her own violence. She says, "that's why I killed Cato...and he killed Thresh...and he killed Clove...and she tried to kill me. It just goes around and around, and who wins? Not us. Not the districts. Always the Capital" (215). The violence goes around and around. Everyone is justified in their violence against others, and the violence done against them becomes just as justified too. Everyone believes their violence is righteous because they have had violence done to them as well. So ultimately no one wins and everyone is stuck killing each other until nothing is left or until someone is able to say no.

Gale eventually loses himself in this cycle of violence and loses Katniss as well. Gale spends the first two books relatively powerless due to his position in District Twelve, but in *Mockingjay* Gale is finally given some agency and is able to conduct the violence he aspired to in the first two books. For the first time, Gale has power and he gains it through the use of righteous violence, but he loses Katniss for it.

As *Mockingjay* progresses we see Gale begin to lose any real compassion he might have had when he declared to Katniss he wasn't running away. It starts with being selective on who deserves compassion and who doesn't. With District Twelve burned down by the Capital, Gale sees anything Capital as the enemy. This is shown when Katniss and Gale discover that President Coin has locked up Katniss's prep team and is

holding them in a cramped cell. Katniss is furious about the treatment and Gale is almost disappointed by the compassion she has for them. He implies she shouldn't care because they're Capital people, thus deserving of the violence because of the violence they were complicit in. Katniss struggles to defend her feelings while Gale just doesn't seem to care. Eventually, he brushes her off and says, "I don't think Coin was sending you some big message by punishing them for breaking the rules here. She probably thought you'd see it as a favor" (54). Gale sees Coin's treatment of the prep team as fair. Even implying that Coin imagined Katniss was cruel enough to maybe even enjoy the harsh treatment since the team is from the Capital.

There's both a lack of empathy from Gale for three people being punished for rules they didn't understand, in a place they had been dragged to, and an acceptance of violent punishment for a small crime. Something similar to Gale's own situation in *Catching Fire* (being whipped for having a turkey), which Katniss points out. Even though Gale ignores her. To Gale righteous punishment of people from the Capital is then justice given by Coin to Katniss. It seems innocent, relatively minor in the scheme of things, but this acceptance of the cycle of violence enables Gale's much more extreme actions.

When Peeta is rescued from the Capital and is brought back to Katniss hijacked and mad, Gale uses it as a motive for creating larger and more dangerous weapons. He designs bombs that use the compassion and kindness of other humans to draw them in and kill them. Gale uses the most powerful thing, compassion, to wreak an even worse kind of violence. Katniss is disgusted by this: "I guess there isn't a rule book for what



might be acceptable to do to another human being” (186). Gale is very hostile to the sentiment, snapping back, “Sure there is. Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when he hijacked Peeta” (186). Just like the scene in *Catching Fire* where Katniss asks Gale to run away, Gale not only uses her compassion against her, poking at her care for Peeta but also argues that it’s fair to do unto President Snow and the Capital what they did to Peeta. Gale doesn’t seem to care about Peeta himself, instead using his torture to justify Gale’s own desire for violence.

Peeta’s words might have the power to transform, but Gale has the power to create violence. Katniss discovers the power of Gale’s words when they are sent to help the rebels try and take the Nut back from Capital forces. The Nut seems impregnable until Gale offers another solution. Bomb the whole thing creating avalanches that will trap everyone inside. The plan is horrifying and brilliant and Katniss realizes: “Gale said things like this and worse. But then they were just words. Here, put into practice, they become deeds that can never be reversed” (285). Peeta’s words were transformative and life-saving. After all it is his words earlier in the book that save Gale and Prim from the Capitals bombing of District Thirteen. Here Gale’s words are triggering violence that is efficient as it is horrifying. Katniss recognizes the same power but sees it not as transformative but as destructive and irreversible.

Gale of course defends it to Katniss later, saying, “What difference is there, really, between crushing our enemy in a mine or blowing them out of the sky with one of Beetee’s arrows? The result is the same” (221). Gale has become less concerned with intention and more with the end result. He begins compromising any ideals he might have

had for the 'ends justify the means' kind of mentality. Violence against the enemy is all the same and thus permissible. To Gale blowing up a mine full of people who cannot escape is the same as attacking hovercrafts that are attacking a hospital. Though Gale once believed the Capital deserved to burn for allowing the mine collapse that killed their fathers. He now finds the same fate fair for people he has deemed the enemy. Gale has little time for compassion and empathy now. He has become too obsessed with his righteous violence and desire for revenge.

There is of course only one way Gale's story ends. Part of the reason Katniss loves Gale as much as she does is that he is the only person she's ever been able to truly be herself with. They can disagree but when it comes down to it they know how to watch each other's back and work as a unit. They protect each other and they understand each other better than anyone and it is this connection that keeps them together. Until Gale's violence makes him unrecognizable to Katniss.

On the day of President Snow's execution, Gale arrives to talk to Katniss one last time. They look at each other and Katniss reflects, "I'm searching for something to hang on to, some sign of the girl and boy who met by chance in the woods and became inseparable" (366). The only person she could have ever truly been herself with is lost, warped by the righteous violence he sought and transformed into something unrecognizable and unlovable. His lack of compassion and his carelessness to their enemies has turned against them, leaving Katniss sister-less and Gale forever tangled with her death. Now looking at Gale she can only see, "the flash that ignites her [Prim]... the heat of the flames. And I will never be able to separate that moment from Gale"

(367). She not only can't even recognize him, but she can only ever associate him with her sister's death. His violence has come to define him in the worst way. Gale sought violence and he gained agency in it, but by doing so he ended up defining himself by it and ultimately losing Katniss forever.

But Gale's loss is not merely Peeta's gain. In fact, in *Mockingjay* we see Peeta become just as unrecognizable warped by the violence of his abduction and hijacking by the Capital. Where it seemed Peeta's love for Katniss was unshakeable, the Capital finds a way to turn it against both of them. Similar to how Gale is able to predict the compassion of medics and turn it against them. The Capital understands Peeta's love and warps it into violence and hatred against Katniss. They make it where not only does Peeta not love Katniss, he barely recognizes her as human. When his old neighbor Delly brings up Katniss, he screams, "she's [Katniss] some kind of mutt the Capital created to use against the rest of us" (198)! The man who could see the humanity in everyone; the starved morphing that saved him; the families of the tributes who had to die so he could live; even the Capital staff that prepared him for the games; can no longer see the woman he loves as a human being. Only a Capital created monster. This is the moment when Katniss writes Peeta off completely. She watches him scream about her lack of humanity and thinks, "Peeta is irretrievable" (191). The Peeta who loved her is gone. Too lost to his violent madness to even have the hope of coming back. He lacks everything that made him Peeta. He is violent and cruel and uncaring and in being so becomes unrecognizable and thus irretrievable.

This seems particularly true when President Coin sends Peeta to join Katniss's squad clearly intending or at least hoping that Peeta will finally kill Katniss. The squad recognizes him as a threat and treats him as such. Katniss declares to the question of if she's even capable of shooting Peeta: "I wouldn't be shooting Peeta. He's gone. Johanna's right. It'd be just like shooting another of the Capitals mutt's" (267). Katniss strips Peeta not only of his personhood but of his selfhood. He's hardly a person now. And he's certainly not Peeta anymore. Katniss has decided that since Peeta is no longer capable of love and compassion, he is no longer Peeta.

This disconnect is so important because it highlights why Peeta is so important to Katniss and why he is so important in the entire narrative. Peeta was the superior one of the victors because of his ability to love Katniss and to care about others. Even held hostage in the Capital before he is hijacked, Peeta calls for a ceasefire. Probably under the pressure of the President, but also because he recognizes that endless violence only ends with everyone dead. He is the first and only one concerned with the consequences, warning everyone: "to stop just for a moment and think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one and another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely" (26)? Peeta is of course dismissed, but he brings up a valid point. Too much violence, even righteous violence, might destroy them. Yet Peeta seems to be the only one seriously concerned about the consequences.

To take Peeta who recognizes the value of human life and turn him into the hijacked version that returns to Katniss proves a regression that in some ways does strip

him of his selfhood. He becomes a completely different person. Especially when it comes to Katniss. Earlier I mentioned Peeta's role as the love interest and how he is defined completely by his love for Katniss. Take that away and what is he? He's no longer Peeta. He is more like Gale. In fact, an *unrecognizable Peeta looks like Gale*.

Both are defined by the violence they can commit, they're both harsh and mean and they have little regard for the consequences of their actions. Peeta's behavior towards Katniss matches Gale's own behavior against the Capital and who he views as enemies. Peeta strips Katniss of her humanity, seeing her only as a mutt that must be killed. Gale sees the Capital and the people in District 2 the same way, as targets to obliterate for the greater good. Gale observes the similarity between them saying, "It's the way he hates you. It's so familiar... I used to feel like that. When I'd watch you kissing him on the screen" (244). It is *hatred* that they share. Though Gale doesn't specify which one. It could be jealousy, they hate each other for their place in Katniss' heart. It could be resentment. They hate their own powerlessness. But I think it's a selfish sort of hatred, directed at Katniss for not giving either of them what they want from her. Katniss refuses to commit to Gale and Katniss refuses to grant kindness to Peeta in his hijacked state. The divergence however comes when Peeta lets go of this hatred while Gale doesn't.

When Peeta and Gale discuss Katniss in Tigress' bunker, Gale says of her choice between the two of them: "Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can't survive without" (329). It's an unfeeling and almost cruel observation. Yet Peeta doesn't refute it. However, it shows how Gale misses the reason that Katniss loves Peeta. Love for Peeta is not a trick or a survival technique, though he presents it that way. Love is merely wanting

the best for the other person. It is not asking for what the person you love can give to you. It is completely loving that person for who they are. And that's how Peeta has loved Katniss the entire series, with no expectations, just a patient kindness. He knows Katniss can survive on her own; in fact, he expected as much in the first book. That much is clear. Yet Gale is so stuck on this idea of love being an assessment of what can be given and what can be received. After all, he is the one who has continually resented and punished Katniss for not returning his feelings in the way he wants. He treats the love she can give him as not good enough or clear enough. So to Peeta, he presents the choice as a judgment of attributes.

The ultimate decision of course doesn't end up that way. Gale indirectly kills Prim through his lack of compassion and desire for revenge and takes himself out of the running so to say. The last time Katniss sees Gale, he is offering her the bow she will use to kill President Coin and telling her to "shoot straight," committed to the violence to the very end (397). Katniss then returns to District Twelve, alive but not living. It's not until Peeta arrives, bringing Primroses to plant that Katniss begins to find a reason to live again. Where Gale ran away from his role in Prim's death only to return briefly with a weapon for Katniss and no apology. Peeta memorializes Prim in flowers, just like Katniss did for Rue. It is this difference that saves Peeta and condemns Gale:

What I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on,

no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that. (388)

Katniss doesn't need either of them to survive. She needs the motivation to live and move on. She needs to find the good in the world and to see kindness in place not hospitable to it. She doesn't need violence or revenge. She needs Peeta's patient, kind, love that carries no expectations or demands.

So it's pretty obvious why Peeta is the right choice. Textually, symbolically, character-wise, there is no choice but Peeta for Katniss. So why are people so uncomfortable with that? Why do so many readers and fans of the series still reject or disagree with that conclusion? Most importantly why is Team Gale still an option? Well, Hollywood has never been super good at adapting complex intricate narratives for the screen. So the answers seem to lie in the movie adaptations. Adaptations that did not choose to adapt everything I've discussed here and instead propped up a dangerous but more comfortable narrative of masculinity and violence.

*The Hunger Games* is a series about the cycle of violence and how kindness and compassion are the only things that will break it. It is explicitly anti-war and anti-consumerism. It is a radical story with radical morals. Yet Hollywood distills the narrative of this meaning by turning the story into spectacle and instead of undoing the restrictive structures Collins critiques, it upholds and glorifies them, especially in regards to the representations of masculinity. Peeta's presence in the novel completely subverts and even resists restrictive traditional masculinity, while Gale upholds it to his own detriment. Peeta symbolizes radical love while Gale symbolizes righteous violence and

revenge. Yet the movies completely undercut both of these representations and creates a cultural artifact that teaches exactly what the books were critiquing.

In regards to masculinity, the casting for Peeta and Gale must be discussed first. It is clear that the casting directors wanted to make the two characters very different just in their appearances to further establish and illuminate the differences of their characters. Yet the casting contributes and establishes certain gender assumptions. Gale is played by Liam Hemsworth, a traditionally larger and conventionally attractive looking man. Peeta is played by Josh Hutcherson, a shorter, more unique looking man. He's not, not attractive, but he doesn't have the same masculine looks as Hemsworth. He could be considered more 'feminine' in that he's shorter than Katniss, played by Jennifer Lawrence, but his appearance is only feminine in that he looks nothing like Liam Hemsworth with his rugged masculine looks.

Appearance seems to be a key part of who we idolize, less so in books but more so in film. In the books the description of both Gale and Peeta were simplistic, focusing on key traits that defined them. Gale looks like Katniss with the same eyes and skin, and Peeta is defined by his blonde curls matching the merchants in the least poor part of town. Other than that Katniss doesn't seem all that focused on appearance. In the films though appearance defines the character. Audiences knew what Peeta and Gale looked like long before they even heard them say a word. It didn't matter what they did or what they represented, all I knew was that generally it was seen that Gale was hot and Peeta was not and that was enough for people to choose one side over the other.



Scrolling on Tik Tok in the *Hunger Games* tag I come across a short clip of Gale body-slaming a peacekeeper with the creator commenting: “And everyone wonders why we’re team Gale” (@wintersolidernotebook). Some of the comments used the scene as evidence as Gale being better: “Gale>peeta” (@kaiziebrown) “In the films [this is why] I 100% prefer Gale.” “And y’all still be hating on him (@padawan\_cat).” “And what did Peeta do??? Cry (@ainsleyd4).” “Gale took down the Capital with this idea [fighting peacekeepers] and you can’t win a revolution by comforting those around you and baking cake”(@ainsleyd). “Why does everyone hate on Gale i love him and PEETA on the other hand was a problematic CHILD who didn’t contribute to the story” (@tashasc0tt). All implying that the righteous violence seen in the clip is proof that Gale is the strong and appealing choice compared to Peeta, who is seen as weak. Both because of the violence, which was appealing because of its righteousness, and because of who was conducting the violence.

Heroes are usually the ideal person, so it’s not surprising heroism gets tied up with appearance. Whether we like it or not, appearance defines many of our judgments, especially with coding heroes and villains. Appearance often defines quickly what is seen as good and bad, and what is heroic and what is villainous. Movies have long coded villains as queer and as people of color to make them more frightening because those qualities are seen as Other and thus scary. *The Hunger Games* is guilty of this.

The Capital’s privilege is showcased through the weird and wacky clothes they wear and the way they change their appearances to be something almost inhuman, designating them as ‘other’. In the series it’s a rightful designation, the Capital is

villainous, not because of their appearance, but for their privilege and ability to create such an appearance. However such techniques have been used to more problematic lengths. Too often people of color play villains to white heroes, fat women try to and destroy the lives of skinny young women, and villains are queer coded in order to make them more monstrous and inhuman to the heterosexual protagonist. Appearance is just as important a part of a hero as their actions. So the fact that Gale is conventionally hot and Peeta is conventionally not, means a lot in regards to their own status as heroes. It props Gale above Peeta and displaces Peeta as a hero.

I imagine Gale wouldn't be as attractive an option if he wasn't traditionally masculine, both in his appearance and his actions in the movies. After all one of the main reasons people are Team Gale is how he looks. In many pieces arguing for Gale, his appearance is often the first thing they list as a reason. In "10 Reasons Why Katniss Should Have Chosen Gale Over Peeta In the *Hunger Games*," Mehra Bonner writes, "Katniss should have picked Gale Hawthorne — for other reasons than the mere fact that he's played by our collective imaginary boyfriend, Liam Hemsworth" (Bonner). Bonner begins the article by stating what seems obvious, Gale is Liam Hemsworth. He's hot and he's considered dateable by the majority of the population. Who wouldn't choose him?

In "Catching Fire: Why I'm Team Gale," Amanda Dobbins argues this: "there are superficial arguments to acknowledge, like the fact that Gale is tall and handsome (all the girls at school crush on him). He is also District 12's resident bad boy" (Dobbins). Simple reasoning. Gale is hot and he's a bad boy and all the girls love him, making him the easiest choice.

In “How to Decide if You’re Team Peeta or Team Gale: a Scientific Approach to the Ultimate *Hunger Games* Question,” Crystal Bell takes this argument a step further, swooning: “oh, Gale. He's tall, dark and handsome -- a brawny action hero who literally storms the Capitol with Katniss by his side. Plus, who in their right mind wouldn't fall head over heels for Liam Hemsworth” (Bell)? Not only is Bell saying Gale is hot, but she associates his attractiveness with the violence he enacts against the Capitol. Explicitly tying the masculinity he embodies as appealing because of the violence.

Yet Josh Hutcherson’s appearance as Peeta was generally just never mentioned as a positive thing, if it was mentioned at all. None of these cited articles mention Peeta’s appearance. This absence proves that when a character’s appearance is not masculine enough it becomes a moot point or another thing to diminish.

Now if Gale were instead played by a man of color or a younger, skinnier man, would a video of him body-slammng a peacekeeper be as appealing? Would we find the violence he causes as attractive? Would we consider him a hero? Absolutely not. Our culture wouldn’t allow it. Gale’s violence is made attractive by the fact that he is Liam Hemsworth, a hot muscular white man, and that our culture glorifies the violence of young, masculine-looking, white men like him. Gale is as appealing as he is because culture values the things that he represents: white, masculine, righteous violence. Gale is both upheld by this narrative and supports it, creating a vicious cycle. It doesn’t matter that Collins' whole point was to condemn this behavior. That message is too radical to be allowed in a blockbuster that needs to be accepted by the general public.

Leading us to Peeta, who is completely screwed over by this rewriting. Peeta as the less masculine and less appealing option is shunted to the side and displaced in favor of Gale. *The Hunger Games* films do so badly by Peeta. So badly. In the first film, they cut out anything that made him interesting or charming or even funny and left behind a pushy, annoying, whiney, weak caricature of himself. The only in-character thing they gave Peeta to do was the interview with Caesar and the “I’ll take the bow” comment when Katniss says they need to hunt, that makes Katniss for the first time in the entire movie look like she actually likes him (Ross).

While Gale got more screen time. Peeta physically gets displaced by the narrative. Katniss’ and Gale’s introductory exchanges are almost straight from the book, while most of Peeta’s dialogue is cut or changed. Even their exchange on the roof before the games, when in the book Peeta admits to wanting to stay himself and not be a piece in their games and Katniss doesn’t seem to understand is changed in the movie so Katniss does understand. Completely negating Peeta’s role in Katniss coming to this revelation later in the series and then undermining Peeta’s awareness that makes him stand above the characters around him. The movies even interrupt and explicitly cut Peeta and Katniss’ romance scenes in the caves with shots of Gale looking sad and forlorn but still resolute, deliberately turning the attention of the audience from Peeta to Gale.

Then in the second film *Catching Fire*, Gale is given more screen time and more opportunity to conduct his righteous violence, completely undermining the point of his lack of agency that motivates his extreme violence in the third book. Instead of being caught with a dead turkey, Gale body slams a peacekeeper in order to stop them from

hurting some random citizens and gets his whipping that way. Peeta is cut from the scene completely, not allowed to use his words to talk the Peacekeeper down. Completely undermining the power and heroism of Peeta's words for the sake of showing heroism through Gale's violence. In fact, where they can, the films strip words of their power completely and make violence the most heroic thing to do. The third film cuts any of the meaningful propaganda memorializing the lives lost of unfair violence and focusing on the human cost of war replacing it with clips of just more violence but righteous violence instead. The films not only completely portray its heroes wrong, but they also portray the themes of the books wrong as well.

This deliberate displacement of Peeta by Gale, proves an overarching theme in many American life myths. Righteous violence is the heroic thing to do and radical love is weakness. Masculinity is good and femininity is bad. It perpetuates a dangerous idea that for men to be heroes they have to be violent because love is either punished or viewed as weakness. And when these lessons are taught in our media, whether consciously or unconsciously, intended or not, they have consequences.

## Conclusion

*“It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were and sometimes you didn’t want to know the ending because how could the ending be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it was only a passing thing. This shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it’ll shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something, even when you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of going back, only they didn’t. They kept going.”*

*~Samwise Gamgee, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*



The stories we tell as a culture matter. The narratives we create mean something, they prove something about shared values, our shared fears, and our shared aspirations. A story is an artifact of a culture and it represents us, good and bad. While this is an ode to the stories of friendship and love and connection and triumph over evil that defined my life as much as it defined millions of others. This is also a plea to tell the right stories, to celebrate the right heroes. We must examine what our stories tell us about ourselves for better or for worse and we must seek to understand why we celebrate some heroes over others. Why do we tell the story of Paul Revere's ride to warn the American resistance when it was not only him who undertook the danger? Why do we tell the story of Abraham Lincoln as the freer of slaves when it was people like Harriet Tubman who actually freed slaves from captivity? Why do we celebrate the violent victories of soldiers instead of the lives saved by nurses and doctors? Why did we go to war within weeks of 9/11 when, as of April 28th, 2021, we've lost over 573 thousand lives to Covid-19 and for too long refused to do a thing about it (Worldometer)? What do these stories say about us? What do the stories we choose not to highlight say about us? What do these stories demonstrate about what we care about? After all these stories highlight the bravery of American figures, but only certain figures.

Stories can save us, but they can also be the thing that can destroy us as well. Especially when we misuse them. Watching the news on January 6th, 2021, I saw our Capital, the stronghold for Democracy we've called it, stormed and invaded by *Americans*. Traitors, and fascists, and racists, but Americans all the same. I watched our president egg them on, tell them he loved them, and saw their traitorous actions as the

right thing to do. I saw the consequences of a dangerous story: one full of white privilege and violence, of lies and fiction, egged on by a traitor we elected to office because too many people liked the story he told. A story of an America in shambles, ruined by progressive politics and sensitive liberals, that can only be saved by a man who wields his words dangerously and cruelly, who spins narratives and tall tales of a lost, stolen election. I see people plead, “we are better than this,” and claim, “this isn’t America.” When it is and always has been. We are not watching something unexpected or unpredictable, we are watching the end of a dangerous story we’ve enabled and allowed to be told. This has always been the story we’ve told, the underdog standing up against the oppressive government through violence. That is the American way and this is what happens when we accept it.

The stories of America have for too long been about the heroism of white, masculine, righteous violence. It is why we allow white fascists, racists, and Trump supporters to invade our Capital with no consequences while we gun down and gas and beat Black Lives Matter protesters. It is why we excuse the actions of abusive men and ignore and demean their victims. Just in the last month, we have seen accusations of racial harassment and general abuse by director Joss Whedon, creator of the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and director of blockbusters like *The Avengers* and *Justice League* (which are in no way new), continue to be ignored or dismissed while Whedon is allowed to keep making movies and money. Donald Trump was exonerated by the Senate for the second time on February 13th, 2021 declaring he did nothing wrong by encouraging the violence of his supporters. Sexual assault perpetrators are let off with light punishments



(if there's any punishment at all) in court while black men are killed by police for being black and thus suspicious. Over and over we uphold and allow the dangerous narrative of white, masculine, righteous violence because that is the story our country tells, in fiction, in books, in history, in movies, and in real life.

The only way to escape a story is to tell another one, a better one and the story we need does exist! It just keeps being pushed aside and displaced by this more comfortable and familiar, but no less, dangerous narrative. The heroes we need are out there, too often sidelined or ignored, but they are there. Just with the Capital Insurrection people have stepped up and proved that yes, this isn't America. The Capitol Police, specifically Officer Eugene Goodman, who redirected senators away from the insurrectionists who wanted to kill them. Senate aides who had the awareness to grab the electoral votes so they weren't destroyed or stolen. Reporters risked their lives to capture the footage and action in person and up close. Women on dating apps who seek out men bragging about their actions and send said bragging to the FBI as evidence. These are Peetas and Nevilles of the world, who love so radically they can overcome violence. These people tell a different story, a more hopeful one, which makes me hope if we focus on the right story, the right people, we can stop something like this from ever happening again.

The heroes we need exist in fiction, especially in the stories I've explored here, and they exist in real life too. We just have to allow them that label. We have to stop displacing them for the more traditional but dangerous model of a hero. We have to celebrate the protectors in the Capital and dismiss the violent traitors. We have to celebrate the doctors and nurses working to save lives in a pandemic whose own story

has become warped by an administration who refused to take it seriously. We have to tell stories of our capacity for kindness and care, of the power of community and connection. We have to tell the right stories and celebrate the right heroes or we might eventually fall victim to our own narrative.

My dad shaped me through the stories he told, the final one being *The Lord of the Rings*. He showed me the movies two years before he died and I was always surprised by his softness for Frodo. I wouldn't say Frodo was his favorite character, but for a man who resented Boromir for his weakness, he never was so harsh to Frodo. Despite the fact that in the traditional sense Frodo fails in the end to destroy the ring, at least directly. He takes the ring for himself, and it is only destroyed when Gollum takes the ring and falls into the lava. But Gollum wouldn't have been there if Frodo in the beginning of the journey hadn't chosen kindness and spared Gollum's life.

For all I loved Frodo, I never really understood why of all the characters it was Frodo my dad had a degree of softness for. We never talked about him. I wish we had so I could give you a clearer answer. But like most stories handed down, things get lost in the retelling and we must make do with the pieces we have left. It's our role as readers to find the stories and the pieces that will make us better and that celebrate the right kind of heroes.

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