The Impact of Eugenic Feminism on Female Young Adult Readers in Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* and Grace Liggett's *The Grace Year*

Anastacia McKean

Newport News, Virginia

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Department of English

University of Virginia

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Introduction

In bookstores shoppers are likely to find a grand section, spanning numerous shelves and rows, titled *Young Adult* – a category commonly abbreviated: YA. Young adult or YA novels which are typically aimed toward teenage readers aged twelve to eighteen can traditionally be any genre from fantasy to sci-fi to realistic fiction (Winters, 44). Particularly significant for the purposes of this thesis is the growing selection of "young adult dystopian" novels that are finding a place on these shelves. The current explosion of YA dystopias can be attributed to an interest in the genre that has only increased since a boom in the early 2000s (Basu, 2). In 2016, the juvenile fantasy fiction market share, a group that includes the dystopian genre, rose by 17 percent "to become the biggest-selling juvenile category," selling "more than four times as many" units compared to adult fantasy and science fiction (Wilkins, 5, 1). The growing trend toward dystopian young adult novels was noted by the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* in a 2008 piece titled "Scary New World", focusing particularly on Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, a text which so completely devoured its competitors that it spurred a highly anticipated film release four years later in 2012. Despite how encouraging it is to know that a booming young adult shelf means that children and teens are avidly reading, it also raises the question of why dystopian fiction holds such an appeal for them?

This thesis explores the importance of young adult dystopian novels for the role they play in the development of critical perceptions and analysis about current global feminist crises in young female readers. It aims to do this by recognizing that the literary background of the young adult dystopian novel has its roots in a critique of the eugenic movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, through examining the intersection of feminism and

eugenics in the novels *Delirium* by Lauren Oliver (2011) and *The Grace Year* by Kim Liggett (2017), I aim to show that ideas about eugenics form a blueprint within these fictions through which young adult dystopian novels critique responses to global feminist issues pertaining to women's reproductive rights, systemic patriarchies, and the exclusion of marginalized voices. By showcasing these ties between dystopian visions of eugenics and feminism, we can better understand the novels' impact on the way young female readers interpret and respond to certain crises they see in the world around them. *Delirium* and *The Grace Year* are two extraordinarily successful dystopian YA novels that deserve deep analysis of their role in the genre's explosion and subsequent development, particularly in the way they address their female protagonist's conflicts with eugenics through both an individualized and a larger, community-wide perspective.

Delirium, the first installment in Lauren Oliver's trilogy by the same title, is set in Portland, Maine in a futuristic 2091 where civilization has been reduced to isolated cities, travel is restricted, and electric fences separate the cities from unregulated territory known as the "Wilds". Narrated by 17-year-old Lena Haloway, readers learn that the government has declared love a disease, known as *amor deliria nervosa*, and a surgical procedure has been made mandatory for citizens eighteen and older in order to cure the population. Lena has always wanted to be cured of love, her childhood stained by her mother's three failed procedures and subsequent suicide. She is ready to be free of the "deliria" and to receive her marriage matches from the evaluators. However, just months before her procedure, Lena falls in love with the "Invalid" (someone who has not been cured and lives in the Wilds), Alex, who pretends to be cured to live undetected in the city and take part in a growing resistance movement. Her relationship with Alex forces her to question the propaganda she has been fed by the government

about the world, about love, and about her mother's death. Soon Lena must decide whether to be cured or to escape with Alex into the Wilds.

Kim Liggett's *The Grace Year* introduces readers to the patriarchal society of Garner County. There the citizens believe that females harbor dangerous magic and that, in order to be pure for marriage, they must be sent away to release their magic into the wild. A yearly practice known as the Grace Year sends every 16-year-old girl in the community to a camp far from Garner County where they are supposed to live for a year until they can release their magic. 16-year-old Tierney James awakens to prepare for her own Grace Year. Before she is sent away however, she and the other Grace Year girls must participate in the veiling ceremony where, after bartering with the girls' fathers, eligible bachelors choose a wife. When Tierney, known for being a rebellious tomboy, is surprised to be chosen as a wife by her best friend Michael, her dreams of owning her own body after returning from her Grace Year are dashed. The girls are then sent into the wilds where they are constantly threatened by poachers lingering just outside the walls of the camp who hope to sell the butchered body parts of captured girls as magical aphrodisiacs and serums. Though Tierney believes that the girls will begin to form relationships where they can talk freely, away from the oppressive, patriarchal regime of Garner County, the opposite occurs. Foreshadowed by the presence of a "punishment tree" made up of the decorated body parts of past girls, Tierney realizes that the grace year girls will naturally gravitate toward the ingrained ideologies of Garner County. The girls turn to mean-girl Kiersten for leadership, attacking and torturing those who refuse to follow her and eventually banishing Tierney for speaking out against their horrific actions. After being hunted by the other girls who have become unstable in the camp, Tierney is rescued by none other than a poacher who nurses her back to health. There, the poacher reveals the secrets of the camp, that the curse of the camp is

just smallpox and that the reason the girls become mentally unstable is that the well water they relied on for survival was poisoned by hemlock silt, a hallucinogenic herb. With the sudden realization that the magic was never real, Tierney must decide whether to return to the camp and to Garner County to try and protect the future Grace Year victims or escape with the poacher who saved her.

These novels, with their gloomy visions of future worlds and frighteningly direct depictions of pressing global concerns, such as reproductive rights and the heteropatriarchal domination of women, may seem rather overwhelming for the young audience they routinely attract. A 2011 article posted by the Wall Street Journal argues that the topics covered in young adult fiction are “too dark” (Gurdon). The literature scholar Rocio Davis describes young adult dystopian fiction “as a response to today’s mass media culture’s often pessimistic and/or catastrophic vision of the world” and he says that “adolescents are being trained to view mankind as inherently wasteful and oblivious to the consequences of their actions on the earth” (Davis, 48). Yet, Dr. Balaka Basu, a professor of Literature at UNC Charlotte, notes in the introduction to her collection of essays on YA dystopian fiction that the appeal of these titles for “young readers, who are trying to understand the world and their place in it…may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood” (Basu, 1). Davis’ view is based in a clear understanding of the current young adult literature market. These topics, she asserts, are not “too dark,” nor should they be shied away from, even by young readers. As Basu states, young readers are trying to find their place in the world, and young adult dystopian literature provides a space to do that through the parasocial (meaning one-sided) relationships that young female readers generate with the characters of the texts. In providing that space within a dystopian setting, the novels use the parasocial relationships to impact readers’ views of the critiques of

eugenics and feminist ideas that are presented, thus providing a way for them to develop certain critical perspective and analytical skills with which they can respond to emergent issues in the world around them.

Why Focus on Young Female Readers in Young Adult Dystopian Literature?

It is important to note that this thesis' focus on female readers of young adult dystopian literature is based on the overall trend of the genre and its target audience in recent years. A study published in the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* and conducted at Texas Tech University by Miglena Sternadori of the Department of Electronic Media and Journalism and Jessica Kokesh of Kearney Hub identified major novels from the young adult genre published between 2000 to 2010. It used these novels to examine "the genre's narratives and the effects they might have on young readers and specifically on girls," a decision made after seeing the genre's considerable focus on female readership and perspective (Kokesh, 140). Though it consisted of a small sample size of fourteen young female readers, the study, published in 2015, is one of the most recent studies available, and its findings are supported by other scholars' (Moylan, Day et. al., Glenn, etc.) examinations of young adult and dystopian literature. In the study, "one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 young girls" aged thirteen to eighteen (145). The interview consisted of a "schedule of open-ended questions about the participants' reading habits, opinions on female characters, and beliefs about the books' accuracy in portraying teenage life, among others", though the prompts were also noted to be "free-flowing, with follow-up questions based on answers provided by the participants" (146). Along with the interviews, an analytical approach was taken to "identify patterns in narrative portrayals

of female characters" within the young adult genre (144). The analytical and interview methods paired together aimed to identify the *parasocial relationships* that young girls formed with the characters of the novels they read, especially in response to the female narrator. Furthermore, the study identified ways in which young adult novels influence the reader's "identity construction and social attitudes" (140). In doing so, Kokesh and Sternadori highlight both the positives and negatives of the feminine trends in these books; whether they adhere to and perpetrate traditional gender norms or attempt to break them while encouraging readers to do the same through the relationships readers formed with characters.

The strong identifications between young women readers and female protagonists are related to YA dystopian narrative's embrace of the genre of development or formation. The Kokesh and Sternadori study describes one element typical of young adult books as being "a journey toward identity discovery and separation from adults," pointing to the *bildungsroman* that make up the majority of teenage literature (141). As a literary genre, the *bildungsroman* focuses on "the formative years of the main character – in particular [their] psychological development and moral education" (Merriam-Webster). This focus on personal formation becomes dramatized and transformed in the dystopian genre where the protagonist's twist from childhood to adulthood, ignorant to informed, often affects an entire group, community, or even nation-state rather than just the individual. Franco Moretti, professor emeritus at Stanford University, defines the transformative action of bildungsroman as "conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization," (Moretti, 15). In Oliver's *Delirium*, the main protagonist Lena's formative journey culminates in an understanding of both personal romantic love and a realization of the oppressive and totalitarian policies of her government.

Kokesh and Sternadori also present this genre of young adult literature as less focused on (though not completely free of) traditional gender stereotypes and harmful images of femininity, such as the "mean-girl" stereotype identified in the study (146). They identify the trope of "The Rebel" character, who "discover[s] that establishing their agency requires rebellion" (149). Indeed, it is now commonly noted that "rebellion against the status quo is a common feature of YA dystopian fiction", meaning that the trope of "the rebel" female protagonist as identified by Kokesh and Sternadori is the prominent figure that greets readers and leads them on the journey through the book's plot when they delve into the world of a YA dystopian novel (Basu, 11). Though Kokesh and Sternadori give minimal attention to the dystopian novel as a genre, focusing instead on simply summarizing *The Hunger Games*' female protagonist as an example of a popular dystopian text, they nevertheless provide a basis for the argument that dystopian novels can be a powerful force for young women. YA dystopian novels address not only "social attitudes and gender identities" but how these ideas play into larger communities and world issues, a fact emphasized by detailing how female readers are able to relate to and form relationships with "the rebel" character (Kokesh, 154).

Other scholars of this genre also make similar observations about how the fictional worlds of YA novels develop the ties between individual strife and collective ethics. In their book *Discovering Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls with Young Adult Literature*, Marsha Sprague and Kara Keeling state that young female readers are "searching for one's own place in the world," a search which is "often accompanied by outright rebellion and rejection," (Sprague, Keeling; 25). Emma Winters from the Center for Migration Studies, notes that in response to young female readers' search "young adult literature is shifting, following the gaze…toward social justice issues and activism", and that "more recently, these young adult social problem

narratives are morphing into social activism narratives" (Winters, 44). For Liggett's *The Grace Year*, this morph from young adult social problems into social activism narratives comes through the narration of Tierney James, the novel's protagonist. The novel begins by relating Tierney's aversion to marriage and her ongoing feud with mean-girl Kiersten, yet it ends with a hopeful promise of revolution for women's rights. This is precisely what the dystopian novel aims to do in the context of young adult literature: it aims to integrate "social problems" that are local and individualized with "social activism" that addresses world issues.

However, as I stated above, these novels are not completely without their problematic connections to traditional gender roles. Scholars and critics of the genre note that, even when presenting a "positive message that young women should feel capable of…questioning, resisting, and even rebelling against injustice in their societies," these narratives can "rely on rather than refute problematic assumptions about gender" (Day, 88). This is the case particularly when we consider the heterosexual romance plots of the two novels that I focus directly on in this thesis. Yoked to the prevalence of "flimsy characters," both *Delirium* and *The Grace Year* rely on a heterosexual relationship where the male character imparts vital world-building knowledge in order to fully connect the female protagonists with the truth of the worlds they live in (Publisher's Weekly). In *Delirium,* Lena would have been unable to find out the truth about her mother had Alex not recognized the description of her necklace and helped her get into the Crypts. In *The Grace Year*, not only would Tierney likely have died, but she also wouldn't have discovered that the poisoned well water was the true cause of the girls' mania, and not magic, without Ryker's botanical knowledge. Though asking for and receiving help from others is a natural part of transforming ones' views, Ann Childs of *Kirkus Reviews* argues that the requirement that help come in the form of a heterosexual romantic relationship with a more

knowledgeable male character privileges "the heterosexual relationship" and "implicitly position[s] males as more important than females" (Childs, 191). Thus, by enforcing a heterosexual romantic relationship, critics argue that the attempted feminist message is co-opted and silenced.

I argue that these relationships between male and female figures, however, though presenting traditionally heterosexual romantic relationships, do not negate the young adult dystopian novel as an "optimum mode for reaching beyond the myths of male power" because these very female protagonists ultimately choose to act upon their newfound knowledge (Moylan, 41). Furthermore, by the end of both novels, the love interests are left behind; Alex is captured just as Lena escapes, and Ryker is killed by the other grace girl poachers while Tierney returns to the camp. The removal of the male character illustrates how both young women act on their own desires for change and are not bound by their heterosexual relationships with male characters. Dystopias act as critiques of current issues, such as reproductive and women's rights, and thus what may present as traditional gender roles in a young adult dystopian novel can instead become a point of critique. For example, Tierney's return to a traditional gender role as Michael's wife at the end of *The Grace Year* turns out to be an opportunity for her to redefine the society she lives in. Additionally, in *Delirium,* though there is focus on a romantic relationship between Lena and Alex, "the cure [for love] destroys other connections between individuals" such as mother-child or platonic friendships which branches beyond a strictly heterosexual perspective (Childs, 194). This makes young adult dystopian novels the perfect medium through which to examine eugenicist ideologies that typically hold fast to traditional gender roles and to consider how their portrayal of feminism implies a resistance of those ideas for young female readers to use as critiques to address issues they see in their own lives.

One of the limits of studies that focus narrowly on readerly identifications on the basis of preconceived gender categories in youth is that they neglect to consider these ideas of femininity outside of the realm of the female "gossip-circle", focusing rather shallowly on concepts of localized social situations, such as high-school parties, cliques, and teenage popularity. By doing so, these studies reject the idea that novels, particularly those in the dystopian genre, do much more for young female readers than reinforce gender stereotypes and act as social guides for getting through the turbulence of the "sweet sixteen" years. Instead, as I argue in this thesis, the young adult dystopian novel revolves around stories of eugenic feminism and forced gender role expectations that have been curated in a way that compels young female readers toward critical self-reflection and analysis. This curation comes from the genre's background in adult dystopian novels of the twentieth century, such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. *Brave New World*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and their "ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic" (Moylan, xii). These precedent texts have already developed a blueprint for writing the dystopian genre as a forceful critique of traditional eugenics. Thus, YA dystopian novels use the blueprint of a "dystopian textual strategy" of twentieth-century adult dystopias to extend these earlier skepticisms of eugenics in a way that directly impacts young female readers (Moylan xii).

For Kim Wilkins, "iconic female characters from YA books…have encouraged a new expectation that women, especially young women, have strength, skill, and stamina enough to save the world." (Wilkins, 19). This encouragement aligns directly with the overall trend in this genre toward the female perspective, which allows the texts to take on and explore "complex cultural narratives" that young women find important (Kokesh, 140). However, this new expectation that Wilkins identifies is truly only available to young female readers if they are given the opportunity to explore them, yet "girls entering adolescence experience a diminishing

sense of who they are and what they can do" and are often silenced "even when girls were, by standard psychological measures, highly successful," (Sprague, Keeling; 2). What I aim for with this thesis is to expose the systemic silencing of young adult women by examining eugenics within young adult dystopian novels. Furthermore, I aim to identify how these novels rebel against these standards. Young adult dystopian novels present a way of identifying systemic eugenics within a reader's own society while also providing young female readers a "springboard" for activism and to envision change in order to create a better world (Sprague, Keeling; 15).

One way we can directly view how young readers interact with these texts is through an academic setting. Amanda Pepper, a high school teacher from South Carolina, details a course unit she developed on the dystopian novel, providing evidence of how young adult dystopian texts can inspire real actions from their audience. Pepper "looked for texts that would stoke students' curiosity; creating engaging, analytical discussion; and serve as vehicles to study author's craft," choosing specific dystopian texts to "facilitate an evaluation of contemporary culture as students observe modern society from a perspective of the future" (Pepper, 97). While her account presents a more anecdotal view of the impact of dystopian YA novels on student readers, there is no denying the perceived effect that Pepper's curriculum had on her students. Former students, she notes, are "confident" in their knowledge of the term *dystopia* and that they "identify with characters' struggles with fear and pain" while they have also "learned to interact socially with literature as adults do in the real world" (99, 100). Though Pepper's article focuses on a specific circle of young readers (her high-school students), her experience with the dystopian curriculum highlights the important responses that enthusiastic audiences have when engaging with these texts.

In her study of young female readers, Sally Smith, Professor Emerita at Hofstra University, noted how readers "actively positioned themselves as readers who could explore their questions and emotions and to identify with the heroine" (Smith, 12). Not only do readers identify with characters, but they also interact with the larger-scale issues of "contemporary culture" and "modern society" (Pepper, 97). Smith notes that readers use "the worlds of the texts to question and explore their present lives and visions of the future" (Smith, 5). Frank Serafini and James Blasingame postulate that this interaction may be fueled by the way dystopian YA provides "teens with a look at a future they may suspect is nearly upon them, perhaps validating their worst fears" (Serafini, 147). They argue that each dystopian young adult novel has one thing in common: that "they portray a vaguely recognizable condition, a condition we are likely to arrive at if we don't change our ways" (147). This common condition of the dystopian genre paired with the identity finding properties of young adult literature provides strong reasoning for why young readers are so fascinated with the dystopian YA novel. They can see themselves in the characters and they can see global issues like those they see in their own realities – environmental disaster, political turmoil, technological advancement, or even social crises – which then encourages them to consider the problems, questions, and solutions that the characters are presented with in order to determine where they fit in a troubled world.

Pepper's course curriculum provides evidence for how teen readers of young adult dystopian novels use the texts to develop strategies for dealing with current issues they see in the world around them. Though the example is limited to a small group of high-school students, it is nonetheless one that shows how these texts can encourage young readers to become "voluntary members of book culture" who "have learned to interact socially with literature as adults do in the real world," (Pepper, 99). The responses to dystopian texts from young readers seen in

Pepper's article, when paired with sociological studies on the increasing influence of the young adult genre on female readers, provide a basis for the purpose of this thesis. Young readers, as shown through Pepper's curriculum study and use dystopian literature to develop critical analysis skills of the world around them, including in particular those that are guided by concerns over gender. Thus, issues surrounding the female voice – reproductive rights, lack of female visibility in male-dominated spaces, etc. – are absorbed by young female readers, who find connections and relatabilities in these texts, which allows them to develop skills and strategies with which to address similar issues they see in their own lives. However, in order to gain a full understanding of young adult dystopian literature's full impact on provoking feminist responses, it is important to consider its literary background within adult dystopian novels of the twentieth century and their critiques of the eugenic movement.

The Eugenic Blueprint of Dystopian Literature

To properly discuss the two novels which I examine in this thesis, *Delirium* and *The Grace Year*, we must examine the genre of the contemporary dystopia that they employ. Dystopia is often defined in relation to its counterpart, utopia, an imagined society in which "the future renders present-day problems more clearly," problems that the utopia is "engineered to address" (Gordin et al., 1,2). Thus, for many scholars, dystopia is not the *opposite* of utopia, but rather "dystopia is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin et al. 1). Tom Moylan, founding director of the Ralahine Center for Utopian Studies, goes further, identifying a "new tendency as a specific form of dystopian narrative" that he coins the "critical dystopia" (Moylan, 188). Moylan argues that the critical

dystopia is a "retrieval and refunctioning of the most progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative" and that they "represent a creative move that is both a continuation of the long dystopian tradition and a distinctive new intervention" (188). Additionally, Moylan notes that "the contributions of feminist women occupy a leading edge" in this new narrative trend (188). I argue that young adult dystopian novels, specifically *Delirium* and *The Grace Year*, are prime examples of the "critical dystopia" as they not only "give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects" through their feminist perspectives, but they also "go on to explore ways to change the present system" by promoting hope and encouraging activism in their young female readers (189).

In my thesis I claim that young adult dystopian novels are steeped in the literary history of their adult predecessors, specifically through the novels' critiques of eugenics. However, young adult literature also, as noted by Moylan, acts as a "distinctive new intervention," expanding on what dystopias of the twentieth century critiqued through their attention to elided feminist voices (188). Most notably then, these novels interact with and critique a subset of eugenics known as feminist eugenics, which Law Professor Mary Ziegler identifies as the redefining of traditional eugenics by feminist supporters to argue that gender equality was necessary for racial improvement (Ziegler, 213). Thus, this thesis aims to identify, through examination of *Delirium* and *The Grace Year*, the impact that both the threads of traditional and feminist eugenics that articulate themselves within the female-centered young adult dystopian genre have on young female readers.

Critiques of eugenics have had a strong presence in the dystopian genre since its inception. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, eugenics was "a set of both scientific and social practices" that centered around the study of heredity within human genetics and its effect

on intelligence and inherent ability (Levine, 2). As it evolved in popularity into the twentieth century, eugenics became “a cluster of diverse biological, cultural, and religious ideas and practices that interacted with a variety of social, cultural, political, and national contexts” (Turda, 1). While the eugenic movement was outwardly promoted as beneficial for humankind it was filled with misconceptions and ran rampant with ideas that perpetuated discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality. For example, in her book *Eugenic Feminism*, literary critic Asha Nadkarni relates the 1935 eugenic campaign by American birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger to link “birth control to the project of Indian nation building” and “assure a more perfect national and feminist future” (Nadkarni, 1). Though “Sanger may have focused on a positive eugenic message of making ‘the finest men and women possible,’” Nadkarni writes that her effort was “also motivated by a negative eugenic concern with improper reproduction on a world scale” (2). *Eugenic Feminism* highlights just some of the ways in which eugenics was filled with misconceptions of race, gender, and sexuality, especially when concerning women’s reproductive rights.

The traditional dystopian novel markedly made its appearance alongside the start of the eugenics movement and its ideas of reproductive rights in the late nineteenth century with the publication of H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). Wells’ novel was a direct response to the rapidly growing field of eugenics, critiquing its often-dehumanizing ideologies through the character of Dr. Moreau, a disgraced scientist, whose violent vivisection and reconstruction of animals had its roots in the “science of good breeding” (Levine, 1). Though an adult novel, Wells’ creation marks the beginning of the dystopian movement. It presents a fictional world that, though restricted by its secluded island setting, used the distance of its setting to develop a poignant critique of the very real scientific ideologies circulating at the time of its publication.

When Edward Prendick survives a shipwreck and is brought to Dr. Moreau's island, he is stunned to find the exiled physiologist performing gruesome experiments in vivisection. Trapped there, Prendick begins to explore the island where he wanders upon a group of "beast-people" – Dr. Moreau's past experiments – animals who have been humanized by vivisection. The gross revelation of Moreau's experiments – and the horror it induces in the narrator – points directly to the novel's critique of the positive marketing of eugenics as science for creating genetically superior beings. Moreau argues for the benefits of eugenics, boasting that "'it's not simply the outward form of an animal I can change. The physiology, the chemical rhythm of the creature may also be made to undergo an enduring modification…yet this extraordinary branch of knowledge [from eugenic vivisections] has never been sought…" (Wells, 71-2). Moreau's disregard for animal suffering and Edward Prendick's ethical regard for pain ensures that the eugenicist idea of physical and biological modification for the perseverance of superior beings, human or animal, is turned terrifying and grotesque in this path-breaking text.

Since Wells' novel was published, the dystopian genre has evolved to include the social, political, and economic clusters, as highlighted by Marius Turda in his book *Modernism and Eugenics*. Turda notes that eugenicists "were not simply preoccupied with rescuing the individual from the anomie of modernity they geared their efforts towards saving the nation" (Turda, 7). Thus, what Wells' novel began on a secluded island with the example of brutalized animals, expanded into a whole genre of novels that addressed entire communities about the consequences of the eugenic control of the population through social, economic, and political means as well as biological manipulation. For example, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a distinctly female-focused novel that engages with and critiques these expanded eugenic ideologies, similar to the young adult texts I examine. What is important to note, however, is that

adult novels like Atwood's fail to engage young female readers in the same way that young adult novels do because of the lack of similarly aged, relatable characters.

The young adult dystopian novel seized the genre's expansion into social, economic, and political realms by emphasizing a focus on a greater community rather than just looking at the secluded individual. YA dystopias, in other words, sit directly at the intersection of individualism and collectivism, blending "depictions of adolescent personal problems" (Davis, 49) with ways that "individuals position themselves in reference to a wider collective" (Hintz, 254). This tendency was first presented in Lowis Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), which was published just before the boom of the YA dystopian novel in the 2000s. Following the main protagonist Jonas, *The Giver* aimed to present a world with complete social and biological control through the guise of a twelve-year-old boy. Jonas' tale is a dramatic bildungsroman, following Jonas' development as he navigates new and disturbing knowledge about the society he grew up in, including the euthanasia practices of the elderly, sick, and unwanted. The Giver perfectly reflects dystopia's critique of eugenic ideologies that reject imperfect biology.

The emergence of the young adult dystopian novel continues eugenic critiques first developed by traditional dystopian novels. Arguments about human reproduction and government control that were at the forefront of adult dystopian novels of the twentieth century are still visible in contemporary young adult books. However, what has changed is the tendency toward plots that engage larger community concerns rather than the effect of negative events on an individual. The emphasis of these stories is often on developing community-oriented feminist tropes for the young female readers of YA dystopia. With M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) young adult dystopia exploded in popularity and the fascination with the genre has continued well into the present year. The plethora of dystopias

available to young readers provides authors with a path to begin exploring more nuanced feminist voices that had otherwise been silenced in previous dystopias both adult and young adult. A common critique of Lowry's *The Giver* was that it privileged the masculine narrative voice of Jonas, denying agency for the female voice. Most notably this occurs through Jonas's "stirrings", a "puberty-driven sexual awakening" that is realized "though a dream he has about his friend Fiona" (Stewart). The sexual awakening that this dream portends is highly suggestive, describing how he "wanted her to take off her [Fiona's] clothes and get into the tub" (Lowry, 36). Though the sexual yearnings depicted in the dream are never acted upon it nonetheless shows how, even though Jonas is only twelve, the female voices in his life are already being silenced in favor of his male desires. Of his desires, Jonas says, "I knew that she wouldn't. And I think I knew that she shouldn't. But I wanted it so terribly" (36). Jonas has denied Fiona's desires and wants in favor of his own by continuing to "want" her despite his admittance that she would never reciprocate.

The refusal to address the impact of the dystopia on women is not just limited to Lowry's novel. Prior adult dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* also promote traditional social constructs surrounding female voice and presence. Huxley's novel offers a world steeped in traditional eugenics where reproduction has been fully sterilized and mechanized, allowing genetics to be determined completely before birth to follow conventional standards of race, gender, and physical attractiveness. When the character Linda returns after her time in the reservation she is shunned by society: "Nobody had the smallest desire to see Linda…there was her appearance. Fat; having lost her youth; with bad teeth, and a blotched complexion…you simply couldn't look at her without feeling sick," (Huxley, 141). Ingrained social constructs of the idealized woman's physical appearance, heterosexuality, and class structure in the novel,

though exaggerated, all promoted social eugenicist practices that were advocated for in the twentieth century while maintaining a distinctly male focus.

However, as Kokesh and Sternadori note, young adult novels of the 2000s turned toward the female voice. Yet feminism itself is often positioned in a complicated relation to eugenics. In her book, Nadkarni identifies a subset of eugenic ideology she calls "Eugenic Feminism," where "nationalist feminisms launch their claims to feminist citizenship based on modernist constructions of the reproductive body as the origin of the nation," a real-life example of the feminist issues proposed in young adult dystopian novels (Nadkarni, 5). Though the trend toward female narrators and protagonists was a reaction to the overwhelming presence of female readers within the young adult market, Melissa Ames, Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, has written that the success of these texts is "more than just a mere marketing achievement" (Ames, 6). This shift also opened avenues for exploring traditional gender roles, female sexuality, and feminist eugenics that were either skirted over or even problematically perpetrated in earlier dystopias, "turning an ear to their reality and its implications and perspectives about the society we exist in" (Orman, Lyiscott; 64).

It is worth noting that I use the term *feminist eugenics* cautiously, as it is not intended to be a positive term, nor a positive topic of discussion within the novels I explore in this thesis. Rather, feminist eugenics points to the intersection of the prominent female presence and the eugenic ideologies of the dystopia the women live in. It is a space for critique of eugenics that also at times uses feminism as a cover to promote biological (mainly reproductive) and social control over physical bodies and further nationalist sentiments. Eugenics, after all, by focusing on the removal of undesirable hereditary traits, is inherently based in the control of women's reproduction and reproductive rights. Zeigler noted this connection, reciting a common eugenic

argument that to prevent the "eugenic decline of the race…women [must be] granted greater political, social, sexual, and economic equality," (Ziegler, 213). This, however, is flawed feminism because even if women were granted greater equality, it would be done at the expense of other marginalized communities such as LGBTQ+ and non-white groups. Eugenic feminism is, as traditional eugenics was for the dystopian novels of the twentieth century, a key point of critique for young adult dystopias, particularly because of the connection it engenders between nationhood, the collective community, and the reproductive body. Young adult dystopian novels of the recent decades, such as *Delirium* and *The Grace Year*, present critical views of the degree to which feminism consorts with eugenic nationalism through communities that manipulate young women and control reproductive rights for the sake of a grander community. Furthermore, eugenics is not limited to only female bodies, but instead, people of all sexes and gender orientations – male, female, nonbinary, and intersex persons – are affected and manipulated by "eugenic feminism".

What these YA dystopian novels do, then, is represent eugenic societies in order to expose and critique eugenic feminism within a larger community through the perspective of their female protagonist. The protagonists of YA dystopias, as noted by Kokesh and Sternadori, traditionally undergo a form of transformation in which a revelation or realization occurs and an individual who once conformed to the dystopic society becomes "the rebel" and begins working against it. In doing so, novels like Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011) and Kim Liggett's *The Grace Year* (2017) present dystopic worlds centered around feminist eugenics, compelling readers to straddle the line between the individualized young adult and the community-oriented "rebel". The "rebel" is paired with a predetermined moral path toward a hopeful resolution for readers to follow since the protagonists negotiate issues similar to the readers' own worlds. Both novels

take what was written in early dystopia such as those by Wells, Huxley, Orwell, Margaret Atwood, and others and expand upon it, bringing it not only to a younger audience, but also exploring topics – such as marginalized perspectives, eugenic feminism, and women's voice in reproductive rights – that were once only brushed over or perhaps forgotten altogether in YA fiction, thus impacting and teaching young girls how to critically analyze these issues in their own lives.

Emotion and Eugenics in *Delirium*

Delirium is set in an alternate United States and is centered around the town of Portland, Maine. Narrated by 17-year-old Lena Haloway, readers are given a glimpse of the future where everyone is safe, unhappiness can be cured, and freedoms have been relinquished in the name of "stability" and the common good of the nation (Oliver, 11). This so-called "cure" comes in the form of a forced "coming-of-age lobotomy that excises *amor deliria nervosa*, or love," which has been deemed a deadly disease by the current government (Publisher's Weekly). At the height of the young adult dystopian trend, published alongside popular titles such as *Divergent* by Veronica Roth and Marie Lu's *Legend*, *Delirium*'s success in an oversaturated market likely comes from its ability to inspire identification in YA readers. *Delirium* retains a tight focus on protagonist Lena's story while presenting young female readers with a skewed understanding of emotion through its dystopic depiction of love. Emotions, like the complex emotion of love, have an important place in "YA literature in general, with its heightened interest in adolescents' forms of interaction" (Davis, 51). Thus, in the YA dystopian novel, emotions can be used as a relatable medium for engaging adolescent readers with the text's critique of eugenic ideas.

Dystopia in *Delirium* is connected to "forms of regulation and elimination" of love that are established in Oliver's futuristic United States through scientific processes and medical operations, and the social conditioning of citizens (Davis, 51). These regulations are a result of early dystopian critiques of eugenics which have continued into contemporary texts as an opportunity to address adolescent fears about the future of their society. One of the main aspects of eugenics is control. Though presented as necessary for the good of the whole, eugenic control often requires giving up freedoms and allowing specific individuals in power to make decisions for everyone else. The loss of freedoms, the loss of control of oneself, and the inability to be an individual is a fear for adolescents. Young adults are starting to find their place in the world and develop their own identities. The inability to do that, though exaggerated by the dystopian setting, presents a pathway for young readers to connect to critiques of eugenics.

Though not directly described, in the text the "cure" for "*amor deliria nervosa*" is a medical, lobotomy-esque procedure. Readers glimpse the procedure through sightings of a surgical table that Lena becomes obsessed with during her pre-surgery evaluation when she describes imagining herself on, "the hard metal table, the lights winking above [her], the tubes and the wires and the pain" (Oliver, 31). The physical procedure that citizens receive is eugenic ideologies in practice. For the better of the community, the "Order," the sitting government, has assumed control of emotional production.

Along with the medical removal of emotion, we're told that "marriage exists as an institution controlled by the government" (Davis, 58). The Order has seized control of women's reproductive ability; the government dictates genetic matches by assigning the young adults who have passed their evaluation to a set of pre-determined partners who have been verified as compatible. Lena explains the process, saying that "usually the evaluators generate a list of four

or five approved matches, and you are allowed to pick among them," along with "statistics – age, scores, interests, recommended career path, salary projections," (Oliver, 21; 181). This carefully curated list relies on the idea that the matches are correct, and that those determining what makes a good match are not doing so in a way that only serves their interests. It relies on the idea that the genetics chosen to continue are somehow good and worthy, and though *Delirium* does not address the racial implications behind this process, the eugenic basis for it suggests that race may have an effect on the practice.

The new government in Oliver's dystopia also establishes social practices to promote compliance with the direct restrictions of the cure and matchmaking. The government's official publication, "The Safety, Health, and Happiness Handbook" (commonly referred to in the text as "*The Book of Shhh*") is propaganda with information, teachings, and history on *amor deliria nervosa* and the cure, even including "stories of those who died because of love lost or never found," (4). Excerpts from *The Book of Shhh* are found as epigraphs at the beginning of several chapters, some of which are very obviously based in eugenics. On the topic of human emotion, for example, *The Book of Shh* claims that "humans, unregulated, are cruel and capricious; violent and selfish; miserable and quarrelsome. It is only after their instincts and basic emotions have been controlled that they can be happy, generous, and good" (354). This animalistic and vicious representation of humans is what Nadkarni would call a "negative eugenic concern," where humanity must be 'saved' from the negativity of random and uncontrollable emotions in order to prosper and be successful (Nadkarni 2).

The image of the animalistic human infected like a rabid animal by the *deliria* is further presented in the text both through epigraphs and Lena's narration. The epigraph at the beginning of chapter twelve describes a historical account of the years "before the development of the

cure," stating, "many historians have argued that pre-cure society was itself a reflection of the disease…almost half of all marriages ended in dissolution…Incidence of drug use skyrocketed, as did alcohol-related deaths" (Oliver, 183). The epigraph, which is credited to be from a well-known history text of this new society, presents various issues, like divorce or substance abuse, as symptoms of the *deliria* in order to provide evidence of the destruction of the disease. Using a historical account typically signals credibility to a reader, which means that Lena and other citizens who absorb this material are placing value in the images and theories this ostensibly authoritative text describes to confirm the eugenic perception of human emotion the Order has implemented.

Additionally, Lena's own narration gives young readers a sensationalized version, heavy with gruesome imagery. At the beginning of the novel, Lena introduces readers to the world, the disease, and most importantly her perspective of it. Having grown up in this new world, "Lena experiences desire as dangerous because society has explicitly framed it as such" and these beliefs about love are ingrained so deep within her that she actively feels anxiety about her potential to contract the dangerous disease *amor deliria nervosa* (Day, 86). She recites how she's imagined herself as an uncured member of her community, and saying that:

> I don't like to think that I'm still walking around with the disease running through my blood. Sometimes I swear I can feel it writhing in my veins like something spoiled, like sour milk. It makes me feel dirty. It reminds me of children throwing tantrums. It reminds me of resistance, of diseased girls dragging their nails on the pavement tearing out their hair, their mouth's dripping spit. (Oliver, 2)

Lena's orthodox belief in the Order's propaganda is a prime example of the social conditioning she receives in order to convince her and other citizens in the world of the novel to

follow the Order's eugenic practices. Lena understands love as an affliction, "diseased blood and spoiled milk in one's veins," and imagines young girls tearing themselves to pieces like animals. Her description of the *deliria* is a potent passage that works to convince young female readers when they initially enter the fictional world of the novel and follow Lena as she leads them through her world that this disease could be real and dangerous.

At the end of the first chapter, Lena recounts the way the government has utilized occurrences of diseased young girls as sensational propaganda through their representation on state-sanctioned media. She recollects a news story that was played continuously on the TV when she was younger, hammering in the horrific and fatal effects of the *deliria.*

> Several years ago on the day of her procedure, one girl managed to slip from her restraints and find her way to the laboratory roof. She dropped quickly, without screaming. For days afterward, they broadcast the image of the dead girl's face on television to remind us of the dangers of the *deliria*. Her eyes were open and her neck was twisted at an unnatural angle… (3-4).

Both of these excerpts are utilizing eugenic ideas; natural human instinct must be controlled and regulated because it is dangerous if left to its own devices and it is society's duty to protect the vulnerable from this unregulated danger for the good of all. The social basis for this eugenic argument is presented through the government's numerous forms of sensational and historical propaganda. Furthermore, because it is delivered so early in the text in such a graphic manner, it is presented in a way that is inevitable to young female readers who are given almost no chance to consider these ideas.

Perhaps it is farfetched to consider love a fatal disease that needs to be cured through a lobotomy, yet the role of love within the novel as a dystopic element of society that can easily spiral out of control is also an opportunity to connect with young female readers. Kokesh and Sternadori note that "relationship heartbreaks represent a common experience" that female readers can relate to, and a world in which the pain of heartbreak doesn't exist may be tempting to a teen girl who has just gone through her first breakup (143). Smith notes in her study that romance in young adult literature allows "girls to ponder their desires to be living more exciting lives, to consider the fascination of romance and sexuality" (Smith, 8). Thus, Oliver's depiction of love, intimacy, and emotion as something a totalitarian government could control also presents a thread of interest for young female readers as confirmed by the studies of Smith and Kokesh and Sternadori. Furthermore, the exploration of love as a topic of teen female relatability allows Oliver a chance to critique eugenic feminism, a "redefining" of traditional eugenics to appeal to women (Zeigler, 213). However, just as these young female readers can relate to the teen issue of heartbreak, Oliver's novel does not hesitate to present its critique of the society it has built, warning these young readers about what can happen when these eugenic-based ideas are taken too far. This thesis, as stated previously, aims to show that young adult dystopian novels impact young female readers by teaching them how to address feminist issues in their own lives. Thus, the relatability of the female protagonist only holds as much value as the warning and critique that develops through her subsequent transformation across the text.

The novel's warning against the Order's ideologies comes surprisingly early. Lena's best friend, Hana, "has been strange recently…more outspoken, more independent, more fearless," and Lena, noticing that her friend is exhibiting dangerous behavior, fears that Hana might be the next girl to drop "from the roof of the laboratory" (Oliver, 20). Readers first receive a hint that

something is wrong through Hana's dissent. Before going in for their evaluations, Hana tells Lena "'You can't be really happy unless you're unhappy sometimes,'" (Oliver, 23). Later, Hana confesses that "[she] can't breathe, [she] can't sleep, [she] can't *move,*" feeling as though "there are walls everywhere" (207). While the Order promises a life free of pain with complete happiness, Hana disagrees, arguing that the Order is really promising a fake, suffocating happiness, one that is not as powerful as the real thing. Hana's warning is the crux of Oliver's critique of the biological and social eugenic practices in this hypothetical future where love itself is viewed as a dangerous contagion. Davis identifies how "the world of *Delirium*…posits a totalitarian rejection of free will in the guise of a solution to the problems that emotions bring," where the Order promises a cure from a "negative eugenic concern" (Davis, 60). The negative eugenic concern that the Order focuses on concerns the uncontrollability of emotion. According to the Order, uncontrolled emotions lead to improper marriages and poor genetic reproduction, as well as substance abuse and potential death, which further depletes genetic possibilities for future generations. Additionally, the uncontrollability of emotion supposedly impacts societal stability, causing economic, environmental, and social strife for communities and nations without the cure.

However, what Hana, and subsequentially Oliver, argue through Hana's warning to Lena before their initial evaluation is that the restriction of free will, and emotional and reproductive choice, is so restraining that it creates a false existence. Furthermore, they argue that pain, heartbreak, and failure make us human and are necessary aspects of life rather than symptoms of a disease that needs to be cured, thus advocating against the eugenic policies of the Order. Though this argument is "existential and epistemological rather than political," its development directly impacts political and social views that readers develop of the totalitarian regime (Davis, 60). This means that the novel still has the power to impact how young female readers view

feminist issues in their own world by critiquing the eugenic-based ideologies that Oliver presents. Young female readers are encouraged, by following Lena's transformative narrative as she examines what the Order has taught her, to question their own beliefs and understandings. Likewise, they are encouraged to combat common eugenic ideas about relationships and emotions within their own lives, a point that Sara Day notes: "Western culture has largely taken to portrayals of young women…as creatures whose sexuality must be controlled by implicit or explicit rules and regulations," that "seek to restrict young women's exploration of their own physical agency" (Day, 75). Lena's transformation in *Delirium* presents a path for young readers to practice "vicariously what [they] would feel and do if [they] were living that experience," through the parasocial relationships that they develop with the main protagonist (Sprague, Keeling; 148).

Throughout the novel, the push against eugenic ideas of free choice and love is expanded through Lena's relationship with Alex, the Invalid who is uncured and lives in the city secretly as a part of a growing resistance. Their relationship is a point of contention for Lena as it goes against everything she has been taught by the Order as well as her own beliefs about the *deliria*. This contention, this anxiety surrounding Lena's struggle to balance both her relationship with Alex and her belief in the Order's teachings, impacts her narrative in two ways: individually and communally. Not only does Lena grapple with her own ideas about love, but her relationship with Alex unearths multiple secrets and lies that the Order worked to hide from the entire nation. Though this occurs throughout the novel, there are three main catalysts for Lena's dramatic change in her belief system: her discovery of Alex as an Invalid, the reveal that the electric fence is not charged, and the knowledge that her mother may still be alive.

When Alex reveals that he is not, in fact, a citizen of Portland, but was born in the Wilds and never cured, Lena experiences an extremely sudden and personal heartbreak. She tells readers "I'm desperate to rewind time, go back to the moment before he said my name in that strange tone of voice, go back to the triumphant, surging feeling of beating him to the buoys," indicating that this revelation has shaken her understanding of the world (Oliver, 167). Her initial response to "rewind time" suggests that she has lost some level of innocence that had when this information wasn't available. Learning about Alex's Invalid status is deeply troubling to her personally, and numerous times she describes Alex as animalistic and dangerous, likening him to "predators dropping silently from trees…enormous cats with glowing amber eyes, just like his," and calling his eyes "an animal's eyes" (170, 165). She even goes so far as to compare Invalids to mythical creatures, saying "Vampires and werewolves and Invalids: things that will rip into you, tear you to shreds. Deadly things" (168). The propaganda that the Order has pumped into the citizens of the United States is so ingrained in Lena that this boy whom she had been laughing with and enjoying being around suddenly turns into a vicious beast that is going to violently destroy her. Lena asks Alex "'Why are you doing this?'" and "'What do you want from me?'" as if he was planning something horrible (169).

However, despite Lena's adverse reaction, this is the first major step toward her rebellion against the dystopian society she has grown up in. By being forced to confront differences in how the Order portrays Invalids (violent, fictional beasts) and how she sees Alex, Lena must make her own decisions about what to believe. This gives her the opportunity to consider other possibilities and turn away from her blind belief in the Order. When female readers who are connected to Lena through parasocial relationships see this development they are also being taught that questioning what you've been told is an important critical analysis skill. Readers can

discern that Alex is not, in fact, a vicious animal out to hurt or take advantage of Portland citizens when he says "'Lena, I like you, okay? That's it. That's all. I like you," and thus understand that Lena was misinformed and that she needs to question what she is being told (170).

Readers see this questioning being put into action when Lena agrees to go with Alex into the Wilds for the first time, which becomes a metaphorical journey that allows her to address issues outside of her personal experience. By this point in the novel, she has addressed the fact that the Order has lied to her about the existence of Invalids and their threat to society, however she has not chosen to tackle the further issues that Invalids present. To access the Wilds, Alex and Lena must get past an electric fence so strong that it will fry a human body in moments; they think that the fence will "make our hearts go haywire, kill us instantly," – at least, that is what Lena and the readers understand to be true (279). In reality, the fence is "dead and cold and harmless" (279). Once again, Lena must come to terms with the fact that she was deceived, and "it really hits [her] how deep and complex the lies are, how they run through Portland like sewers…the whole city built and constructed within a perimeter of lies" (279). No longer is the lie just affecting her and her relationship with Alex, but it is affecting the entire community. In the end, Lena recognizes that:

> They've lied about everything – about the fence, and the existence of Invalids, about a million other things besides. They told us the raids were carried out for our protection. They told us the regulators were only interested in keeping the peace. They told us that love was a disease. They told us it would kill us in the end. For the very first time I realize that this, too, might be a lie. (280)

At this culminating point in the novel, Lena questions the entire society that she grew up in, and the intentions of the government that put these regulations, ideologies, and practices in place. Young readers, too, can question these things alongside Lena, continuing to develop critical analysis skills which teach them to come to their own conclusions of their own free will by taking in all the evidence they can, the good and the bad.

The final reveal that turns Lena into the "rebel" character is the knowledge that her mother may still be alive. Though Lena has learned to question what the government is telling her after the epiphany at the fence, she has not transitioned into the "rebel" character who is actively working to dismantle the dystopic systems of oppression around her. She is still passively questioning things, questioning if love is a disease or not. Before Lena learns of her mother's true fate, she is haunted by what she experienced during her childhood. She tells Alex after rejecting his proposal to escape into the Wilds with him that "'I don't want to be like her…I saw what it did to her, I saw how she was…She left me, left my sister, left it all. All for this thing, this thing inside of her'" (333). It is her understanding that her mother was killed by the *deliria* that keep her from completely transitioning into the "rebel" character. However, Lena's perspective changes when Alex recognizes a pin that her mother wore and tells her that he believes her mother may not have committed suicide after all, and that she is still alive (336). To confirm this, Alex takes Lena to the "Crypts," which serves both as a prison for "resisters and sympathizers" as well as "Portland's mental institution" where her mother was likely kept (344). In her mother's prison cell, Lena finds that:

> In the lower half of one wall, she has traced the word so many times in such enormous script – LOVE, each letter the size of a child – and gouged so deeply into the stone that the *O* has formed a tunnel, and she has gotten out (369).

The new knowledge that her mother has escaped from the Crypts and Portland spurs Lena into her moment of transformation. The lies that the Order has told have now directly impacted her life, and her family; Lena was told that her mother died from the *deliria* ten years ago, but in actuality, she had been kept as a prisoner for rebelling against the state. She experiences a "rebirth of identity…despite pressure from adults to abide by rules" and she convinces Alex "to leave Portland" together to escape the oppressive regime of the United States government (Glenn, 390; Oliver, 380). While this is a personal decision, it sparks a feeling of resistance and revolution within Lena and subsequently within readers. Young readers will root for Lena and Alex's forbidden relationship winning over the oppressive regime, as they "identify with heroes…who risk all to save the world" (Sprague and Keeling, 113). At the climax of the novel, Alex and Lena's escape plan is thwarted and the two must make a dangerous last-ditch effort to fight back and achieve freedom. Just as Lena escapes to the other side of the fence, she turns to find "Alex is still standing on the other side of the fence…soaked in blood" (Oliver, 439). As Alex sacrifices himself so that Lena can escape the society that has lied to her all her life, she experiences her final transformation into the complete "rebel," declaring:

> You can try to pin me down with a hundred thousand arms, but I will find a way to resist. And there are many of us out there, more than you think. People who refuse to stop believing. People who refuse to come to earth. People who love in a world without walls, people who love into hate, into refusal, against hope, and without fear…Remember. They cannot take it. (441)

Oliver uses Lena's love for Alex as her final call to action, spurred on by the three moments of realization and transformation. Though this is a personal, "existential" crisis for Lena, it has spilled over into an understanding of a wider group of people within the overarching

setting of the novel (Davis, 60). Within Portland and within this futuristic United States, Lena's narrative shows that other people believe in love as she does and that there are others who will critique and fight back against a totalitarian regime based in eugenic ideologies. Furthermore, it presents a narrative of change and personal growth. If Lena can transform into the rebel character, through the help of her friend Hana, her romantic relationship with Alex, and her familial love for her mother, then we can assume that others in the United States are also capable of this same growth. Not only that, but readers, as they "celebrate when these characters resist pressures to retreat rather than confront," can find inspiration to undergo the same growth (Sprague and Keeling, 26). *Delirium*, thus, is a novel published early in the young adult dystopian boom that deserves recognition for both how it was influenced by traditional eugenics and twentieth-century dystopian novels in its depictions of love, emotion, and reproductive choice, and its ability to impact young female readers to question similar refusals of choice and expectations of relationships through an intensely personalized and relatable story through the emotion of love.

Systemic Patriarchy and Female Relations in *The Grace Year*

As the dystopian genre has continued to grow, so have the novels it produces. Kim Liggett's *The Grace Year*, though also narrated from a teenage girl's perspective, gives an entirely different perspective of the way authors are approaching feminism within dystopias. Published in 2017, six years after *Delirium* and the YA dystopia boom, *The Grace Year* follows sixteen-year-old Tierney James and the other girls of the fictional Garner County as they fight to survive a year-long banishment designed so they release their supposed magic into the wild in

order to return purified and ready for marriage[1]. In contrast with *Delirium*, Liggett's novel focuses on the dynamics of female relationships, including themes of female competition and LGBTQ+ characters that were absent from novels of the early boom, such as Oliver's. The genre is expanding to include even more marginalized voices, and though Liggett's novel still falls into the same tropes of the young adult genre, featuring, for instance, the unnecessary heterosexual love triangle, it is still a strong example of an exploration of eugenics within young adult literature. Most important for this exploration of eugenics in YA fiction, *The Grace Year* completely removes the biological aspect of eugenics, opting instead for a social and political approach to the feminist issues of women's reproductive rights and patriarchal control. *The Grace Year*'s larger community of Garner County focuses on the social control of women and their reproductive systems through an established patriarchy.

Though it may seem as though the eugenic critiques of the twentieth-century novels are missing because of the absence of direct mentions of biological eugenics, the practices of Garner County, as well as their belief systems towards women and their bodies, are firmly grounded in traditional eugenic ideas of "good breeding" (Levine, 1). Garner County's presentation as a patriarchal society, however, produces a tension between mainstream eugenics and eugenic feminism, because the men who determine and uphold the community's rules and ideologies represent a mainstream eugenic group that actively rejects the gender equality that feminist eugenicists would argue for. As stated previously, feminist eugenics is not to be taken as a solution. Feminist eugenics is a strain of traditional eugenics from the twentieth century that, despite advocating for gender equality, did so to prevent the "eugenic decline of the [white] race" Ziegler, 213). Furthermore, historically its efforts found little to no success, and the feminists

[1] Liggett, Kim. *The Grace Year.* Wednesday Books. 2017 Back Cover

involved within the movement "abandoned their interest in promoting the…status of women and instead promoted purely eugenic reforms" when mainstream eugenicists rejected the proposed gender equality (212). In this vein, *The Grace Year* may be read as a text which advocates for feminist eugenics because it actively advocates for female equality in a mainstream eugenics-based society. However, this would also be a mistaken reading despite the novel's main focus on female relationships within a eugenic society. The female coalition presented within the novel does not promote feminist eugenics, but instead advocates against the competitive, anti-women nature of feminist eugenics, supporting freedom *from* the eugenic practices of the male-controlled society altogether.

Garner County's strong patriarchal ideologies are reminiscent of a Puritan settlement deep in the throes of a never-ending witch hunt. The novel opens by explaining that, in this patriarchy, women are thought of as magical and deceptive:

> We're told we have the power to lure grown men from their beds, make boys lose their minds, and drive the wives mad with jealousy. They believe our very skin emits a powerful aphrodisiac, the potent essence of youth, a girl on the edge of womanhood. That's why we're banished for our sixteenth year, to release our magic into the wild before we're allowed to return to civilization (Liggett, 1).

For the men, who are the leaders of Garner County, this magic is inherently sexual, no matter how young the girl may be. Before embarking on their grace year, the sixteen-year-old girls are "expected to parade around town, giving the boys one last viewing before they join the men in the main barn to trade and barter our fates like cattle" (8). Suggestive glances from the men, such as the married Mr. Barton whose "gaze rakes over [Tierney's] skin" (13) and Geezer Fallow who is "clearly not too old to give [Tierney] the once over" (15), further emphasize how

these young women are made overly sexualized objects with nothing else to their personhood in the eyes of the male citizens.

Garner County's belief that women are literally magical is an exaggerated depiction of a historically prominent ideology surrounding female sexuality and eugenics. Audre Lorde notes that "the erotic is a resource…that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" and that traditionally "for women, has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. We have been taught to suspect this resourced, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society" (Lorde, 53). Traditional eugenic sterilization laws targeted "women perceived to be 'licentious,' neurotic, or otherwise deviant," declaring that "gender norms…were, in fact, scientific, objective, and enforceable by law" (Ziegler, 214). This declaration by the mainstream, male-oriented eugenics movement is what Garner County's policies and traditions are based on, the misogynist belief that gender norms are a natural part of the world because of women's natural ability to be deceptive and deviant.

Additionally, the declaration that women were "deviant" can be examined through the problematic relationships between the women of Garner County and their foundation in eugenic feminism. These feminists "supported…eugenic laws" and "abandoned their interests in promoting the social or economic status of women and instead promoted purely eugenic reforms" in failed efforts to "convert mainstream eugenicists" (Ziegler, 212, 213). Similarly, women in Garner County willingly turned on one another, focusing their attention and dissatisfaction with their situation on fellow women instead of on the patriarchal system that oppressed them, in a potential attempt to make their own situation better. Amy Montz identifies how young women are "applauded for competing with each other" and are "not congratulated for

competing against boys or ideals" (Montz, 107). This competition within Garner County, Montz posits, acts as "distractions to occupy their attentions with competing against each other instead of rebelling" against the oppressive heteropatriarchal community that is the real source of distress for these women. The pitting of women against one another is recalled in Kokesh and Sternadori's study as a narrative stereotype of young adult fiction: "the meanie" (146), characters who "expend their energies angling to get to the top…no matter whom they have to devastate on their way up" (147). While the women are waiting for the choosing ceremony to finish, Tierney makes note of this phenomenon.

> This is the one night a year the women are allowed to congregate without the men. You'd think it would be our opportunity to talk, share, let it all out. Instead, we stand isolated and petty, sizing each other up, jealous for what the other one has, consumed by hollow desires. And who benefits from all this one-uppery? The men. We outnumber them two to one, and yet here we are, locked in a chapel, waiting for them to decide our fate. Sometimes I wonder if that's the real magic trick (Liggett, 43).

The novel presents a patriarchal, eugenic-based regime alongside the eugenic feminism movement which rejects dissenting women in favor of appealing to male supporters of mainstream eugenics. The dual depiction creates two points of critique within the novel: the patriarchy, which is an obvious villain young female readers can easily recognize, and the feminist eugenic ideologues who act as a distraction to the women of Garner County. For young female readers, the novel relies heavily on these social interactions in order to convey Liggett's argument about the eugenic ideologies of the dystopian Garner County, which is that neither mainstream nor feminist eugenics is productive. To argue this, Liggett leads Tierney on an eye-opening journey during her Grace Year, in which she experiences the full extent to which the

blinding effect of eugenic feminism can damage Tierney's potential transformation from orthodox believer or quiet dissenter to active rebel in addition to the traditional dystopian trope of unveiling the lies of the oppressive regime.

Unlike Lena, Tierney James understands that there are issues within Garner County from the beginning of the novel. She is subversive from the opening pages of the text, but this subversion is quiet and hidden so as not to get her in trouble, telling readers that "speaking of the grace year is forbidden, but it hasn't stopped me from searching for clues" (Liggett, 1). Tierney's search for clues about the Grace Year and what girls experience during this period of separation identifies her as an outsider, someone who goes against the men by asking questions about taboo subjects. She seeks information because the knowledge of the grace year and the experiences of other women will allow her to better understand and live within the community around her, a phenomenon noted by Kathleen Carico's study of young adolescent women at Virginia Tech. Carico states that young girls seek information because "what [they] know is important and can be used, often in collaboration with others, to know more and thus be more things" (Carico, 8). And it is clear, Tierney seeks information to understand her world better, to know more about the social life she lives in Garner County.

The belief that issues of women's oppression, competitive relationships, and lack of free choice are problems is supported by Tierney's direct responses to them. She notes how "we're not allowed to dream. The men believe it's a way we can hide our magic," (6) and that "if anyone ever found out what the dreams were about, it would mean the gallows," (7) already presenting the draconian policies that permeate Garner County. She notes issues with the institutional system of marriage as well criticizes the practice of bartering the marriageable girls in the veiling gathering, a meeting of Garner County's men to determine what girl each eligible

bachelor will receive in marriage. Tierney says that while some "women believe the men's veiling gathering in the barn to be a reverent affair…there's nothing reverent about it…All they do is drink ale, sling out vulgarities, and occasionally get into a brawl over one of the girls…there's no talk of our 'dangerous magic'" (17). These practices that the men have put in place, the ideologies they teach about women and their role, are not based in true reverence or good faith according to Tierney, but rather in convenience, "Like when Mrs. Pinter's husband died, Mr. Coffey suddenly accused his wife of twenty-five years of secretly harboring her magic" (17). Mrs. Coffey was cast out and "surprise, Mr. Coffey married Mrs. Pinter the following day" (17). This example clearly shows that the magic, whether it is real or not, is controlled and regulated for the use of men, for their convenience rather than their safety.

Tierney's subversiveness is a point of connection for young female readers. She's described as a "tomboy" (21), who desires a life where her body and "life will still belong to [her]" (10). She is the outcast of the novel and, as discussed before, these types of characters are often used by young female readers in "their own identity construction" as they "resemble ideal persons they want to become" (Kokesh, 152). A strong female character breaking out against a problematic system is a perfect example of that idealized figure. However, Tierney, even as subversive as she is, does not completely understand the implications of the Grace Year or the supposed magic that women harbor.

The true horrors that are caused by the tradition of the Grace Year are revealed when the girls reach the camp for the first time and see the "punishment tree" which holds "hundreds of trinkets tied to the tree like yule ornaments…they're fingers, toes, ears, braids of all shades and textures affixed to the tree" (Liggett, 98). The violence that hangs from the trees both stuns and confuses the girls, who wonder why a punishment tree like the one back in Garner County exists

within the camp, noting that "'At home, the punishers are men, chosen by God'" (101). Yet, the answer comes confidently from Kiersten, the established "mean-girl" within the girl's group, as she says "'We are the only Gods here'" (101). The punishment tree, yet again, represents a return to the heteropatriarchal expectations that have been ingrained in these young women. This femininity that has been conditioned in eugenic beliefs turns to violence and cruelty, punishing those who act outside or against what is expected of them. Kiersten's character is a prime example of how eugenic feminists, in an attempt to convert mainstream eugenics, rejected women who were not willing to compromise or who fell into the categories of perceived deviants (Ziegler, 214). Kiersten vehemently believes that the grace year girls must release their magic, and when other characters, such as Tierney or Gertrude (another grace year girl) speak out against her, she takes it upon herself to mutilate them as punishment, as would have been done to them back in Garner County. She has absorbed the role of the heteropatriarchal oppressor due to both ingrained social conditioning and a desire to be accepted and successful when she returns from the grace year, creating an entirely new perspective to Kokesh and Sternadori's "mean-girl" stereotype, a perspective that is drenched in eugenic feminism. The cattiness and jealousy between the women that Tierney observes in Garner County is intensified to gruesome levels within the camp, and both the grace year girls and the young female readers are given real insight into the effects of blinding feminist eugenics on the female population. Indoctrinated by years of eugenic practices, patriarchal control, and female subjugation, the grace year girls are unable to reject their social upbringing even in a place of complete freedom.

Tierney's transformation into an informed resister of the dystopian Garner County begins with the entrance to the grace year camp and the imagery of the punishment tree. She acknowledges the effect that it has on the grace year girls, and those who survive and return to

the county, but she feels that she's "missing something…a key piece of the puzzle" (Liggett, 136). Similar to *Delirium* where Lena questioned what she knew and believed in throughout the novel, *The Grace Year* presents the same roadblock for Tierney's transformation into a conforming member of the eugenic society to which she belongs. There are things that have been hidden from her, and like *Delirium*, she, and by extension, the young female readers are being told to "examine everything, question everything, no matter how things may appear," (109). Not only does this allow the readers to sift through the lies and falsities that Garner County's patriarchy has taught as truth, but it teaches them that the skill to do so in itself is valuable when confronting new information. By questioning the society they live in, examining it in its entirety no matter how it appears at first, these young girls can make informed decisions about the world around them.

However, to complete her transformation, Tierney must step out of the community altogether, breaking from the eugenic feminism of the grace year girls who are entranced by the promise of holding forbidden magic. This break comes forcibly as Tierney flees the remaining grace year girls in the camp, who have become mentally unstable due to the harsh conditions. Her flight leads her to be rescued by a poacher, an individual outside of Garner County named Ryker who hunts grace year girls to sell their body parts back to the county as aphrodisiacs and youth serums. Though Ryker's occupation is dangerous to Tierney, he nurses her back to health to repay a debt he owes to her father and during that time reveals information about Garner County's practices that were once hidden to her (223). One by one, the mysteries of Garner County, of the grace year girls, of the magic, are revealed. Ryker tells her that the poachers are paid for their work by "'the same people who send [the girls] here'" (235), revealing that the men of Garner County are behind the horrific mutilation and desecration of grace year girls'

bodies; the supposed curse that surrounds the camp and keeps the poachers from entering it to kill the grace year girls immediately is "smallpox…a virus," which Tierney's "father had been working [to] cure for years" (253). Ryker finally discloses that the reason the girls in the camp have become unstable and obsessed with magic, is because hemlock silt, a hallucinogenic herb, was growing "inside the well…it's poison" (268). These moments, these realizations that Tierney experiences, complete her transition from a subversive spirit who only acts out in secret to the rebel who actively wants to work toward changing things within the camp and Garner County. Tierney returns to the grace year camp, declaring that "I have to find a way to make this right. To fix this" (286). However, the change Tierney has to spur is more than just returning to the current grace year girls in the camp and nursing them back to health from their poisoned, delirious state. Tierney's transformation into the rebel connects to the overall community as well, as was identified in Turda's work. Tierney's individual subversion and rebellion mix with the community of women and girls in Garner County. In an effort to rally the grace year girls together to change their competitive ways and challenge their oppressive circumstances, Tierney notes how "[she's] seen glimpses of strength, mercy, and warmth from every single one of [them]…Imagine if [they] were able to let that shine, how bright the world could be. [Tierney] want[s] to live in that world" (361).

Tierney's subversive attitude, however, is not an outlier in Garner County. Just as Lena declared in *Delirium* that there are more people who are not afraid to love, there are more women in Garner County prepared to risk everything to change the world they live in. Tierney is invited into the woods on the outskirts of the county one night where she hears "women's voices, boisterous, untethered…I remember hearing about the gatherings from Ryker. This is clearly a place for women's work," and she finds that a resistance has been building long before her own

rebellion took place (395). Women have always been working there, in the shadows, to change Garner County and give women free will. "What burns in you burns in all of us,'" Tierney's mother tells her (400). For the young women reading this book, this statement isn't just for Tierney, it is a call to all of them, a statement of hope and revolution. It tells these young women that they *can* create change, and every single one of them is capable of it.

For Liggett, Tierney's journey is an individual one, but it is not a singular occurrence. Rather, the community that this dystopian text connects to has been present long before, and will be present long after, the events of the book. It is a timeless tale that young female readers can latch on to. Not only are they being taught to question what they are told, to think for themselves, but they are being taught that they are not alone in their fight against the problems they face in their own lives. Women's reproductive rights, patriarchal control, the silencing of marginalized voices, are fights that numerous others undergo, and Liggett's final message allows young readers to see that, and to take hope in it.

Conclusion

Delirium and *The Grace Year* are two striking novels that have engaged numerous young female readers, drawing them in with relatable characters that lead them through dystopian societies teeming with violent truths about the world they live in. They propose radical ideas through the formerly marginalized female voice, tackling issues surrounding reproductive rights and gender equality, fully utilizing the genre's background in the twentieth-century eugenic movement while adapting the ideologies to modern debates. Furthermore, they invite a nuanced

critique of feminist eugenics through their examination of female relationships within an oppressive regime.

They are, of course, not without their own critiques. Though, as explored in this thesis, they present incredible opportunities for the development of critical analysis skills in young female readers, they also fall victim to stereotypical tropes. As stated before, critics identify the heterosexual relationships in both *Delirium* and *The Grace Year* as harmful toward their overall feminist message. Though I believe that the girls' ability to act with free choice makes these critiques less substantial, it is nonetheless important to note the lack of LGBTQ+ characters in the texts I examined When it comes to LGBTQ+ voices, eugenics, with its emphasis on reproduction as a way to save the human race, is inherently opposed to anything identifying outside of cisgender heterosexual characters and romantic relationships. The clear opposition provides an easily accessible route for criticism of the eugenic movement, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and giving homosexual or transgender characters a platform to speak out. However, this fact is never addressed in Oliver's novel, their voices are never given a chance, and the topic is only skimmed over by Liggett's when the novel reveals that Gertrude and Kiersten "kissed…like we've done a dozen times before" (Liggett, 297). Both novels fail to address the implications of homosexuality or transness within their eugenic-based societies, despite the increasing call for these voices to be heard in critiques of ideologies that demonize their existence.

Furthermore, both novels fail to address the issue of race or sexual orientation within their dystopian settings. With a history steeped in eugenics, it feels important, especially as minority rights are a continuous point of tension in current news, for these texts to address such issues. Despite racist connotations of eugenics, neither novel makes reference to race, and a

review of *The Grace Year* by Kirkus Reviews notes that “all characters are assumed white” (Kirkus). It is my hope that future texts work to subvert these roles, developing relationships as more than a static source of knowledge while not being afraid to dive headfirst into issues around race and sexual orientation.

Nevertheless, these texts provide young female readers with an easily accessible entry point into analyzing and critiquing the current feminist issues discussed in this thesis - women’s reproductive rights, gender equality, and the silencing of marginalized voices – among others. This accessible entry point that I have described shows the value of these texts, especially when considered in the pedagogical context, such as that examined in Amanda Pepper’s curriculum. In addition to providing entertaining and digestible stories, reading these novels in an academic setting further allows young female readers to discuss what they are learning in a supportive and guided environment.

The dystopian young adult novel proves itself, time and time again, to be a genre that takes its readers on exciting adventures through terrifying worlds that seem both out of grasp and directly in front of them. By doing so, unflinchingly, these texts give young readers a thrilling lens with which they can view not only themselves but the world that surrounds them and the issues it is facing. For female readers, the dystopian young adult novel presents an opportunity with which to engage with feminist ideologies and global issues of women’s rights such as reproduction, patriarchal control, and the silencing of marginalized voices. As shown in this thesis, this genre of young adult novels utilizes the historical and literary background of the mainstream eugenic movement to better conceptualize and present modern issues that have roots in eugenic ideologies, both mainstream and feminist. Yet, even with the grim, heavy content explored within these books, the young adult dystopian novel presents young readers with one

very important parting lesson: hope. Both *Delirium* and *The Grace Year* end with calls to action, reaching directly out to the young female audience that they so brilliantly capture, and encouraging them to take a stand against the injustices they see in their lives. Young women are encouraged to love freely, speak openly, and act with kindness to create a world better than the one they live in, and when you see a young woman reaching out, questioning the system, working to change things for the better, you can thank the young adult dystopian novels they had the honor of reading.

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