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What Makes Her Tick?
Katniss Everdeen's Use of Defense Mechanisms in The Hunger Games

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Abstract

This essay deals with the character Katniss Everdeen in the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The essay shows that Katniss' behavior and actions in the novel can be explained by showing her use of defense mechanisms, and that from a psychoanalytical perspective, she is completely logical in the way she acts. The defense mechanisms Katniss uses are withdrawal, reaction formation, altruistic surrender, intellectualization, and suppression. The behavior Katniss illustrates due to her use of defenses can make her seem confusing to readers, but it is also what makes her a complex and three-dimensional character.
With predecessors like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is the latest international success in the young adult novel category. The latter is set in a dystopian future in Panem; a country consisting of 12 districts that are all ruled by the totalitarian city called Capitol. Every year, each of the districts has to send one boy and one girl to Capitol to participate in the Hunger Games, where they all fight till death, and the last boy or girl standing is crowned as the Victor. In this essay I will only focus on the first book in the trilogy in which the story follows the sixteen-year-old girl Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to take her younger sister's place in the 74th annual Hunger Games. The novel is narrated by Katniss, and as readers we follow her way from District 12 to Capitol and her participation in the games.

Since the books are so popular, there are many articles and reviews written about them, and there is a general uncertainty expressed in many of them about Katniss when it comes to trying to understand who she is. There are descriptions of her as a strong character (Hatfield), and tough, but also as complex (Lewit). Similarly, Laura Miller describes Katniss by saying that she is capable and strong, but at the same time explains that “Katniss acts decisively and often effectively, but only when she’s backed into a corner”, which makes Miller conclude that it is hard to say what Katniss really wants. Author Jennifer Lynn Barnes tries to provide an answer as to why many readers find it difficult to know and understand Katniss. Firstly, she says that it is because “Katniss isn't the kind of hero we're used to seeing in fiction[, for example, s]he reacts more than she acts” (17). Secondly, she states that, even though “the books are told in first person, Katniss has strikingly little self-awareness[, and w]e have to work to figure Katniss out, because as often as not, *Katniss* doesn't know who she is [or] what she feels” (18). I think that what this difficulty to explain Katniss Everdeen shows is that she is complex and cannot be easily stereotyped, which is something Barnes also adds, saying that Katniss is “interesting and flawed and completely three-dimensional” (15). As I see it, the reason Katniss comes across as having little or no self-awareness and seems not to know what she wants is because she pushes away her own feelings, and she uses psychological defense mechanisms to do so.

The aim of this essay is to show that Katniss is indeed a complex character, but that she is not therefore necessarily difficult to understand. It might seem like the first person narrative narrows the understanding, but the reader is provided with many explanations for Katniss' behavior and actions which suggest that she is using what is within psychoanalysis referred to as defense mechanisms. I will show that Katniss' behavior and actions can be explained precisely as defense mechanisms, and that even though Katniss seems difficult to know and understand, she is completely logical from a psychoanalytical perspective.

In psychoanalysis, defense mechanisms are, for the most part unconscious, strategies that a
person uses to cope with anxiety (Atkinson, et al. 512). They are used to keep emotions and thoughts that we feel we cannot handle in the unconscious of the mind (Tyson 15), and by using defense mechanisms, we avoid the possible pain our emotions or thoughts can cause us (Niolon). Tyson explains that the unconscious consists of the “painful experiences and emotions […] we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them[, moreover, that the unconscious] comes to being […] through repression” (12). Hence, repression is seen “as the parent of all defenses” (Niolon), and the other defense mechanisms are used to reinforce it; to keep the repressed from entering the conscious (Atkinson, et al. 513). The defense mechanisms are meant to be a tool in processing problems and all people use them, but as Niolon points out, if the issues are not eventually addressed the defenses become an obstacle to resolution, and moreover, separate individuals from their true feelings. In the following we will see that the defense mechanisms Katniss uses are withdrawal, reaction formation, altruistic surrender, intellectualization, and suppression.

The first defense mechanism I will discuss is withdrawal. This concept is not to be confused with what substance abusers may suffer from when they stop using drugs. As a defense mechanism, withdrawal means that individuals remove themselves from “events, stimuli, interactions, etc […] that could remind [them] of painful thoughts and feelings” (Niolon). They do this by, for example, being silent, running away, and avoiding people that can be a reminder of those emotions. The consequence of this behavior can be that it causes “strong feelings of loneliness and alienation” (Niolon). Barnes describes Katniss as having “no desire to be known” (15), or that she keeps her distance (16), and I claim that withdrawal is the reason for that characteristic.

Katniss' description of her behavior with her schoolmate Madge, who is the mayor's daughter, is one example of when she uses withdrawal: “She just keeps to herself. Like me. Since neither of us really has a group of friends, we seem to end up together a lot at school. Eating lunch, sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering for sports activities. We rarely talk, which suits us both just fine” (14). Katniss prefers not being around other people, and when she is, she prefers being silent. This is a way for her to avoid the risk of having to talk about herself and her feelings.

Her unwillingness to connect with other people can be explained by the fact that it could put her at risk of caring for someone that she then might lose, which is something she has experienced before when her father died when she was eleven. For example, she does not want to have children, because that might mean she will lose them in the Hunger Games: “I know I’ll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world. Because if there’s one thing being a victor doesn’t guarantee, it’s your children’s safety. My kids’ names would go right into the reaping balls with everyone else’s. And I swear I’ll never let that happen.” (378). Another example is when Katniss remembers
the time she became friends and hunting partners with another boy from District 12, Gale, whose father died in the same mining accident that killed Katniss' father (134). She explains how it took her several months to return a smile, but that eventually, she enjoyed “having a partner [that] lightened the load” (133). This behavior towards Gale can partly be described as avoiding a situation where she might start caring for someone that she could possibly lose, but also be caused by the fact that Gale is someone who Katniss connects to her father's death, hence her initial unwillingness to become close to him.

Evidently, there is a reluctance in Katniss to form close relationships to other people, which, to some extent, she is aware of, and she reflects on the matter the following way: “It’s not as if I’m never friendly. OK, maybe I don’t go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people” (147). She knows that she does not form relationships easily, but she also admits that it does happen sometimes. Moreover, once she has formed a connection with someone she would rather die than relive a situation like losing her father and feeling those painful emotions again. This is what she experiences with Peeta, who is the boy that was picked from District 12 to compete in the Hunger Games: “I find myself yelling his name louder and louder because if he goes and dies on me now, I know I’ll go completely insane” (412). Also, at the end of the games when Peeta is about to kill himself to let Katniss win, she begs him desperately not to do it: “‘No, you can’t kill yourself,’ I say. I’m on my knees, desperately plastering the bandage back onto his wound. 'Katniss,' he says. 'It’s what I want.' 'You’re not leaving me here alone,' I say. Because if he dies, I’ll never go home, not really. I’ll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out” (417). The fear of losing someone she cares about is grounded in her not wanting to trigger and experience again the emotions connected to her father's death.

Another situation where her impulse to use withdrawal is caused by the possible triggering of memories and feelings of her father's death is her reaction to an injured man that is brought to their house, because her mother is a healer: “I ran from the house. I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome leg, memories of my father’s death” (216). She is trying to remove herself from a stimuli to avoid painful emotions by running away, both physically and mentally, from that which triggers unwanted feelings in her.

The same mechanism is at play to some extent in Katniss' relationship to her mother, because her mother is a reminder of painful emotions. She let Katniss and her younger sister, Prim, down after their father died when she did not take care of them, which meant Katniss had to take “over as head of the family” (32). Katniss' reaction to her mother's inability to do anything shows how painful this was for her: “I was terrified. I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother
as well” (32). Because of this pain Katniss was reluctant to be close to her even after her mother got better: “Prim forgave her, but I had taken a step back from my mother, put up a wall to protect myself from needing her, and nothing was ever the same between us again” (64). Katniss tries to avoid her mother, because she is a reminder of painful emotions; both of Katniss' father's death, and of her mother's subsequent abandonment. Nevertheless, in Katniss' unconscious, her true feelings towards her mother reveal themselves, which is the case when Katniss is about to wake up after having fainted in the games: “My mother’s hand strokes my cheek and I don’t push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don’t trust her” (353). Katniss is in a dream state when experiencing these images, and during sleep, defense mechanisms do not work the same way as during awakedness, and “the unconscious is free to express itself” (Tyson 18). But even when Katniss is awake there is also a will in her to try to forgive her mother and be closer to her again: “I’m trying to get past rejecting offers of help from her. For a while, I was so angry, I wouldn’t allow her to do anything for me” (18). So, Katniss employs withdrawal towards her mother although there is really a wish to be close to her, which can seem ambiguous to the reader.

When it comes to Katniss' relationship to her mother there is also another defense mechanism at play, namely, reaction formation. Reaction formation means to act in a manner contrary to one that is “too painful or threatening to feel”, and thus avoiding awareness of the unwanted emotion (Niolon). For example, if weakness is something that is too threatening to feel, a person will try to adopt a tough and strong attitude to push away the feelings of weakness (Carlsson 74). This behavior can be restricted to specific situations, but can also be used in a more general manner, which can lead to a real change in character traits (Fhanér 178). Furthermore, if the reaction formation is used automatically, the consequence is that individuals will not know their true feelings (Niolon). Katniss does not want to acknowledge being weak or vulnerable, but rather, she wants to see herself, and be seen, as strong and capable, which is one reason why Katniss is described in articles and reviews as tough (Green), or even “tough-as-nails” (Lewit). The reason Katniss perceives weakness and vulnerability as something negative is because of her mother's behavior after Katniss' father died. Katniss expresses hatred when she thinks about her mother's behavior: “And some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weakness, for her neglect, for the months she had put us through” (64). Katniss could not allow herself to be weak, but had to take on the responsibility of taking care of the family (32); in other words, it was too threatening to feel weak if she were to support her family. Katniss' reluctance to being weak is the reason why she reacts so strongly when it is suggested to, or about, her, for example, when Peeta makes a comment about how she does not have to worry about not having any sponsors to help her through the games:
“What on earth does he mean? People help me? When we were dying of starvation, no one helped me! [...] What effect do I have? That I’m weak and needy? Is he suggesting that I got good deals because people pitied me? [...] No one pitied me!” (111). She does not understand what Peeta means, and thinks that he is suggesting she is weak, which makes her upset. The same thing happens when, before the games, Peeta admits that he is in love with Katniss on a national broadcasted TV-show, and Katniss expresses her anger about it to her mentor, Haymitch: “This was your idea, wasn’t it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?” [...]. 'You are a fool,' Haymitch says in disgust. 'Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own.' 'He made me look weak!' I say” (163-65). Again, Katniss shows a strong reluctance to being seen as weak. However, after Haymitch points out that her being seen as an object of affection will mean more sponsors, she reconsiders: “Haymitch is right, they eat that stuff up in the Capitol. Suddenly I’m worried that I didn’t react properly” (165). What this suggests is that Katniss can disregard the possibility of seeming weak if it can give her an advantage in the games even though she wants to show that she is capable when finally in the arena: “I’m glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I’m a good bet” (199). This behavior can explain why Katniss can be perceived as not knowing what she wants, but the reason for her going along with being in love is because of her promise to Prim to try to win the games, which is grounded in another defense mechanism called altruistic surrender.

Altruistic surrender - sometimes also referred to as altruism - is when individuals try to fulfill their needs through other people, and live their lives for others (Boeree), in order to avoid anxiety (Altruistic surrender). Paul Klein explains that altruism means that “[n]eeds are met by fulfilling the needs of others rather than one's own” (6). For Katniss, this is the case when it comes to her sister, Prim. On several occasions Katniss expresses that the reason she does things is because of Prim, for example, when Prim asks her to try to win the games: “You will try, wont you? Really, really try?” asks Prim. 'Really, really try. I swear it,' I say. And I know, because of Prim, I’ll have to” (44). Before talking to Prim, Katniss has already concluded that she has no chance at winning, and her reasoning after promising Prim shows that the reason she will even try to win is for Prim's sake. Furthermore, during the actual games, Katniss uses Prim as the reason for her thoughts or actions: “My thoughts turn to Prim. [...] For her sake, I try not to look too desperate” (205); “For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it’s the thought of Prim’s anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy” (290). Even when she is about to be killed by another contestant, she does not think about dying, but her mind turns to Prim: “This is it, I think, and hope for Prim’s sake it will be fast” (346). In these examples it is Prim Katniss lives for, and focuses on, to avoid thinking about what she feels or wants herself.
Her altruism is not only connected to Prim though, but to other people she cares about as well. After the games, when Katniss is informed that her actions that led to both Peeta and her winning have put her in danger, she thinks about what this can mean for others she cares about: “It’s so much worse than being hunted in the arena. There, I could only die. End of story. But out here Prim, my mother, Gale, the people of District 12, everyone I care about back home could be punished […] Peeta will suffer [too]” (434-35). Katniss only cares about other people, and as long as they are not affected negatively by her actions, she is not concerned about dying herself, which shows how deeply affected her way of thinking is by altruism.

Moreover, in the games, Katniss' use of altruistic surrender also manifests itself in the way she uses Rue, another contestant, as a reason to act. The reason Katniss quickly starts caring for Rue is because she reminds Katniss of Prim, which is established the first time she notices her: “Rue. Primrose. Neither of them could tip the scale at thirty kilos soaking wet” (121). Furthermore, when Katniss teams up with her in the arena, she again makes the connection between Rue and her sister: “I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she’s a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim” (244). Katniss is used to having someone to live for and to act for, and Rue is a perfect candidate especially since she reminds Katniss of Prim, for whom Katniss usually does things. Eventually, Rue even becomes a more important focus for Katniss than Prim: “[I am] feeling somehow worried. About Rue being killed, about Rue not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Rue alone, about leaving Prim alone back home. No, Prim has my mother and Gale and a baker who has promised she won’t go hungry. Rue has only me” (258). In addition to using Rue as a reason to act, Katniss can also avoid the anxiety she experiences when thinking about her sister back home, and her inability to help her, by focusing on Rue.

When Rue is killed, Katniss cannot push her emotions away but lets out the anger she feels towards Capitol, and her feelings break through: “Gale’s voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue’s death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us” (286). After she leaves Rue's body, it becomes clear that her reason for acting has gone: “I’ve no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Rue has vanished” (288), which is why the morning after, in order to motivate herself, she thinks of Prim: “I’ve lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything but lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it’s the thought of Prim’s anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy” (290). First, Katniss is angry and wants to do something to take out her anger on Capitol, but then she can barely get up, and has to think of Prim to do so. Later she
motivates herself again by using Rue, or rather, Rue's death, as reason for what she is about to do: “But I told Rue I’d be there. For both of us [...] Now I am determined to revenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable” (293). This promise is almost the same as the one she made to Prim, and she also confuses Prim and Rue: “But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try [to win]” (283). The mixing up of names is another example of how similar Rue and Prim are in Katniss' mind, and shows how used she is to having someone else as an incentive to act.

Katniss' need to have someone else to live and act for is not only something that is connected to the actual games, but also very much a part of who the character Katniss is. This becomes evident when she thinks about the future: “What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I’m not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some.[...] I don’t want to think about then, when Prim has grown up, my mother passed away” (378). Her identity is deeply influenced by her use of altruism, which shows her profound need of having someone else to live for in order to avoid her own emotions, and this goes for her life in general; not only in connection to the games. Thus, the way Katniss motivates herself by using other people can be one explanation as to why, for example, Barnes and Miller describe her as reacting rather than acting (18).

The fourth defense mechanism I will discuss is intellectualization. Intellectualization is used when individuals need to handle conflicts and/or painful feelings (Fhanér 90), which they then talk or think about in “abstract, intellectual terms” (Atkinson 513) to distance themselves from emotions. Intellectualization means to remove “the emotion from emotional experiences”, and the consequence of intellectualizing is that individuals are not particularly in touch with their feelings, which consequently means they can have difficulties describing what they feel (Niolon). Katniss employs intellectualization in a situation before the games when she is trying to show her archery skills to the people who direct the games, and they do not pay attention to her. She becomes furious, and shoots an arrow at them, then leaves, and after, she starts to cry (124). In this situation when her feelings break through, and she cannot keep them from entering the conscious, she, at first, focuses on the consequences for herself: “What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avox so I can wait on the future tributes of Panem? What was I thinking, shooting at the Gamemakers?” (125). Katniss' subsequent response is to push away her emotions by intellectualizing: “Oh, what does it matter? It’s not like I was going to win the Games anyway” (126). She tries to be logical about her chances in the games instead of letting herself feel scared or sad about what might happen to her. In the same situation, Katniss also illustrates the use of multiple defense mechanisms, because she continues her line of thought by going into altruism
again in order to push away the anxiety by focusing on other people instead of herself: “Who cares what they do to me? What really scares me is what they might do to my mother and Prim; how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness” (126). When Haymitch says that it is “[m]ore likely they’ll make [her] life hell in the arena” (130) than hurt her family, Katniss can let it go: “It’s OK. My family is safe. And if they are safe, no real harm has been done” (131). By only caring about other people, in this case her family, and then realizing they are not in danger, her initial fears for herself are pushed away, and she can handle the situation.

Her use of intellectualization is also the reason she comes across as pragmatic. For example, the anger towards Capitol, that she lets out when Rue dies, is something she has tried to push away by rating it as not very useful, as when she reflects on Gale's anger over how the Capitol treats them: “His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It’s not that I don’t agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair. It doesn’t fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game” (17). By turning the feeling of anger at Capitol into something abstract that is not useful to her, Katniss can dismiss it and take the emotion out of it. Moreover, she does the same thing when thinking about Panem's history and what really happened when the districts rebelled against Capitol: “But I don’t spend much time thinking about it. Whatever the truth is, I don’t see how it will help me get food on the table” (51). Again, she changes the troubling thoughts into something abstract that is not useful to her, and thus, expels it into the unconscious.

Similarly, her opinion on music is also pragmatic, at least at first glance: “In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather” (255). It later becomes clear that Katniss dismisses emotions related to music because she connects music to her father when Rue is dying and asks Katniss to sing to her, which makes her think of her father: “My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice — but I haven’t sung much since he died” (283). Singing is something Katniss has first tried to suppress, that is, consciously pushed away: “I could never bring myself to continue [singing] after he was gone” (53), and subsequently she uses intellectualization, as shown above, to keep emotions away from music and singing. Late in the story, Katniss actually realizes this connection between music and her father herself: “It strikes me that my own reluctance to sing, my own dismissal of music might not really be that I think it’s a waste of time. It might be because it reminds me too much of my father” (366). The fact that Katniss sometimes, as opposed to always or never, shows awareness of the fact that she is trying to avoid her feelings, I believe, helps make her into a three-dimensional character, which is the way Barnes describes her.

Furthermore, Katniss also uses intellectualization when it comes to her feelings for Peeta. In
the beginning, she tries to use intellectualization in order to avoid her feelings for him, for example, when she thinks about how Peeta may have been killed early on in the games: “Maybe it’s better, if he’s gone already. He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. Maybe it’s better if he’s out of this for good” (185). She intellectualizes Peeta’s death so she can avoid recognizing her true emotions for him. Later, she finds out that Peeta is alive, and the same way she intellectualized his possible death, and what that would mean to her, Katniss tells herself: “if I get killed, his winning will benefit my mother and Prim the most. This is what I tell myself to explain the conflicting emotions that arise when I think of Peeta” (190). In this case, Katniss herself is aware of the fact that her need to have an intellectual and logical approach to what she is feeling is a way of avoiding her true feelings for him. However, at one point towards the end of the games, when they have spent some time together, she admits to herself that she cannot intellectualize in order to justify why she does not want him to die: “the idea of actually losing Peeta hit me again and I realized how much I don’t want him to die. And it’s not about the sponsors. And it’s not about what will happen back home. And it’s not just that I don’t want to be alone. It’s him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread” (362). This is an example of when she recognizes her true feelings. Nevertheless, the moment of recognition is brief, and after the games when they are on their way back to District 12, and Peeta has found out that Katniss has been, at least, partly playing at being in love for the cameras, her strategy after Peeta expresses his anger about the situation is to think of a possible relationship in intellectual terms: “I want to tell him that […] it’s no good loving me because I’m never going to get married anyway and he’d just end up hating me later instead of sooner. That if I do have feelings for him, it doesn’t matter because I’ll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children” (453). She tries to distance herself from her feelings for Peeta by intellectualizing about the fact that there is not even a point in going for it, since it would not work in the long run. Katniss’ use of intellectualization shows that she is a composite character: there is an evident conflict in her mind about how she should relate to Peeta, and her pragmatism is largely based in deeper psychological issues rather than her just being a “tough girl”, which I believe to be one reason Lewit describes her as tough but also complex.

When it comes to Peeta, and Katniss' anxiety over experiencing a situation like her father's death again, she uses another defense mechanism called suppression. Suppression means to consciously push away any unpleasant thoughts or feelings from the conscious into the unconscious (Fhanér 224-25). This can be achieved by, for example, doing something else to avert one's mind from troubling thoughts (Fhanér 225), and/or make a conscious decision not to think about whatever may cause anxiety (Niolon). In contrast to repressed material, which people are mostly unaware of, “[i]ndividuals are aware of suppressed thoughts” (Atkinson, et al. 513). In a situation
when Peeta has been severely injured in the games and might die, Katniss reacts in the following way: “Suddenly, out of nowhere, I’m scared he’s going to die. [...] ‘No, Peeta, I don’t even want to discuss it,’ I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him. [...] Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words” (315). In this case, the feeling she wants to suppress is her fear of the possible death of someone she cares about. Katniss cares about Peeta, and thus, his possible death creates a similar scenario to her father's death. She does not want to discuss the matter, and in order to push away those thoughts from her consciousness, she takes action to stop Peeta from talking about it. Also, the thought of Peeta possibly dying is something Katniss has already suppressed early on in the games: “Both of us can’t win these Games. But since the odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought” (251). Here too she decides not to think about it, because the death of a loved one is something that stirs up unwanted emotions.

At another point, she similarly makes a conscious decision to push away anxiety-causing issues, but this time they are caused by thinking of Peeta and Gale. Katniss is unsure about whether she feels something for Gale, and whether Peeta is trying to help her in the games, and therefore she reacts by “[pushing] the whole thing out of [her] mind, because for some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in [her] thoughts” (238). She chooses not to think about that which causes her to recognize and analyze her emotions.

Her suppressing also makes her use the games as an excuse for not facing and dealing with her emotions for Peeta, and Gale. This is the case when Katniss does experience what she is feeling for Peeta, as she consciously pushes away her emotions, and uses the fact that she is being watched on screen by the entire country as a reason for not thinking about it: “I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Panem. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I’m feeling, it’s no one’s business but mine” (362). Katniss subsequently tries to end the conversation that led to those emotions, and thus, avoids the subject. The same thing happens right after the games when Katniss again thinks about her feelings for Peeta, but concludes that she will deal with that when she is back home and “no one is watching” (435-436). Katniss decides it is due to the fact that she is being watched that she ignores her emotions for the time being. Later, when they are on their way back home from Capitol, Katniss begins to feel uneasy about what has happened in the games, because she feels she has in some way lied to both Peeta and Gale, and that “there will be no Games to hide behind back home” (451). Her reasoning is an indication that she herself is aware of the fact that she has tried to suppress her emotions; moreover, that she can no longer use the games as an excuse to do so. The fact that she has indeed used the games as an excuse is further shown on the way back home when the train has made a stop and Katniss and Peeta have a moment on their own: “We continue walking, past the end of the train, out where even
I'm fairly sure there are no cameras hidden in the scrubby bushes along the track. Still no words come” (451). In this situation, they are alone, but she still cannot express her emotions, which shows that it does not matter if she is being watched or not; it has merely been a way for her to justify pushing her emotions away.

Suppressing her feelings is also what she does when, on the train back to District 12, she begins to distance herself from what has happened during the last few weeks. She changes into her normal clothes, washes off the makeup, and puts her hair in its usual braid: “I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta’s arm around my shoulders feels alien” (450). She tries to push away whatever she has experienced, whatever feelings she has felt during the games, by “transforming back” into her old self, that did not have to deal with any of the confusion and anxiety she experiences now. The confusion is something further shown when Peeta confronts her about what her feelings for him are, and she cannot tell him: “‘I don’t know. The closer we get to District Twelve, the more confused I get,’ I say. He waits, for further explanation, but none’s forthcoming” (452). Katniss expresses confusion in this particular scene, which also seems to be the case for readers, for example, Miller who writes that it is hard to say what Katniss wants. A contributing factor to the readers' confusion about what Katniss wants is her way of suppressing her emotions: the way she says that it is because of the games that she cannot deal with her feelings, but in the end that is not the case; moreover, at the end of the novel when the reader assumes that Katniss is going to face what she has said she will, she instead tries to go back to who she was before the games, and thus, avoids dealing with her emotions. Although her behavior is confusing, it is also the reason she is seen as a complex character, or as Barnes describes her: “interesting and flawed” (15).

Katniss also demonstrates the consequence of using defenses to such a large extent that she does, which is to be disconnected from your own feelings. Katniss' difficulties to connect to her own emotions are present both at the beginning of the novel and the end. Before the games when she is being transported by train to Capitol to compete in the games, she wants to let her feelings out: “If I’m going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I’ll be able to wash the damage done by the tears from my face. But no tears come. I’m too tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else” (65-66). In a situation where she wants to let herself experience what she is truly feeling, she cannot. The same is true at the end when she has difficulties understanding her feelings for Peeta, or Gale: “I haven’t even begun to separate out my feelings about Peeta. It’s too complicated. What I did as part of the Games […] Or what I did because I cared about him” (435); “I can’t explain [to Peeta] how things are with Gale because I don’t know
myself (453). She cannot explain her feelings to someone else, because she does not know herself what her true emotions are, which is a result of having used defenses to avoid her feelings. Her inability to connect to her emotions can be a contributing factor to Barnes' opinion of Katniss having “strikingly little self-awareness”, and not knowing “who she is [or] what she feels” (18). Nevertheless, it seems Katniss does have some awareness of her feelings and her actions in the novel although that does not automatically mean she is always aware of using defense mechanisms, which is perhaps a better explanation of Katniss. That is, she is aware of what she feels and what she does, but not always the underlying reasons. That fact together with her willingness to “transform back” rather than to recognize her new feelings could be why Katniss seems not to know who she is.

To conclude, in this essay I have showed that Katniss is a complex character, and, despite the seeming difficulty for readers to understand her, that she can be explained by her use of defense mechanisms. The way she employs withdrawal makes her seem unattainable, but at the same time she does form relationships with certain people, and once she has done that, will do everything she can to keep them safe. This behavior might be illogical to readers if they do not understand the underlying mechanisms of her actions. Moreover, her unwillingness to be seen as weak is a contributing factor to the perception of her being a tough character, but the way she sometimes accepts it also results in confusion about what she really wants. There is also Katniss' use of altruistic surrender, which is part of the reason she seems to react more than she acts, since she uses other people as motivation for doing what she does. This defense mechanism is an important aspect of her relationship to both Prim and Rue, and it is inherent to Katniss' identity. When it comes to her relationship to Peeta, her behavior can largely be explained by her use of intellectualization, but also, this defense mechanism makes her pragmatic, because she takes away emotions from thoughts that could cause her anxiety. Katniss' use of suppression makes it hard to know what she wants, but that confusion also contributes to making her into a complex character, which means readers have to make an effort to understand her. Barnes' description of Katniss as having little self-awareness can be explained by the fact that Katniss does exhibit the consequence of using defense mechanisms to a large extent, that is, she is disconnected from her feelings. Another way of explaining Katniss, however, is to say that she is aware of her feelings although she is not aware of the reasons for her way of thinking and acting, which can contribute to the reader regarding her as not knowing who she is. By showing her use of defense mechanisms, I have presented a way to gain a deeper understanding of the character Katniss. Her way of acting in connection to the other characters, and also in certain situations, shows that Katniss' behavior and actions can be explained precisely as defense mechanisms; they are an integral part of her character.
Works Cited

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