# Career Anxiety's Involvement in Identity Formation:

# Analysis of Contemporary American Adolescent Literature

by

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Abstract

Since its conception in the 1960s, the critical conversation surrounding American adolescent literature has been consistently focused on understanding the long-standing theme of identity formation. In the past twenty to thirty years, anxieties about career and career decisions that affect the adolescent figure's self-concept have been increasingly present in American adolescent literature. Since adolescent literature attempts to portray the reality of adolescent concerns, career anxiety is a crucial aspect of young adult literature to scrutinize in order to understand the reality of the professional concerns that American youth might be facing. It is important for adolescents to find ways to grapple with these anxieties.

In this thesis, I contribute to the critical conversation about young adult literature by exploring how literature that addresses career anxiety and its relation to identity formation can serve as a resource for young people to make meaning of their own experiences and concerns. My thesis includes textual analysis of contemporary works of dystopian fiction including *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* by Suzanne Collins. These texts address career anxiety's relation to different conceptions of identity including individual and collective identities. This thesis also includes textual analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*, a novel originally written for adults that has become a "crossover" text read by adolescents. Eugenides's novel addresses the ways in which career anxiety can become convoluted and exacerbated by societal expectations and norms relating to gender and class. The texts featured in this thesis portray a range of ways that career anxiety can manifest, though they only skim the surface of what the young adult genre has to offer regarding professional anxieties. I suggest that adolescent literature that addresses career anxiety can serve as a cultural resource for adolescent and adult readers alike to complexly engage with in order to contemplate and better understand professional anxieties and decision making.

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I was raised up believing I was somehow unique like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see. And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be a functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me. But I don't, I don't know what that will be. I'll get back to you someday soon, you will see.

—The Fleet Foxes

## Introduction

In her speech at the tenth anniversary of the Massachusetts Conference for Women in 2014, actress Lupita Nyong'o offered the following insight about the way that career decisions assume extreme importance, even at a very young age, and the way that adults can perpetuate that importance, often in a negative way:

> As I grew older, I grew more and more confused about what I wanted for myself. And at some point in my adolescence, the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" seemed to be the only question on every adult's lips. There's so much pressure when we're younger to define ourselves by one thing, and I disagree with that. We can and should be able to define ourselves as many things for as long as possible, especially children. (Massachusetts Conference for Women)

Nyong'o articulates the "pressure" and anxiety many young people feel about answering the question that so many adults ask: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Furthermore, she expresses how anxiety comes from the feeling that young people need to define themselves by their answer to this one question. Culturally in America, this question implicitly refers not to personal characteristics that one wishes to embody during adulthood, but rather how one wishes to sell one's labor; this cultural understanding of expected answers to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" shows the intense importance attached to knowing how one will fit into the work force. Career should serve as just one particular way that people can define themselves and find meaning; as Nyong'o beautifully articulates, "We can and should be able to define ourselves as many things."

As Nyong'o specifies, broadening the ways in which people contemplate self-definition is particularly important for children and adolescents. Prior to the 1960s, literature was published for young adult readers in the United States, but it was not until the 1960s that American adolescent literature started to take shape as an established genre. This genre was patterned after the trend of New Realism, which attempted to portray the reality of issues that adolescents faced, usually from the perspective of the young adult. Michael Cart, an extremely influential adolescent literature critic, comments that "it's obvious from our survey of the field that few works of young adult literature before 1960 would have qualified as literature. Indeed, many academics would have asserted that putting the words *young adult* and *literature* together was nothing but an oxymoron" (Cart 22). Cart highlights that although literature for young adult readers existed prior to the 1960s, there was no text base with shared characteristics that could be considered a genre. One novel that exemplifies authors' newer attempts to write about real adolescent issues is *The Outsiders*, a book that S. E. Hinton wrote when she was only fifteen. In a 1967 *New York Times* article titled "Teen-agers Are for Real," Hinton states, "Teen-agers today want to read about teen-agers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times" (Hinton). The genre began to display common themes and thematic patterns, one of which is the quest for self-definition through identity formation, an ongoing question that American adolescents must grapple with before they reach adulthood.

Since the New Realism trend that emerged in the 1960s, the genre of adolescent literature has developed many different subgenres that address a broader range of adolescent concerns outside of simply offering raw, realistic depictions. In about the past

twenty years, the economic state of the country has prompted much concern for working citizens. Anxieties about monetary concerns such as inflation and socioeconomic class disparity have become a larger issue for American young adults who must think about entering the country's work force. In addition to dealing with questions about identity, adolescents must think about what professions they would like to pursue, considering not just their interests and strengths but also financial stability. Thus, the necessary decision-making regarding professional goals and daunting ideas about the future evoke anxiety for many adolescents, and this career-centered anxiety is increasingly evident in contemporary works of young adult literature published from the 1990s to the present.

Young people begin to develop their own value systems and identities through their individual decisions, and decisions regarding professional aims are part of adolescents' identity formation processes. Since much of American young adult literature deals with self-concept and identity formation, this topic has consumed a lot of the critical conversation about the genre since its conception. Many critics, including Dorothy Petitt, John Raible, Sonia Nieto, and Flora Fennimore, have explored the adolescent figure's quest for self-definition through various lenses, including gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, and religion. In some works of adolescent literature, decisions about career complicate and drive identity formation, yet a specific analysis of career anxiety is missing from the critical conversation about adolescent identity formation. In this thesis, I address this gap in scholarship by offering focused textual analysis about career anxiety in young adult literature. My thesis does not include interviews with adolescent readers since I wished to keep my analysis strictly textual; however, I have provided speculations about particular ways in which the featured texts could be useful for readers to make meaning

out of their concerns and experiences. Although my speculations only exemplify a single perspective, they begin the process of unearthing how adolescent literature can serve as a cultural tool for better understanding professional anxieties.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I analyze works of adolescent dystopian fiction: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and the trilogy including *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* by Suzanne Collins. In their collection of essays *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*, collaborating editors Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz argue that dystopian fiction "powerfully engages with our pressing global concerns," augmenting social anxieties through exaggerated, fictitious worlds in order to underscore those issues (*Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* i). As dystopian works that are specifically targeted for a young adult audience, Lowry's and Collins's works foreground anxieties that many adolescents face in reality, including uncertainties related to choosing a profession. My first chapter places Lowry's work and Collins's works in dialogue with each other with a focus on different perspectives of identity formation. Balaka Basu, in an essay discussing a different work of dystopian fiction titled *Divergent*, introduces a binary of individual identity formation versus collective identity formation. Psychologists such as Naomi Ellemers, Russel Spears, and Bertjan Doosje provide a more realistic and nuanced perspective that personal identity and shared identity are not entirely separate categories. However, since dystopian fiction presents extreme, dramatized situations and worlds, Basu's perspective is useful for understanding extreme binary arguments about identity formation present in Lowry's and Collins's works. In analyzing Lowry's work, I focus on the theme of choice—the freedom to choose and the societal necessity for individuals to make decisions including career decisions. The text's

emphasis on choice relates to its larger theme about the protagonist adolescent figure's quest for defining his sense of self and the necessity of establishing a solid individual identity. My analysis of *The Giver* focuses specifically on some detrimental aspects of career anxiety and how dwelling in these professional anxieties can be extremely challenging. In Collins's texts, a totalitarian regime limits options and accessibility for careers, which also makes expressing individuality nearly impossible and poses a situation where social injustice needs to be eradicated and rebellion is necessary; in order to implement social change, a collective identification with one shared cause becomes essential. However, Collins also posits the importance of individuality because individual agency is required for initiating the formation of a collective identity. By analyzing Lowry's and Collins's seemingly converse arguments, which respectively address the necessity of developing an individual identity and identifying with a group, I suggest that a more realistic understanding about adolescent identity formation relating to professional anxiety can be reached. One struggle of adolescence is reconciling the desire to establish a feeling of unique individuality and a sense of belonging to a group. This struggle is highlighted when thinking about career; decisions about career involve making individual choices about what one might like to pursue professionally based on personal interests and strengths and also what field one might like to join. In reading Lowry's and Collins's texts together, a reader might gain a more nuanced understanding of identity in that forming ideas of a personal self can coincide with developing a sense of belonging to a group.

In addition to biological adolescence, which includes medical information about development and definitions of puberty, there exists a cultural or socially constructed notion of adolescence and the traits that coincide with the transitional period between

childhood and adulthood; the identification of adolescence as a particular phase of life is tied to particular cultural formations and contexts that are subject to change over time. This means that the jurisdictions of adolescence are constantly in flux and are temporally dependent. During a 2007 interview with Hara Estroff Marano for *Psychology Today*, psychologist Robert Epstein argues, "The age at which Americans reach adulthood is increasing—30 is the new 20—and most Americans now believe a person isn't an adult until age 26" (qtd. in Marano). In medical terms, the ending age of adolescence extends even further; medical professionals deem the age range between eighteen and twenty-eight the "second decade of adolescence" (Kantrowitz and Springen). Since the transitional period itself is culturally defined and subject to change, the genre of young adult literature is also constantly developing and somewhat unstably defined, and therefore the phase of adolescence integrates new issues faced by young adults. Cart writes, "Surely the term [adolescence] no longer embraces only twelve- to eighteen-year-olds—it must now also include nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds" (Cart 119). With the expansion of the culturally defined concept of adolescence spanning into individuals' twenties, professional issues become even more of an urgent concern.

Jeffrey Eugenides's text, *The Marriage Plot*, fits into a category called crossover texts, which reach outside of the scope of literature initially published for a young adult audience. The crossover phenomenon is an important aspect of contemporary literature to consider when evaluating adolescents' concerns; the category includes fictional works that involve representations of adolescents that are initially intended for a general or adult audience and are not originally published under the domain of young adult literature. Well-known works such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *The Lord of the Flies* are

crossover texts that gained so much interest from young adult readers that far after their initial publication date they were ultimately embraced as works of adolescent literature. Cart writes, "Though crossover books is a relatively new term, at least one aspect of the phenomenon it contemplates—the notion that young people will read books published for adults—is scarcely a new one" (Cart 111). Since career anxiety has been emerging in young adult literature only in the past twenty years or so, the most recent texts dealing with this topic may not have had enough time to gain a following by young adult readers and be embraced as part of the genre in the future. I argue that it is beneficial, then, to analyze texts that are not currently within the canon but still address representations of adolescents and career anxiety.

Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* is set in a higher education context spanning from the time within undergraduate university life to the time immediately after graduation in the 1980s. This text serves as a radically different type of writing in comparison with the works of dystopian fiction, portraying adolescent concerns in a light of realism. Eugenides attends to the ways in which anxieties about career and career decisions related to a system of higher education can become heightened because of additional layers of anxieties aroused by societal norms related to gender and class. I do not address additional anxieties aroused by societal expectations related to race or sexuality since Eugenides's text does not specifically offer insight on these layers of self-definition; however, other texts not explored in this thesis should be investigated to supplement understanding about race and sexuality related to professional anxieties. Since some societal expectations and norms shift over time and some persist, expectations can conflict. The tension caused from conflicting expectations augments the preexisting anxieties that accompany late adolescence—the

time when young people begin to enter the work force; *The Marriage Plot* illustrates different ways of handling these conflicting expectations, providing readers many vantage points from which they can engage with the text to help them understand and potentially ease their own anxieties.

Each of these primary texts offers a different portrayal of career anxiety and different ways to think about how career anxiety relates to adolescent identity formation. I selected the texts included in this thesis in an attempt to depict some of the range of career anxieties that young people might encounter. For instance, Collins's emphasis on issues of class disparity that affect career decisions differs from Eugenides's focus on gendered anxieties aroused for women and men immersed in a system of higher education. Because of the range of professional concerns and anxieties that American adolescents face, the depictions of professional anxieties offered by the texts analyzed in the following chapters supply a range of opportunities for readers to engage with and thus contemplate their own professional concerns. Literature, then, can serve as a tool for young readers to make meaning of their experiences and grapple with their anxieties in the midst of the confusing transitional time between childhood and adulthood. Literature can also inform adult readers about the ways in which adolescents might be struggling with their professional anxieties and therefore serve as a potential resource for parents, administrators, counselors, or educators to understand adolescent concerns. I contribute to the critical conversation about adolescent identity formation by addressing career anxiety in literary texts so that readers may better understand the complex scenarios that literature presents and contemplate how literature can serve as a cultural resource for addressing professional anxieties.

# Chapter One

## *Integrating Both Individual and Collective Identities: Analyzing Dystopian Fiction*

Identity formation has been a long-standing theme in adolescent literature, and career anxiety seems to be a more recent lens through which to think about this theme. The texts analyzed in this chapter, Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* and Suzanne Collins's trilogy including *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, address manifestations of career anxiety such as characters' worries about the scarcity of jobs or accessibility of professional opportunities. This chapter focuses on an analysis of all of the featured texts in an attempt to elucidate the connection between career anxiety and both individual and collective identity formation. Although it is not possible to make a stark separation between individual or personal identities and shared or social identities, the featured texts dramatize the imaginary binary of individual and collective identities since they adopt the extreme perspectives of dystopian fiction. Analyzing these texts together provides a more nuanced and realistic way of thinking about identity formation related to career that addresses the adolescent's desires to both develop a solid sense of individuality and also feel a sense of belonging.

Dystopian fiction is a subgenre of young adult literature that has recently gained commercial popularity. The preface of *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* asserts:

> With its capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writing powerfully engages with our pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity

> and justice, and increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self. When directed at young readers, these dystopian warnings are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots and accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood. (*Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* i)

The dystopian texts analyzed in this chapter largely deal with issues of "liberty and self-determination" directly concerned with "questions of identity," which are serious subjects for consideration by young adults. Both "liberty" and "self-determination" involve different degrees of choice and independence or autonomy. The degree to which one possesses freedom of choice affects one's degree of self-determination, which in turn affects one's sense of self and identity. In Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and in Suzanne Collins's trilogy, questions about choice and class, which reflect questions of identity, become bound up with career anxiety.

Dystopian fiction attempts to expose many different societal anxieties, usually in dramatized ways. In his essay "Dark Shadows and Bright Lights: Generators and Maintainers of Utopias and Dystopias," Roger C. Schlobin states:

> Dystopias and utopias certainly pervade everywhere and can be produced by the following: reactions to anxieties and discontent, suffering and pain, blocked and failed social systems, tyrannical languages and symbols, oppression of gender and color, dehumanization, loss of the "American dream," science and machines, materialism, antithetical cultures, ideologies, and colonialism. (Schlobin 14)

For dystopian fiction specifically directed at an adolescent audience, many of the featured anxieties deal with entrance into the adult world, including the work force. The texts analyzed in this chapter portray "reactions to anxieties and discontent," and responses to "suffering and pain," "failed social systems," and "loss of the 'American Dream'" seem related to the dramatized depiction of class disparity in Collins's trilogy. Dystopian fiction for adolescents thus serves as a beneficial genre to evaluate since there are many different vantage points through which young readers may engage with the texts and potentially make meaning of their own professional anxieties.

Both Lowry's work and Collins's works express extreme situations, and both convey a binary understanding of the benefits of forming individual versus collective identities. However, in reality, one of the quintessential challenges of adolescence relates to reconciling the simultaneous desires to forge a unique individual identity and to be considered part of a group. In *Social Psychology: Social Identity: International Perspectives*, collaborating authors Stephen Worchel, J. Francisco Morales, and Jean-Claude Deschamps refer to "the conflict of affirmation and individual necessity versus affirmation and collective necessity, the search for personal identity versus the search for collective identity, what constitutes individual difference versus what constitutes similarity to others…in short the conflict of the individual versus the group" (Worchel, Morales, and Deschamps 1-2). Even the language used here, largely through the repetition of the word "versus," evokes a notion of an established dichotomy between the self and the other, suggesting a binary way of thinking about personal and shared identities. The authors acknowledge that the "relationship between the concept of the individual and the collective [is] often viewed as conflicting" (Worchel, Morales, and Deschamps 2). Since Lowry's work

focuses on the necessity of forming a unique individual identity and Collins's works present the benefits of forming a collective identity, placing these texts in dialogue with each other helps to provide a more realistic understanding of adolescent identity formation. Collins's works, however, also ultimately provide a sense of the importance of individuality and freedom of choice; she highlights that individual agency is necessary in order to initiate formation of a collective. By analyzing these dystopian texts, this chapter highlights how American adolescent fiction offers a range of perspectives about the importance of integrating both forms of identity in order to establish a solid and healthy self-concept.

One focal point of career anxiety that appears in dystopian texts is choice; personal choices inherently speak to one's individuality and the formation of a unique personal identity. This manifestation of career anxiety is evident, for instance, in *The Giver*, published in 1993. In her Newberry acceptance speech in 1994, Lowry highlights that her novel is centered around issues of choice, and in her text, she ultimately argues for the necessity of individual choices:

> The man that I named The Giver passed along to the boy knowledge, history, memories, color, pain, laughter, love, and truth. Every time you place a book in the hands of a child, you do the same thing. It is risky. But each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom. Those are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things.

The necessity to choose a particular career evokes anxiety—one may not have one particular, strong interest to pursue; one may primarily be economically driven. A person may fear choosing the "wrong" career. Although Lowry states that choices are "risky" and

can be “unsafe,” she ultimately proclaims that those choices are “wonderfully” dangerous; she asserts that choice is necessary in people’s lives, endorsing the concept of free will. This quote also demonstrates the main argument of this thesis in that texts can serve as tools for adolescents to make meaning of their experiences; fictional renderings of situations presented in texts can enable readers to meditate on aspects of reality. When Lowry states that “each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere,” she illustrates how texts can be the vehicle to open up possibilities for understanding otherness, thoughts that differ from one’s own, and new perspectives that diverge from one’s pre-conceptions. Texts can serve as the entryway into engaging with problems and developing new ideas, which is essential for forming one’s self-concept and value system. Through creating a fictional world in which individual choices do not exist, Lowry suggests that making choice obsolete will not expel anxieties and instead, doing so will eliminate beautiful and necessary parts of life, such as “history, memories, color, pain, laughter, love, and truth.” Although eliminating individual choice might remove some of the anxiety evoked from needing to choose the “correct” career, the costs of eliminating that choice are too high.

Lowry sets up a fictitious environment in *The Giver* that expels choice from being part and parcel of individual lives and consequently removes the option for individual career decisions. When an individual is not free to choose his or her professional trajectory, a method of systematic categorization comes into play. *The Giver* exposes the risk that categorization will only allow individuals to form collective identities without the opportunity to also form unique, individual identities. In the novel, a committee of Elders observes each individual during the first eleven years of his or her life, with careful analysis

of the individual's strengths, talents, and interests. All of the children are categorized into groups based generally on age, and there is a ceremony every year to mark the progression from each stage of life to the next, which is demarcated by numbers loosely fitting the individual's age. The last stage in the annual ceremony is the progression from Eleven to Twelve, and after that, the individual's relative age is no longer societally tracked or important. During the ceremony when each individual leaves the category of Eleven, he or she is assigned a particular career within the society based on the Elders' observations. The absence of free will and choice is the primary problem that the dystopian novel contemplates. In this dystopia, choice becomes obsolete.

Liberty of choice, largely based on interests and personal decisions when regarding professional aims, speaks to one's sense of self. To what degree one's career should speak to one's self-concept becomes a topic worth consideration. If the career is not chosen by the individual, he or she may not identify with that career or find it satisfying. According to the article "Self and social identity" by Naomi Ellemers, Russel Spears, and Bertjan Doosje, the "strength of commitment to the group indicates the likelihood that a particular (social) identity will be relevant to the individual in question" (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje). In *The Giver*, individuals are placed into particular professional fields and discontinue pursuing other interests. An individual's "strength of commitment to the group," or particular career field is thus extremely high and "relevant to the individual in question" because most if not all of his or her time and identification resides with that group. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje argue that "the nature of the resulting perceptual, affective, or behavioral responses [to the group] depends on interaction with the relevant social context and which aspects of the self are secure or threatened" (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje). The

authors state that the responses to involvement or commitment to the group, whether they are emotional, conceptual, or social, depends on the public climate or context; since the social context in Lowry's novel is systematically structured in a way that forces individuals to create strong ties to their professional field because they are unable to identify with other subject positions, a large part of each individual's identity or self-concept is bound to career categorization. When so much of one's identity is tied to one area, other "aspects of the self" are more vulnerable or easily "threatened." In the situation presented in *The Giver*, only a collective identity can be formed, leaving little or no room for the development of a healthy individual identity made up of an amalgamation of various subject positions.

In "What Faction Are You in?," an essay about categorization in the work of a dystopian adolescent novel called *Divergent*, Balaka Basu illuminates the differences between individual identity formation and collective identity formation. Although Basu's comments set up a binary between these ways of thinking about identity, in reality, individual identities and shared identities are not completely separate categories. Nonetheless, Basu's argument provides insights that are helpful for analyzing *The Giver*. Basu writes:

> It is perhaps all the more unsettling to realize, then, that at the end of their quests, the heroes of YA narratives tend to find not an individual identity but a collective one, defined mainly by membership in a particular group. Forming an adult identity is not understood by these novels as forging a unique, never-before-seen, and thus ultimately unclassifiable self, but instead as fitting in with an already extant *type* of self. (Basu 19)

What is disputable and unsettling about Basu's claim is her idealistic and naïve assumption that it is possible to forge "a unique, never-before-seen, and thus ultimately unclassifiable self." Individuals occupy many different subject positions and work with multiple available identities; a unique individual identity can be understood as an amalgamation of different associations, social roles, or subject positions. In "Self and social identity," the authors more accurately refer to the relationship between group identities and personal identities when they argue that concerns of "self and identity" are generally "conceptualized at the level of the personal self. Although this tradition emphasizes the importance of social roles and social interactions for the awareness of who one is, these are mainly considered…in terms of how reflected appraisals from others contribute to the definition of self or may help fulfill a generic need to belong" (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje). Here, the authors establish that "issues of selfhood and identity are affected by the groups to which people belong" instead of thinking of group identities and individual identities as completely separate entities (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje). The authors state that social roles and social interactions are generally considered in relation to the "personal self;" social or group identities then are applied to the individual's conception of his or her personal self. How those social interactions and group identifications affect individual identity depends on "reflected appraisals," or others' exposed evaluations and assessments of the individual. They also can help an individual with the desire and need to belong.

Even though her claim is disputable when thinking realistically about identity formation, Basu's argument in a dystopian fiction context still provides insight since she gets at the problem of tying career choices to identity; in reality, career is another means of categorization that connects an individual with some larger group of people. Through

establishing self-concept only with regard to a larger group of people, many dystopian works only speak to how an adolescent fits into societally pre-existing identity types or subject positions instead of also considering personal or individual identities. If individuals are stripped of their ability to choose, and even when individuals are able to choose their career, they may develop categorical, collective identities at the expense of developing the intrinsic aspects of self that constitute individual identity. Identification with a group is not inherently a bad thing; however, *The Giver* contemplates the problems that arise when a collective identity completely eclipses a sense of individual identity.

Individual identity formation, as contemplated by works of young adult literature such as *The Giver*, is underscored as an imperative concept for young people to achieve. In Lowry's novel, during the time before the protagonist, Jonas, is a Twelve, his mother tells him:

> But this means…that you'll move into a new group. And each of your friends will. You'll no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens. After the Ceremony of Twelve, you'll be with your Assignment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No more recreation hours. So your friends will no longer be as close…When I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages. (Lowry 17-18)

This passage illuminates that Jonas will be stripped of what little individual freedom he has, such as his decisions about where to spend his volunteer or recreation hours. He will presumably spend all of his time with other individuals in his Assignment group, and therefore he will be surrounded by people in the same field, which will drastically reduce

his exposure to people with other interests, talents, and careers. This system of categorization only fosters for the individual a sense of identification with a group and with the specific function that the group carries out, or as Basu argues, the individual forms only a collective identity. Although it may be beneficial and imperative to form relationships with people who harbor similar interests, it is imperative to interact with people who possess dissimilar interests in order to form a healthy self-concept. Interactions with people who have different ideas and different interests help an individual to establish his or her own value system and ideas of self. By initially excluding any alternative to professional categorization and forcing the characters into the inescapable framework of only being able to form shared identities, Lowry dramatizes the negative aspects of categorization. Forming individual value systems and unique perspectives of self is not possible when an individual is stripped of his or her ability to choose. Lowry emphasizes the value and need to form individual identities through the freedom of choice and thus, the text warns readers about only forming collective identities.

Although *The Giver* as a whole enforces the necessity of choice, ultimately promoting individuals' decision-making specifically with regard to career choices, the rhetoric in the beginning of the novel cannot seem to get away from the pervasive comfort elicited by categorization and having difficult decisions made for oneself by someone else. The system of categorization eases the anxieties behind choosing a career; however, it simultaneously diminishes individuals' abilities to form unique identities and does not offer relief from the anxieties attached to uncertainty about the future. In the beginning of the novel, Jonas is an Eleven and is apprehensive about what position he will be assigned during the annual ceremony in which he becomes a Twelve. His parents attempt to ease his anxiety about the

ceremony by relaying the information that the Elders' decisions are well informed through years of observation, and that those decisions are rarely incongruent with people's personality types and interests. Unlike Jonas, who has no idea what his Assignment might be, his father had an inkling of his Assignment because he had strong interests in a particular field and spent most of his volunteer hours during his first eleven years pursuing that field. He relays this information to Jonas, who is obviously not completely reassured about the Elders' decisions since his own situation is very different from his father's. Jonas expresses his anxiety outright, but it also shines through his questions for his parents; he asks whether any of the Elevens during his father's ceremony were disappointed with their Assignments. In response, his father states, "No. I don't think so. Of course the Elders are so careful in their observations and selections…There are very rarely disappointments, Jonas. I don't think you need to worry about that" (Lowry 16). Jonas's father sort of shrugs off Jonas's worries about potential disappointment with his Assignment because of the faith he has in the societal system of categorization and the Elders' informed decisions. The comfort that the father is able to provide Jonas stems from this faith in the system, similar to how the system itself provides comfort for the individuals who would be anxious about choosing particular career paths for themselves.

Although the anxiety about choosing a particular career is systematically eased for Jonas, the uncertainty of what his future holds still serves as a source of anxiety for him. Lowry addresses the anxieties connected to uncertainty, ultimately suggesting that such existential quandaries pertaining to the unknowable are unavoidable. She writes, "Though [Jonas] had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he hadn't had the slightest idea what Assignment the Elders would be selecting for his future, or how he might feel about it

when the day came" (Lowry 19). In this dystopian world, even when freedom of choice is extracted from one's career, uncertainty about what particular position one will practice persists as a main source of anticipatory anxiety.

Since she emphasizes that anxiety regarding the unknowable is an inescapable part of life, Lowry draws attention to the emotional strife that such anxiety causes rather than striving to reduce it. Indeed, she elongates the period of Jonas's uncertainty regarding his Assignment in the plot during the Ceremony of Twelve. The Chief Elder running the ceremony skips Jonas in line when he is to be given his Assignment. When the Chief Elder skips him, Lowry writes, "A mistake. She made a mistake. But Jonas knew, even as he had the thought, that she hadn't. The Chief Elder made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Twelve" (Lowry 57). Because of Jonas's ingrained faith in the system, his moment of disbelief about the Chief Elder's actions hardly lasts long enough to consider as a potential reality. In the face of this absurdity in the regular structuring of the ceremony, Jonas attempts to retain faith in the organization of his society. However, his anxiety in the passage manifests as hugely disruptive to his cognitive functions and mental health. Lowry continues:

> He felt dizzy, and couldn't focus his attention. He didn't hear what Assignment Pierre received, and was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new badge. Then: Twenty-one. Twenty-two.
>
> The numbers continued in order. Jonas sat, dazed, as they moved into the Thirties and then the Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each announcement, his heart jumped for a moment, and he thought wild thoughts. Perhaps now she would call his name. Could he have forgotten his

> own number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked Nineteen. (Lowry 57)

Jonas's faith in the system both instigates his anxiety when there is a rupture in the regular structuring of the ceremony but also mollifies his reaction to such a rupture. He is obviously distressed about being skipped during the time when he is supposed to be assigned the career that he will practice for the rest of his life, which is exemplified through words such as "dizzy" and "dazed" that describe his mental state. Lowry also describes his heart jumping and his "wild" thoughts, which indicate a divergence from his regular mental state. Initially, Jonas's confidence in knowing that there was no mistake in the proceedings of the ceremony overrides his confidence in himself and the knowledge he has about his own societally designated number. He questions himself and his own knowledge near the end of this particular passage when Lowry writes, "Could he have forgotten his own number?," assuming that the Chief Elder and the system are always correct and that he must therefore be the one who is incorrect. Quickly, however, he realizes that he is, in fact, number Nineteen and something else must be happening in the ceremony. Jonas's faith in the system mitigates his distressed reaction, causing him to sit quietly at the ceremony in agony instead of searching for a way to ease his anxiety by expressing his confusion. Because of this incident, the period of uncertainty about his future career is extended, furthering his anxiety surrounding such professional issues while also highlighting the negative ways that uncertainty affects adolescent mental health.

*The Giver* provides an image of what adolescent uncertainty looks like and attends to its troublesome characteristics. Through conveying the adolescent figure's anxiety about his future career, the text addresses how this anxiety damages Jonas's sense of self. During

the ceremony, before Jonas has been assigned to a societal position, Lowry illuminates that he

> [h]unched his shoulders and tried to make himself smaller in the seat. He wanted to disappear, to fade away, not to exist. He didn't dare turn and find his parents in the crowd. He couldn't bear to see their faces darkened with shame.
>
> Jonas bowed his head and searched through his mind. *What had he done wrong?* (Lowry 57-58)

What seems most troubling about Jonas's reaction to being skipped in the Assignment process is that instead of questioning the system and its structure, which would mean addressing the Chief Elder's potential mistake, he wishes that he would no longer exists. He assumes unquestioningly that he is at fault somehow for not being assigned a societal, professional position. Jonas's shame is emphasized in his assumption that he has behaved incorrectly. In the final italicized sentence, it is clear that Jonas assumes that he has done something wrong, but the fact that he poses a question indicates that he is unaware of any action he has committed that would be considered outside of the realm of normal behavior. Instead of having confidence that he has performed adequately according to the strictures of his society, he searches his mind for what action he performed that could have potentially stripped him from his right to be assigned a professional position. Jonas relinquishes his confidence in himself. Not only is Jonas's shame highlighted in this passage but this section also addresses Jonas's concern about his parents becoming ashamed of him. Part of the anxiety attached to professional issues is a desire for parental approval and pride. Jonas's focus on his parents' possible reactions to his being skipped in the ceremony,

such as seeing "their faces darkened with shame," augments his anxiety. Although choice regarding career decisions is narratively removed from this plot because of the structure of the dystopian society, the uncertainty about future professional positions remains; the negative effects of this professional uncertainty and also the desire for parental approval speak to realities that adolescents face. Readers, then, are presented with the fact that uncertainty is inevitable and are provided with an image of how that uncertainty can cause an unhealthy self-concept through lack of self-confidence and self-blame; readers are also presented with an opportunity to speculate about the challenges of grappling with the inescapable nature of uncertainty. Perhaps readers may experience comfort in understanding the universality of uncertainty.

Though the beginning of the novel posits the partial comfort ascribed to having career choices made for oneself, eliminating much of the stress attached to making professional decisions, a main aim of Lowry's work seems to be to assert the necessity of making individual choices, including career choices. Jonas's Assignment in the novel is actually a selection. He is selected to be the next Receiver of Memory; this societal position is very rare, as there is always only one person who practices that career at a time, with the exception of the time that the last Receiver of Memory trains the new one. During the training period, the old Receiver of Memory becomes the Giver. The Giver explains to Jonas, "Simply stated…although it's not really simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past" (Lowry 77). The Receiver of Memory possesses memories of the way the world was before the society decided to go to Sameness; in other words, the Receiver possesses memories from the world as contemporary readers understand it. In the dystopian society, war, fear, pain, color,

choices, music, and many other things understood as parts of life do not exist, except in the memories that the Receiver retains. When trying to explain to Jonas about the world before Sameness, the Giver relates that "[t]here's much more. There's all that goes beyond—all that is Elsewhere—and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those, when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future…I am so *weighted* with them" (Lowry 78). The Receiver uses the memories from the past to advise the society's committee about important issues so that destructive things from the past cannot occur again in the present or in the future—in short, so that people will not make poor choices. Every member of society has no knowledge of the past, and consequentially no knowledge of past destruction or death, and instead, the burden of those memories rests with one individual.

When Jonas is given a memory from a time of warfare, containing knowledge of pain, suffering, and death, he understandably feels negative about his selection for his societal career. Lowry writes:

> Jonas did not want to go back. He didn't want the memories, didn't want the honor, didn't want the wisdom, didn't want the pain. He wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games. He sat in his dwelling alone, watching through the window, seeing children at play, citizens bicycling home from uneventful days at work, ordinary lives free of anguish because he had been selected, as others before him had, to bear their burden.
>
> But the choice was not his. He returned each day to the Annex room. (Lowry 121)

Because Jonas is integrated into a social system that strips the individuals of their freedom of choice for career, he is immersed in a situation where his desires and interests are in direct conflict with his duty to uphold his assigned position in the society. A common trope in much adolescent literature is a desire to return to the simplicity, innocence, and happiness of childhood because of the difficulties the adolescent faces during the complex transition to adulthood. Because of his newfound knowledge of death and deep sadness, Jonas initially desires to revert back to the time when he had no knowledge of what the world was before the society decided to go to Sameness. Jonas obviously cannot do so and cannot even stop going every day to fulfill his societal duties as the new Receiver of Memory because he has no choice in the matter, just as all of the community members have no choice in what career they are assigned. However, through his experiences with the Giver, Jonas learns what choice is through the memories of the past, and he gains the knowledge that at some point, someone made a choice to remove the possibility of individuals making choices in case they made poor ones, or the "wrong" ones. Through learning what choices were, Jonas comes to understand their necessity and importance in determining one's individual identity, as opposed to only being allowed to fill one societal role. Slightly after this passage, Lowry offers an example of this understanding as she writes that Jonas "had seen a birthday party; with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud" (Lowry 121). When Lowry writes "so that now" the reader can understand that it is only after Jonas receives this memory that he is able to understand the concept of individuality.

Ultimately, Lowry's novel argues for the necessity of choice, which is connected inseparably with individuality. Near the very end of the work, Jonas makes a choice to leave the community and take with him a baby that the community had scheduled to "release," or kill, because he requires excessive attention compared with the community's other Newchildren. As he and the baby, Gabriel, are searching for Elsewhere, they experience real hardship for the first time:

> You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.
>
> Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving.
>
> But if he had stayed…
>
> His thoughts continued. If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love.
>
> And Gabriel? For Gabriel there would have been no life at all. So there had not really been a choice. (Lowry 172-173)

This passage illuminates that Jonas did not make the wrong choice, contrary to his initial reactionary thought that leaving the community was a bad decision. In the beginning of the novel, Lowry suggests that it would be nice to exist in a world without the conflicts that arise from war and discrimination, while she offers comfort in the security of knowing that each person plays a vital, necessary, and correct role in society without having to go through the potentially agonizing task of individually choosing for him or herself. Near the end of the novel, however, Lowry suggests that sacrificing individuality, along with other

joys of life, in the course of eliminating these conflicts is too much of a cost. In the fictional environment, beautiful parts of life, and the parts that make people human, like feelings, color, music, and love are inaccessible if individual choices are impossible. Lowry presents readers with the responsibilities attached to choice. There are burdensome possibilities attached to all choices, but those are inseparably part of what makes people human. Lowry opens up for readers that human existence is complicated and that the complexity of choice is a large part of what enables a wide spectrum of human experience.

Conversely, in Collins's trilogy, the author creates a dystopian world in which there is totalitarian rule, thereby eliminating much of the opportunity for characters to express their individual identities, and in this fictional extreme, Collins endorses the benefits of forming collective identities. Under an oppressive regime, there is an excess of required conformity and the citizens must abide by the totalitarian rule. Although Collins's texts support the formation of collective identities in order to overcome the social injustice of required conformity to a norm, her texts also value the need to establish and express individual identities; individual agency is necessary for forming any type of shared identification with a goal. In a totalitarian environment where individuals' choices are limited, supporting a shared goal like that of rebellion involves individuals' decisions, and these choices can only be made if individuals possess a clear sense of their values and desires. Collins's trilogy draws similar attention to issues of career anxiety; however, her texts focus on career anxiety through the lens of socioeconomic class. In *Little Red Readings: Historical Materialist Perspectives of Children's Literature*, Angela Hubler acknowledges the dramatized class issues that Collins contemplates in the dystopian world she creates. Hubler writes, "It's rare, however, to encounter a dystopian novel like Suzanne

Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) and its sequels, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*: what's targeted isn't Cold War-era mind control but economic inequality, totalitarian rule, and oppression maintained by brute force" (Hubler 229). As Hubler states, Collins's work targets the oppressive totalitarian rule that causes economic inequality and calls for revolution. In the novels' dystopian world called Panem, class disparity is exaggerated and dramatized with the society divided into twelve districts that span further distances from the Capitol as the numerical signifier of the specific district increases. As the number of the district as well as distance from the Capitol increases, the poverty of each community increases. Also, each district is responsible for a particular industry. Collins writes about the beginning of the annual Hunger Games spectacle: "For the opening ceremonies, you're supposed to wear something that suggests your district's principal industry. District 11, agriculture. District 4, fishing. District 3, factories" (*The Hunger Games* 66). Since the districts themselves and their industries are kept strictly distinct and separate from each other, the local economy of each community is relatively stagnant and is not allowed the opportunity to improve through leveling out some of the economic disparity. With District 12, the poorest district and the protagonist's home, the state of the economy is terrible, so there is hardly any money put into the community's market, meaning that monetary circulation occurs almost exclusively among members of the community. This situation creates an environment that excludes almost all possibility for social mobility since everyone within the poorer communities is in relatively similar states of economic poverty.

By establishing a dystopian world that dramatizes issues of economic disparity, Collins's trilogy can enable a reader to think about issues of socioeconomic class inequality in reality. Collins's works can offer insight, through fictitious dramatization, into how some

young people in America struggling with monetary concerns might deal with career anxieties that are similarly survival based such as constantly worrying about having enough money for food or other basic needs. The depiction of class inequality that Collins provides possesses revolutionary undertones, which conveys a situation in which people must form collective identities in order to realize a collective goal. Social and political changes, such as eradicating social injustice, require more than the individual—these changes require a shared effort. Hubler, while introducing Ernst Bloch's ideas, discusses the revolutionary aspects of Collins's trilogy with regard to survival-based living:

> Collins represents this rebellion as a response not to ideological but to material factors. The plot follows the trajectory outlined by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*: "Hunger cannot help continually renewing itself. But if it increases uninterrupted, satisfied by no certain bread, then it suddenly changes. The body-ego then becomes rebellious, does not go out in search of food merely within the new framework. It seeks to change the situation which has caused its empty stomach, its hanging head…"(75-76). (Hubler 236-237)

According to this perspective, Collins's texts provide a means to ruminate about such career anxieties that can deviate from simply circling around the immediate initiative for survival, or the immediate "hunger." Bloch explains that if there is a sole, continual focus on relieving increasing "uninterrupted" immediate needs, such as always needing to worry about having enough food to survive, those needs ultimately cannot be continually temporarily remedied by immediate solutions without wishing to alter the situation. Rebellion then becomes the means to achieve a longer lasting solution by altering "the

situation which has caused" the continual concentration on immediate needs or "its empty stomach, its hanging head." Even though escaping poverty is presented as extremely difficult, ultimately requiring collective rebellion, the text offers an image of the positive use of forming a collective identity—a shared identification with a unified goal in order to deal with class-focused professional anxieties.

The beginning of the second novel of the trilogy, *Catching Fire*, pinpoints how little the protagonist of the series, Katniss, is able to express her individual identity, which then creates a narrative situation in which forming a collective identity is both possible and beneficial. After the first Hunger Games when the results of the Games are unique since there are two victors, Katniss and Peeta, some people view the alteration of the normal results of the Games as an act of defiance to the Capitol; the double victor result of the Games "made the Capitol look foolish, and consequently undermined [President Snow's] control" (*Catching Fire* 18). President Snow is visiting Katniss to discuss how she must maintain the façade that she and Peeta, the other tribute from her district, are in love; in order to survive the Games, Katniss and Peeta pretended to be in love and formed a kind of team. Because of this, at the end of the Games, Katniss and Peeta made a spectacle that they were going to commit suicide to avoid one of them having to kill the other. Rather than have the Games result in a tragic double suicide and produce no victor, the ruling figures intervened and allowed both of them to live and win the Games. After the Games, President Snow states that Katniss and Peeta must continue to act as though they are in love in order for the question of defiance to the Capitol to be expelled. He threatens to hurt her loved ones, in this example, Gale, her secret hunting companion and potential actual love interest, if Katniss does not cease seeing him. In response to President Snow's threats, Katniss

thinks to herself, “The woods have always been our place of safety, our place beyond the reach of the Capitol, where we’re free to say what we feel, be who we are” (*Catching Fire* 24). The oppressive totalitarian rule exemplified by President Snow’s character causes Katniss to lose her only refuge, hunting in the woods with Gale, where she is able to more openly express her individuality.

Quickly after Collins presents the notion that it is extremely difficult and dangerous to express individual identity in this oppressive environment, she offers a scene depicting the beginnings of the formation of a collective identity—one of the similarly oppressed citizens in the poorer districts. Katniss goes to District 11 to give a speech, and when she is finished, the crowd responds together, expressing ideas of solidarity between their own district and District 12; Katniss narrates, “What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It’s our sign from District 12…” (*Catching Fire* 61). The passage illustrates the beginnings of a revolution, which inherently requires shared identification with the desire to realize a singular cause. In other words, revolution requires the formation of a collective identity. Members of the crowd planned this gesture before Katniss made her speech. The fact that members from a different district perform the sign that originates from Katniss’s district shows an attempt to establish unity among districts that experience similar forms of oppression and suffer from socioeconomic disparity. In this dystopian environment that is dramatized in such a way that people are not easily able to form or express individual identities, revolution is the only means of overcoming oppression. Collins’s works ultimately convey the positive aspects of establishing a collective identity.

Analyzing Collins's texts alongside Lowry's text provides a range of perspectives for contemplating ideas about career anxiety and forming one's identity; read together, the texts address the necessity for an adolescent to focus on both establishing ideas of a personal self and identifying with a group. Although the process of choosing a career can potentially be stressful and unpleasant in different ways, *The Giver* ultimately endorses and praises the system of choice. Lowry suggests that the comfort found in having a career—the "correct" career based on careful observation of skills and interests—chosen for a person cannot outweigh the need to choose for oneself because individuality and humanity itself are at stake. Similarly, Collins's trilogy values individuals' choices since it presents a world where people's choices are extremely limited because of the totalitarian rule that causes tremendous economic disparity. Through these fictional, dystopian tales, a reader grappling with issues of professional choice may find solace to some degree in Lowry's and Collins's arguments proclaiming the need for individual choices. In Lowry's text, at least choice gives people the entryway into forming and possessing solid conceptions of self, which the novel, and much of the young adult literature genre, claims is imperative. These texts offer fictional situations and images of adolescent career anxiety that might be useful to young readers; much of the time, the need to make choices is the reason adolescents develop anxieties about career. Bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood unavoidably involves moving from a situation where many choices are made for oneself to a situation where one must make decisions on one's own. Although this can be scary, it is also exciting and—as the texts analyzed in this chapter assert—necessary for forming self-concept and establishing a personal value system. Readers might benefit from engaging with Lowry's text apace with Collins's texts to gain the understanding that individuality

does not have to be mutually exclusive with belonging to a group; reading and assimilating the differences in perspectives that these two authors present can give a more nuanced understanding of identity formation. Thus, a reader struggling with career anxiety might be able to apply a more nuanced understanding gained from reading these texts together in order to give credence to both his or her desire to make individual career choices and also find shared identification with a group in one particular career field.

## Chapter Two

### *Layered Anxieties because of Social Expectations: Analyzing a Crossover Text*

As I explained in my introduction, crossover texts are an important aspect of contemporary literature to consider when evaluating adolescents' concerns. Because adolescent literature continues to address the needs, interests, and principal concerns of Americans in their twenties, career anxieties have become a more prominent feature of crossover texts. Michael Cart writes that the crossover "category started to show up when, because of economic hard times, more and more twenty-something Americans began returning home to live with parents, delaying commitments—to professions and partners alike—until their early thirties" (Cart 119). Referring to these twenty-somethings, Cart continues, "And why not, as many of them—given increasing life expectancies and continuing economic hard times—are looking at living into their nineties and working until they're in their seventies. Who can blame them for not rushing to accept adult responsibilities?" (Cart 119). His comment also illuminates professional anxieties and concerns about entering into the world of adulthood. Given these anxieties, it is important to analyze works of literature that may not be published for young adult readers originally but address representations of adolescents and career choices or career indecision; such works become available as sources for young adult readers to engage with and could be adopted into the genre in later years.

One text that deals with professional ideas and decision-making through representations of adolescent characters is *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides. Eugenides's work is set within the context of university life and the immediate time after

graduation from a higher education setting. This text, divergent from the works of dystopian fiction because of its realism, provides multiple realistic manifestations of career anxiety through its descriptions of three main characters' development. In presenting the career anxieties of three different protagonists, Eugenides provides readers with multiple vantage points for relating to or understanding the issue of career anxiety; thus, the text serves as a potential means for readers to make meaning of their own professional anxieties. Although *The Marriage Plot* is set during the 1980s, reminiscent of the era in which Eugenides himself experienced university life, the depiction of past professional concerns seems applicable and relevant to contemporary professional concerns.

Eugenides's work offers a complex depiction of career anxiety; the author provides characters and scenes that exemplify anxieties about professional decisions related to a system of higher education. He then further complicates these anxieties by attending to other anxieties that cause additional tension for adolescent characters as they try to make decisions about their futures. These additional anxieties are related to societally expected roles such as the ways daughters, sons, children, college students, or people in different socioeconomic class standings are expected to act. Eugenides exposes that the fundamental way decisions are made is gendered and classed. Decisions are also raced, but *The Marriage Plot* does not specifically attend to this issue. The text is set during a time when feminism was an important, newer perspective and women were becoming increasingly integrated into the system of higher education and the work force. Career decisions especially envelop gendered norms and expectations, such as what professional fields are dominated by a particular gender or what professions are considered inappropriate for a particular gender,

and one of the best settings to explore the complications and conflicted pressures of gendered professional decisions is higher education.

The opening of the novel immediately delivers a depiction of a character's internal, professional anxieties, which are bound to her identity formation. *The Marriage Plot* begins with a scene describing one of the protagonists, Madeleine, gazing at her collection of books from her college experience on the morning of her graduation from Brown University. Within the first paragraph, Eugenides addresses the stress that comes from contemplating how decisions about what to study in college become implicated in one's sense of individual identity. The author writes:

> There was, in short, this mid-size but still portable library representing pretty much everything Madeleine had read in college, a collection of texts, seemingly chosen at random, whose focus slowly narrowed, like a personality test, a sophisticated one you couldn't trick by anticipating the implications of its questions and finally got so lost in that your only recourse was to answer the simple truth. (Eugenides 3)

The phrase "like a personality test" indicates that through the various texts that she has accumulated during her time as an English major in college, Madeleine's decisions about choosing classes speak to her core personality or character. In stating that Madeleine is not able to "trick" the personality test to help her understand what her pre-professional decisions and the knowledge gained from those particular texts actually says about her identity and disposition, Eugenides suggests that she believes that her pre-professional decisions truly identify her nature. Madeleine feels a sense of distress, loss, and anxiety

about the literature defining a part of her identity because of her inability to understand the implications of the personality test.

After introducing Madeleine's pre-professional anxieties relating to her sense of self-concept, Eugenides complicates those anxieties by depicting more anxieties related to gendered norms. Madeleine uses many of the texts in her library in her English honors thesis about the marriage plot storyline. Directly after the previous passage, Madeleine contemplates how the texts might label her in simple one-word personality titles. Depicting Madeleine's thoughts, Eugenides continues, "And then you waited for the result, hoping for 'Artistic,' or 'Passionate,' thinking you could live with 'Sensitive,' secretly fearing 'Narcissistic' and 'Domestic,' but finally being presented with an outcome that cut both ways and made you feel different depending on the day, the hour, or the guy you happened to be dating: 'Incurably Romantic'" (Eugenides 3). In searching for the most accurate way that her books and her thesis define her character, Madeleine begins by expressing her hope for "Artistic" or "Passionate;" these words would imply that her thesis shows not only a natural, creative skill, but also that her talented writing involves interest and enthusiasm. She then thinks that she "could live with 'Sensitive,'" which carries both positive and negative connotations related to gender norms. One gender stereotype is that women are more sensitive than men, which implies that women are more in tune with emotions; for Madeleine, this generalization can indicate that her writing is thoughtful, but it also envelops a more negative undertone related to oversensitivity or ardent emotion. She continues her train of thought in which she fears being labeled "Narcissistic" or "Domestic;" narcissism negatively marks one with self-obsession. Madeleine's gendered anxieties are also evident in her fear that her writing and her character might be considered "Domestic."

Domesticity evokes images of the household, with which women are stereotypically associated. Especially since Madeleine's thesis is about the classic literary marriage plot pertaining to courtship rituals, nuptials, and romance, she may fear that her topic is thought of as simplistic or that her writing is thought of as girlish. Finally, Madeleine fears that having her writing labeled "Incurably Romantic" could "cut both ways." This description could be considered a positive demarcation of her writing in that romance is generally associated with attractiveness; however, "romantic" also contains a negative nuance of dreaminess and sentimentality, which could imply that Madeleine's character and writing are unrealistic and not down to earth.

Madeleine not only worries about what the texts she has read during college and her honors thesis might imply about her identity, but she also exhibits anxiety about her decision to major in English more generally. Through Madeleine's character, Eugenides highlights a means of dealing with career anxiety that reduces self-esteem and seems unhealthy. He writes that Madeleine had "become an English major for the purest and dullest of reasons: because she loved to read" (Eugenides 20). Although Eugenides's use of the word "purest" suggests that Madeleine's decision about what to major in was interest-based instead of based on which major would guarantee her a successful career, there is also a negative connotation attached to the other descriptor used—"dullest"—which makes her decision seem uninteresting and therefore implies worry about that interest-based decision. Eugenides continues the discussion of Madeleine's decision to become an English major:

> And yet sometimes she worried about what those musty old books were doing to her. Some people majored in English to prepare for law school.

> Others became journalists. The smartest guy in the honors program, Adam Vogel, a child of academics, was planning on getting a Ph.D. and becoming an academic himself. That left a large contingent of people majoring in English by default. Because they weren't left-brained enough for science, because history was too dry, philosophy too difficult, geology too petroleum-oriented, and math too mathematical—because they weren't musical, artistic, financially motivated, or really all that smart, these people were pursuing university degrees doing something no different from what they'd done in first grade: reading stories. English was what people who didn't know what to major in majored in. (Eugenides 21)

In this section, Madeleine's thoughts imply that she is one of the group of people who chose to major in English because there is not another area of study that she feels she is capable enough to study, and there is nothing else that she is interested enough in to choose. Madeleine also expresses that a degree in English might not equip a person for many financially good jobs. The passage points to Madeleine's uncertainty about her completed undergraduate major through her self-deprecating thoughts about why students study English—for instance, she demotes the work that English majors do when she thinks that they "were pursuing university degrees doing something no different from what they'd done in first grade: reading stories." Madeleine thinks she might, in some way, be inadequate for being an English major.

Madeleine's reflections illuminate many issues that adolescents immersed in the American system of higher education face, including how some students end up just picking something to study, regardless of true interest or passion, because time and the

institution dictate they need to choose. The passage also sheds light on the pressure for students to be professionally driven in their academic decisions at the university with the beginning of the section stating specific professions students desire to pursue and emphasizing their decisions to major in English in order to realize those ambitions. However, the section posits that outside of the students who have particular careers in mind when choosing to study English, there is “a large contingent of people majoring in English by default.” The phrasing “by default” leaves the reader with a somewhat negative understanding of these students’ decisions; this phrasing implies that these students are not following a particular professional ambition, potentially because they do not yet know what they might like to commit to professionally, and they are also not necessarily following a particular passion. Within the passage, there is also an implication that some of these English majors are not “financially motivated.” Financial concern is also a large factor that plays into pre-professional decision making.

Eugenides also supplies the reader with a portrait of Leonard Bankhead, a character who does have a particular passion and an intended professional aim. However, Leonard, and other students who have clear ideas of what careers they might like to pursue still face anxiety about academic and professional life, such as the desire to uphold an expected role as a capable, intelligent, and motivated college student. Leonard is an extremely smart and charismatic individual, but he suffers from bipolar disorder, which complicates all aspects of his life, including his professional intentions:

> Leonard’s dark moods had always been part of his appeal. It was a relief to hear him enumerate his frailties, his misgivings about the American formula for success. So many people at college were jacked up on ambition,

> possessors of steroidal egos, clever but cutthroat, diligent but insensitive, shiny but dull, that everyone felt compelled to be upbeat, down with the program, all systems firing, when everyone knew, in his or her heart, that this wasn't how they really felt. People doubted themselves and feared the future. They were intimidated, scared, and so talking to Leonard, who was all these things times ten, made people feel less bad about themselves, and less alone. (Eugenides 108)

In this passage, Eugenides describes a common front that people put up during college, knowing that they are supposed to personify ambition or fill an expected role of a determined and capable student; therefore, they hide true, anxious feelings. Both gender and class implications are wrapped up in the description of this expected role. The "American formula for success" relates to economic success and desires for class ascendancy or maintenance of a privileged class position. Eugenides provides a list of somewhat opposing characteristic representations such as "clever but cutthroat, diligent but insensitive, shiny but dull," which offers an image of an intelligent, industrious, bright student who desires to rise above his or her academic competitors, even at the cost of being considered merciless, intense, or heartless, and become most economically successful. The underlying class implications present in this passage also evoke gendered perspectives. The student who embodies this ruthlessly ambitious persona and plays into the "American formula for success" is marked by masculinity, as evident in phrases such as "steroidal egos" and "jacked up." Being "jacked up" on performance enhancing steroids tends to be associated with strength and with images of large muscles, and less literally, with being bigger, better, or exaggerated. Leonard is then directly contrasted with these other

students since he is expressive of “his frailties, his misgivings about the American formula for success.” The word “frailties” is comparatively feminine and associated with weakness.

The sentence describing this image that many people adopt containing the list of somewhat opposing characteristic representations also includes multiple appositives, which has a lengthening effect on the sentence. Because of the style of this sentence, the following sentence that possesses short, simple structure—“[p]eople doubted themselves and feared the future”—is striking and stands out with thematic emphasis. Earlier in the passage, the author qualifies that “so many people at college” convey a certain outward persona, whereas here, Eugenides envelops all people in his claim. In a passage that characterizes Leonard, Eugenides argues that there is a universal feeling of doubt surrounding people’s personal behavior and decisions, and also a universally shared fear surrounding people’s inevitable and necessary thoughts regarding the future. Eugenides posits that this universal fear of the future is true, or uninhibited, real feeling. He states that the fearless, ambitious front that so many college students put on is not actually indicative of how they truly feel. When he writes, “when everyone knew, in his or her heart,” he brings up the concept of knowledge of the intrinsic truth with regards to internal fears and anxieties about the future. Eugenides attends to another situation when societal expectations, in this case, both classed and gendered expectations, can cause tension and amplify anxieties; some adolescents wish to fill the expected role of an ambitious, talented, and confident student, but in doing so, eclipse and ignore their true, important feelings of loneliness and anxiety, which need attention.

When other people hear Leonard speak of his reservations and issues with “the American formula for success,” they feel a sense of relief, although they are most likely

integrated into the formulaic schema. There is a relieving aspect of communally acknowledging the problems with the American system of progression from higher education straight into idealistically uncomplicated professional life; potentially conversing about the problems faced during such experience is one way for young people to grapple with these anxieties. The fact remains, however, that even with such communal conversations regarding “misgivings about the American formula for success,” a pervasive sense of solitude and loneliness exists because of characters’ individualistic academic behavior and career decisions, highlighted through the last three words of this passage. Concepts of alienation and loneliness in adolescent literature are commonly connected with the long-standing theme of identity formation and an individual’s quest to determine a unique self-concept. In this text, anxieties about career and the pre-professional world are part of the reason for this loneliness, and part of the reason that some students do not feel comfortable expressing that loneliness since they might feel as though they have to fulfill the socially expected role of a strong, capable college student.

Eugenides’s depiction of characters’ feelings of inadequacy and their obsession with understanding how pre-professional decisions affect one’s future and sense of self seem to display realistic emotions spawned out of the experience of higher education in America. Readers immersed in systems of higher education may identify and feel empathetic with the ways that these characters struggle with such issues. This text can serve as a means for readers to recognize feelings that they might possess and not even be able to express for themselves, and if they do relate, some comfort could be elicited in understanding that they are not alone in their feelings. Although the text might not explicitly offer ways to remedy and soothe the damaging anxiety evoked from the experiences of undergraduate life,

readers may speculate about alternative ways to cope or engage with their own professional anxieties because of the presentations of how the characters address their issues. Furthermore, the fact that the text does not explicitly impart ways to remedy career anxieties speaks to the reality that these anxieties are serious and difficult to deal with. The section in which Madeleine contemplates choosing her major and debates the correctness of her choice provides readers with questions of uncertainty, self-doubt, and regret; although the system of higher education might seem as though it dictates when some individuals must make a decision of what to study that affects the course of their future career, it is important for individuals to feel as though they can make choices of their own. Regret is a feeling that alerts one to evaluate decisions, which is a necessary activity to perform, and, changing one's professional course is not an easy thing to do, but in many cases, it is possible.

For Madeleine, the post-undergraduate decisions she must make are further complicated by expectations from her parents. Whereas *The Giver* provides an image of parental involvement in career decisions based on the adolescent figure's desire to elicit pride from the parental figures, *The Marriage Plot* brings up the idea that even when one does elicit pride from parental figures, one might not possess a sense of pride in oneself. Eugenides depicts a situation where the parental figures take ownership of the adolescent figure's academic or pre-professional achievements. Still focusing on the morning of Madeleine's graduation, Eugenides writes:

> That Alton and Phyllida had driven up from New Jersey to see her graduate, that what they were here to celebrate today wasn't only her achievement but their own as parents, had nothing wrong or unexpected about it. The

> problem was that Madeleine, for the first time in her life, wanted no part of it. She wasn't proud of herself. She was in no mood to celebrate. She'd lost faith in the significance of the day and what the day represented. (Eugenides 5)

Her pervasive sense of loss about her college experience and her ambition or pride in her accomplishments suggests that Madeleine feels effaced. This despair is highlighted through the contrasting celebratory mood of her parents, which Eugenides acknowledges is not intrinsically a bad thing; however, her parents take ownership of Madeleine's own academic achievements, which can convolute the positive ways that those achievements may speak to Madeleine's individual identity. The passage indicates that prior to this moment, Madeleine was proud of herself and her academic progress since the author includes the phrase "for the first time in her life." However, she loses her sense of pride in herself and her concept of the significance of graduating yet continues until she accomplishes that goal. This parental ownership of Madeleine's achievements creates a potentially dangerous scenario for Madeleine in case her future academic or professional actions might be carried out based on parental expectations and not personal ambition, since she "wanted no part" of the celebration.

Madeleine's parents evoke post-graduation anxieties by connecting professional motivations and aspirations to romantic concerns when her mother introduces additional gendered pressures. Eugenides includes a discussion between Madeleine and her parents regarding her potentially moving in with her boyfriend Leonard: "'Because it's still a bad idea!' Phyllida cried. 'I don't mean the propriety of it. I'm talking about the practical problems. If you move in with Leonard—or any young man—and *he's* the one with the job, then you begin at a disadvantage. What happens if you two don't get along? Where are you

then? You won't have any place to live. Or anything to do'" (Eugenides 12). In this passage, Phyllida expresses a feminist perspective. She begins by dismissing the issue of propriety, which during the 1980s could definitely be part of a discussion about an unmarried couple moving in together. Her parents' worry that Madeleine will experience professional disadvantage from living with her boyfriend overshadows more conventional worries about this situation. For instance, Madeleine's parents seem completely disinterested in voicing any concern regarding her sexual practices or the social implications. However, the fact that Phyllida brings up the issue of propriety, while still dismissing it, points out that appropriateness is still involved in decision-making. Phyllida articulates her concerns about relying on a man and potentially having Madeleine's own desires and goals eclipsed by Leonard's if "*he's* the one with the job." Madeleine's anxieties about her relationship are thus inevitably bound up with her anxieties about her future career decisions, which are further complicated by anxieties about feminine equality and power.

This passage exemplifies how Eugenides presents the complexity of anxieties about career through layered, often conflicting perspectives. Another interpretation of Phyllida's concerns shows that the passage also evokes issues of competition between people in a relationship. Phyllida suggests that career can become a source of competition between Madeleine and her significant other through her use of the word "disadvantage," even though the two of them would be pursuing careers in entirely different fields. Eugenides highlights Phyllida's perspective on the competitive nature of a relationship through the arrangements of questions that Phyllida poses. The issue of Leonard having a job before Madeleine finds one comes before Phyllida's worries about living with a significant other, such as whether or not they will get along in a shared living space. The two sentences in a

row that are questions followed by two short sentences containing a negative and definitive tone help to perpetuate a feeling of anxiety about more than just career decisions; they perpetuate anxious feelings for Madeleine's situation and thinking in general. Phyllida also places incredible weight on the possibility of Madeleine living with Leonard in her last comment, stating that if Madeleine and Leonard do not get along, Madeleine will have nothing else to do. Although Phyllida voices her concern clearly with the intention of looking out for her daughter's well-being through her focus on female equality, her warning suggests an unhealthy and anxiety-evoking way of thinking about the dynamic between Madeleine and Leonard because she prompts ideas about competition.

Since gender norms and expectations are not static and are constantly shifting, sometimes they can conflict, and such conflicts can exacerbate anxieties. Madeleine's relationship with her mother complicates her career decisions by inducing her to think about a feminist perspective; Madeleine's integration of feminist thinking is complicated further in a scene depicting her relationship with her father. While her relationship with her father propels her ambition to achieve success, it also causes her to feel guilty about stepping outside of her conventional role as his daughter. The author writes about Madeleine and her father, Alton's, tennis games together, which serves as an entryway into understanding part of Madeleine's character—she is always striving for success and is anxious about the obstacles that might prevent her from achieving that success, markedly male competition:

> Madeleine had been trying to beat Alton her entire life without success. This was even more infuriating because she was better than he was, at this point. But whenever she took a set from Alton he started intimidating her, acting

> mean, disputing calls, and her game fell apart. Madeleine was worried that there was something paradigmatic in this, that she was destined to go through life being cowed by less capable men. (Eugenides 10)

Madeleine's chief concern that shines through simple and supposedly playful tennis matches with her father is a gendered anxiety regarding an inadequacy when compared to men and their accomplishments. In addition to characterizing Madeleine as someone with deep-seeded internal anxieties, as partially evidenced through Eugenides's word choice "destined," signifying somewhat dramatic tendencies as well as indicating a long term worry, the quote enlightens the reader that Madeleine understands her capabilities and possesses high self-respect and strong ambitions. The author writes, "[S]he was better than he was, at this point," emphasizing that Madeleine is surpassing her parent's abilities and talents, which can arouse an uncomfortable feeling. Madeleine is able to identify that her father acts childish in ways during their games, and she can therefore see him not just as her parent but as a person with undesirable characteristic traits; however, her father's behavior still affects her, causing her to lose. This fact indicates the guilt she feels about emerging from a role as a stereotypical daughter figure. Alton's behavior suggests that he also has difficulty accepting that Madeleine has emerged from a role in his life in which he is dominant and always wins the tennis matches and instead is a young adult woman who is more capable than he is in certain areas of life. Here, Madeleine struggles with her wish to both maintain and break free from the gender dynamic understood in the phrase "daddy's little girl;" she was always able to look up to her father and depend on him, while she also worries that breaking free from this role might embarrass him and affect the relationship she has maintained with him for her whole life. This passage illuminates the

complexity of Madeleine's interrelated career anxieties; her feminist worry about being less capable than men overlaps with her anxiety and frustration about surpassing her father's capacities and changing the nature of her relationship with him.

Eugenides offers another image of an adolescent figure's anxieties about career becoming convoluted and more complex because of the layering of additional challenges, which include dealing with a mental health disorder and trying to step outside of the role of a parent's child. Leonard's financial concerns become conflated with anxieties aroused by his mother who confuses him about the "right" way to act. Much of Leonard's professional motivation rests in financial concern. During the last semester of his senior year, he has a depressive episode and needs to be hospitalized; his health issues thus conflict with his goals and amplify his anxieties about his future career. When speaking with a friend while he is at the hospital, Leonard states, "I've fucked everything up, Ken. I'm not going to graduate on time, with everyone else. If I don't graduate, then they're going to cancel my internship at Pilgrim Lake. I don't have any money, Ken. My parents aren't going to help me. I don't know how I'm going to make it. I'm only twenty-two and I've fucked up my life!" (Eugenides 109). The explicit anxiety and clear frustration that Leonard expresses through cuss words is directly related to financial concern; however, what is more interesting about his confession of panic is how he sees this isolated incident of hospitalization that could potentially conflict with his upcoming internship as entirely encompassing in his life. He views this conflict as the ultimate roadblock for his professional track. When he exclaims "I'm only twenty-two and I've fucked up my life!" he uses the past tense, indicating that he believes the action is complete and he already has ruined every opportunity to come out of his episode in a way that still permits him to attend Pilgrim Lake (the location of his

genetics lab). This section illuminates how career pressures and the financial implications that accompany them can instill a sense of finality and incredible importance in an individual's life. Although this sense of finality and importance might be inflated, Leonard's reaction conveys the immensity of his feelings of failure. Eugenides's image of a character's intense, damaging feelings of failure may resonate with some adolescent readers' actual feelings.

During his time at the hospital, Leonard has a phone conversation with his mother, and this scene gives a different view of parental involvement than previously observed. In *The Giver*, the thread of parental consideration concerning career highlights the adolescent figure's desire to uphold the pinnacle of expected parental pride, and Madeleine's case introduces complex layers of anxieties about gendered norms and expectations. Leonard's conversation with his mother adds layers of challenges for him that exacerbate his career anxieties; Eugenides highlights Leonard's mother's contradictory messages which are confusing for Leonard, ultimately making it more difficult for him to make decisions. While expressing the fact that she is "not swimming in money," Leonard's mother reluctantly offers to help him with his hospital bills, but she states that it is the last time she will financially help him with his illness, augmenting Leonard's monetary anxieties (Eugenides 256). The conversation continues with his mother saying:

> "What do you mean, how? You graduate from college and go find a job like everybody else."
>
> "I'm not going to graduate!" Leonard cried. "I'm taking three incompletes!"

> "Then complete your incompletes. You have to start taking care of yourself, Leonard. You hear me? You're grown-up now and I can't do it. Take your medicine so this doesn't happen again." (Eugenides 257)

The notion that "everybody else" simply goes out and finds a job after graduating puts pressure on Leonard that if he does not, or is not able to find occupation after college, he is somehow outside of the norm. This creates anxiety from a feeling of "otherness," which can be detrimental to his self-concept, especially during a time when he is already feeling extremely anxious because of his hospitalization that prevents him from graduating with those in his class. Profession, in this passage, is depicted as a means of fitting into societal conceptions of what people should pursue and achieve after graduation, leveling out ideas of individualism. Leonard's mother not only augments his anxiety about conforming to social norms, but she makes it difficult for him to understand how to act and make decisions. In this section, Leonard's mother employs a commanding and therefore prototypical parental tone while the content of her statements contradicts that tone. Her response consists first of a command, "Then complete your incompletes," followed by a sentence ending in a specific address, using Leonard's name, typical of a maternal tone, then followed by a rhetorical question, a quintessential parental manner of speaking—"You hear me?" Simultaneously, she is stating that he is "grown-up now" and should be able to "parent" himself, falsely implying that once one enters adulthood, one does not need external assistance anymore. Eugenides suffuses irony into the situation when he writes that the mother undermines her own statement that Leonard is grown-up juxtaposed with yet another command that involves a quintessential parental tone: "Take your medicine." Her tone and the content of her statements send mixed messages, ultimately confusing

Leonard instead of helping him deal with his anxieties. Similar to how Madeleine struggles with reconciling wanting to be grown-up and considered independent and capable but not entirely wishing to break away from her preexisting, comfortable role as a daughter figure for fear of embarrassing her father, Leonard struggles because he is told that he is grown-up while simultaneously cast in the role of a child.

This text again delivers a situation that many adolescents might identify with. Successfully transitioning from the role of a child to the role of an adult comes with many challenges, and even when parents or other adults attempt to help an adolescent with his or her struggle to bridge this gap and realize this transition, many times such efforts to help add confusion and anxiety to the situation. One take-away that readers might gain from recognizing the struggles of this situation is that although other people might be adding stresses to a situation where one is reconciling maintaining a role as a child and striving to occupy a role as an adult, many times those people's intentions are simply to help. The text portrays adult figures who do not recognize the best way to aid in easing the adolescent figure's anxiety; the text not only expresses for young readers how adults are just people who do not always know the best way to handle difficult situations, but it also might enlighten adult readers to the ways in which they can intensify adolescents' anxieties even when their intentions are venerable.

Eugenides also offers a scene depicting shared professional anxieties about post-graduate life during a conversation between Mitchell, the third protagonist, and Madeleine on graduation day, with graduation serving as an environment that augments the characters' anxieties about their futures; and, Eugenides again complicates these shared

professional anxieties by attending to how gender expectations and norms for men, mostly regarding class, amplify Mitchell's professional anxieties. Eugenides writes:

> Without lifting her cheek from the table, Madeleine said in a pitiful voice, "I'm homeless. I'm graduating from college and I'm a homeless person."
>
> "Yeah, sure."
>
> "I am!" Madeleine insisted. "First I was supposed to move to New York with Abby and Olivia. Then it looked like I was moving to the Cape, though, so I told them to get another roommate. And now I'm *not* moving to the Cape and I have nowhere to go. My mother wants me to move back home but I'd rather kill myself."
>
> "I'm moving back home for the summer," Mitchell said. "To *Detroit*. At least you're near New York." (Eugenides 18)

This passage highlights the aforementioned concerns addressed by Cart that returning to their parents' homes can seem denigrating to some young people, and this phenomenon is even more prevalent now than in the 1980s. Madeleine cannot even lift her head from the table to embody any aspect of comfort or contentment in proclaiming her potential need to move back in with her parents; Eugenides even describes her proclamation of being homeless as deserving of or arousing pity. The anxieties surrounding this next step are evident in Madeleine's exaggerated and dramatic language that she would rather kill herself than move back home. Eugenides's use of italics in naming the location of Mitchell's parents' house suggests that Mitchell shares Madeleine's discomfort in needing to move back home during his immediate post-graduate life, but moreover, his hometown is characterized by economic hard times and unemployment. The fact that Mitchel is

returning to Detroit stirs anxieties stemming from ideas of fundamental gender norms and expectations which prescribe that men are supposed to be breadwinners and find a career that is financially supportive and successful. These gender expectations are highlighted when compared with Madeleine who speaks of either living in the Cape or New York, both of which are wealthy areas bringing to light discrepancies in class. The class discrepancy highlights further that the breadwinner gender expectations for Mitchell are also apparent since Madeleine has been a long-term love interest for him, and yet he is in a worse financial situation than her, stirring anxiety. Here, Madeleine and Mitchell unite in their anxieties about not having a job or secure place to move, ultimately forcing the characters to revert back to their pre-college living situations; however, long-standing gender expectations and norms heighten the anxieties that Mitchell experiences.

Through Mitchell's character, Eugenides provides one particular presentation of how to deal with such conventional expectations. Mitchell's way of interacting with conventional post-graduate expectations and his own uncertainty about the future is through his decision to reject the necessary professional decisions that he must eventually face by taking a temporary escapist tactic to travel through India and parts of Europe. In presenting Mitchell's decision to travel to India after graduation, Eugenides writes:

> Mitchell and Larry had decided to go to India one night after watching a Satyajit Ray film. They hadn't been entirely serious at the time. From then on, however, whenever anybody asked what they were doing after graduation, Mitchell and Larry replied, "We're going to India!" Reaction among their friends was universally positive. No one could come up with a reason why they shouldn't go to India. (Eugenides 100)

The author posits the ridiculousness and triviality of the method by which Mitchell had come to formulate his travel plans while existing in a state of uncertainty about what comes after graduation since Mitchell and Larry developed their plan after viewing a film. The "why not?" philosophy that Mitchell employs regarding his post-graduate life does not reduce the feeling of anxiety surrounding the necessary decision making considering career, however; the reader can perceive Mitchell's departure from a more conventional track from higher education into either a world of academia or a particular profession as a means of prolonging a liminal state between the "real world" and university life. During his time on his trip, Mitchell is still faced with the same questions of uncertainty concerning his future that he was facing directly out of college. However, some of the experiences he undertakes while away on his trip might apprise new perspectives on how he will choose to continue his professional track. Some individuals need more time than others to work out what they might like to pursue professionally, and some individuals need to immerse themselves in new experiences in order to realize their desires.

Adolescent anxieties about career are bound to exist. This crossover text conveys how expectations and norms, especially when multiple expectations and norms are present and conflicting, can add to preexisting anxieties. *The Marriage Plot* provides multiple representations of how characters handle and manage these layers of complications that surface from the tension aroused from conflicting expectations and norms. Readers can absorb the ways in which these characters approach managing conflicting expectations and apply their newfound knowledge to their own situations in varying ways, such as simply understanding that these expectations exist and can complicate their feelings and decisions. Alternatively, readers might decide to accept some of the expectations and

norms present for themselves and qualify others, or they might refuse to give credence to some expectations and norms that they do not feel they need to address or fulfill. However readers may respond, this text illuminates the variance of individuals' situations, and thus, the variance of techniques for handling those situations.

## Conclusion

The transitional time between childhood and adulthood is when young people begin their search for understanding who they are and who they might like to be. A quest to establish a personal value system and self-concept is bound to be riddled with struggles and questions that are difficult to face and difficult to answer. These difficulties create anxieties pertaining to many different facets of life. Literature about this transitional time portrays how these struggles and anxieties can affect adolescents' lives. The critical conversation surrounding American adolescent literature has been consistently focused on understanding the adolescent's quest for establishing identity and the anxieties that coincide with that quest. What is missing from this critical conversation is particular analysis of career anxiety and how it affects and complicates adolescents' perceptions of self. Focusing on contemporary young adult literature, this thesis has explored adolescent anxieties about career and career decisions that affect adolescents' conceptions of self.

My first chapter explores career anxiety related to different conceptions of identity formation. Lowry's *The Giver* argues for the necessity of individual choice and therefore for establishing a solid individual identity even though making choices, markedly career choices, can be extremely difficult and anxiety-evoking. Choice comes with responsibilities and challenges, but those challenges are part of being human. Collins's works also address the importance of individuality. In the face of oppression and required conformity to a totalitarian regime, individual agency is necessary for initiating social change. And because of individual choices, people are able to join together to realize a shared goal and form a collective identity necessary for rebellion. Analyzing these texts together proves to be a useful way to contemplate the struggle that many adolescents face with reconciling both

the desire to develop unique individuality and to feel a sense of belonging to a group. This struggle is strikingly apparent when considering professional concerns; adolescents must find a professional field and feel a sense of belonging within it while they can also demonstrate their individual interests and talents. My second chapter elucidates how professional anxieties are augmented because of societal expectations and norms relating to gender and class issues. Since societal expectations are constantly evolving, sometimes they can conflict, thus causing further anxiety exacerbation. My analysis of Eugenides's text provides different depictions of ways of dealing with these ubiquitous societal expectations, which could be useful for readers to engage with.

Anxieties, and anxieties about career specifically, can be potentially damaging to the way one interacts with the world and to one's self-esteem. It is important for young adults who experience professional anxieties to find outlets that aid them in grappling with and making meaning of their concerns. Because young adult literature has begun to address concerns about career anxiety, this thesis has shown that literature can serve as one potential channel for adolescents to engage with such anxieties and develop new ideas or strategies for addressing, understanding, and dealing with their own professional anxieties.

Adolescent literature that addresses career anxiety can also aid adult readers interested in helping adolescents who are facing these anxieties. Adults working within school systems like educators, administrators, or counselors along with social workers or parents might be able to provide texts to adolescent readers as a resource to assist them in their endeavor to overcome and handle their career anxieties. Additionally, literature can help adult readers better understand what adolescent career anxiety can look like and the different ways it can manifest. Young adult literature also depicts adults and the ways in

which they can often exacerbate adolescent career anxieties even when they have the adolescent's best interests in mind. Depictions of these adult figures might provide insight to adult readers about ways to eliminate some of the added pressures on adolescents and thereby reduce some of their professional anxieties.

As I step back from my analysis, I realize that this thesis unearths the ways that anxieties are always layered with intersecting and overlapping challenges. The texts analyzed in this thesis only skim the surface of some of the different manifestations of career anxiety such as when it is layered with issues concerning class or gender. I did not address professional anxieties bound up with issues concerning sexuality or race, but I now recognize that young adult texts that address how professional anxieties become intertwined with issues of race and sexuality merit further research.

When I began thinking about ways to explore career anxiety for my thesis, I was originally interested in the different ways it can manifest in a higher education setting. Particularly, I was invested in understanding if career anxiety plays a significant role in creating an implicit value system or hierarchy for choosing different areas of study for students. For instance, a student might choose to major in something for job security and put aside a passion for some other major that is less financially and socially valued. Another possibility for further research would be to explore such questions by interviewing students, and the understanding of career anxiety gained from this research would relate to the reality of professional concerns in a different way than analyses of literary texts.

I also believe deeper understanding of career anxiety could be gained from a project that actually engages with young adult readers. As I acknowledged in my introduction, my speculations about the various ways that young adult fiction might be useful to readers are

limited since those speculations only come from my perspective. Interviewing adolescent readers about career anxiety would produce a range of perspectives from readers with vast experiences and thus convey the complexity of this issue.

Recalling Lupita Nyong'o's speech from the 2014 Massachusetts Conference for Women provided in the introduction, I am still contemplating the pervasive nature of the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?," and how it implicitly refers to self-definition through career decisions. People define themselves by many things; this is why the critical field surrounding American adolescent fiction has been preoccupied with the different ways that identity formation can appear in texts. But the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is frequently asked for important reasons. Many people identify with their careers, and rightfully so. Critical analysis of literary texts that focus on anxieties that arise from contemplating career decisions is necessary for keeping up with the ever-changing concerns of the adolescent population.

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