

WHY KATNISS CHOOSES PEETA

Looking at Love through a Stoic Lens

Abigail E. Myers

In the Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss Everdeen is flung, unexpectedly and unwillingly, into the world of romantic love. Before her participation in the Hunger Games, *love* to Katniss means protecting her mother and her sister. Love is also, perhaps, the partnership she shares with Gale Hawthorne, with its occasional undercurrents of jealousy, tenderness, and need. But Peeta Mellark's schemes force Katniss to consider the true nature of romantic love for the first time and to make a choice that will set the course for her life after the Mockingjay revolution.

Katniss's eventual decision to partner romantically with Peeta may seem decidedly unromantic. Let's not forget that by the time Peeta reenters Katniss's life in *Mockingjay*, he has been brainwashed by the Capitol to detest her, so much so that he attempts to kill her every chance he gets. Katniss could have chosen Gale, her childhood best friend and comrade in arms during the revolution, who never tried to kill her, which seems

like a decided plus in a relationship. Yet she chooses Peeta. Why is that? "Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can't survive without," Gale remarks, reducing her choice and its underlying emotions to a purely pragmatic calculation.¹ But the philosophers of Stoicism can help us to understand that Katniss's choice is, in fact, based on something much nobler than base utility. Her choice to be with Peeta isn't just a practical one; it's a Stoic one.

What Could Katniss Learn, Sitting on Her Porch?

Stoicism, a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium (334–262 BCE), advocates moral goodness, living in the present, controlling one's desires, and not being attached to things you can't control. The name of the movement comes from the stoa, or porch, in Athens where the members of the movement originally gathered and lectured. Some of the best known Stoic philosophers, besides Zeno, were Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), Epictetus (55–135), and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180).²

Like the other ancient Greek philosophers, the Stoics believed that human unhappiness is rooted in wanting anything other than what's essential for the development of your true self. Clearly, this philosophy would be a hard sell in the Capitol, where most people seem to believe that happiness comes from excessive indulgence in food, drink, fashion, and entertainment. Imagine trying to explain to them that they would be far happier if they weren't gorging themselves at feasts, throwing up, and then gorging themselves some more. Imagine trying to tell them that what they really need is to focus on cultivating their true selves and to wean themselves from all of those other luxurious pursuits.

The Stoics took a very uncomplicated view of what should be pursued and what should be shunned. The only truly bad

thing, according to Zeno, is moral evil, just as the only truly good thing is moral goodness. Everything else that people regard as good and desirable, such as love, money, power, and pleasure, should be regarded with indifference, and so should things such as poverty and illness, which people typically regard as bad.

At this point, you could be excused for wanting to suggest politely that perhaps the Stoics were a tiny bit crazy. Perhaps the citizens of the Capitol go a bit overboard in their pursuit of certain pleasures, but who could really believe that a terminal illness isn't necessarily bad? Or that romantic love, for that matter, is anything but blissfully wonderful? But a more hard-eyed realist might already see where the Stoics were going with this.

Think of Plutarch Heavensbee, who turns his back on the wealth and prestige of being a prominent man in the Capitol, risks everything to do the right thing, and joins the rebellion. The Stoics would applaud his choice, because he pursued what he knew to be morally good and was indifferent to the lure of wealth. Likewise, what if being diagnosed with a terminal illness inspires a man to give away his fortune and spend his remaining days enjoying the company of his friends and family? The Stoics would commend his courage and endorse the way he's reordered his moral priorities. In cases like these, what's usually assumed to be good could be a roadblock to doing the right thing, and a situation that might otherwise be tragically painful may create an opportunity to do great good.

What truly matters is whether one's character is morally good or evil, and this doesn't depend on wealth or good fortune or anything but our own choices. Consider, for example, Katniss's sister, Prim, who blossoms from a shy, though kind and gentle, little girl into an efficient and tireless caretaker in *Mockingjay*. Prim's tragically short existence reminds us that it's possible to live a morally good life even while surrounded by otherwise terrible circumstances.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of moral character, the Stoics focused on living in the present. Seneca, for example, wrote an essay titled "On the Shortness of Life," in which he really wanted to drive the point home that life is short—a fact that Prim's premature death helps to underscore. That's all the more reason to stop fretting about the future and live for today, while we still can.

Consider Seneca's response to the optimistic belief of a civil servant that he will be able to retire soon and then live his life as he pleases. Seneca's words are no less true today than they were when written two thousand years ago:

What guarantee do you have that your life will be any longer? Who will allow this time to pass as you prescribe? Are you not ashamed to reserve for yourself just the remnants of life and to mark down for a healthy mindset only the time that cannot be used for any other purpose? How late it is to begin living only when one must stop! What foolish forgetfulness of mortality to put off well-considered plans to one's fiftieth and sixtieth year, and to want to begin life at a point that few have reached!³

Sad to say, even today billions of people do not live to those milestones—not even in the rich countries of the developed world, to say nothing of the war-torn and famine-ravaged countries where death at a young age is, for many, a foregone conclusion. It's certainly true in the world of the Hunger Games, where the very young are chosen to be slaughtered and the residents of poor districts like District 12 rarely live to a ripe old age.

The final important tenet of the Stoics for us to examine is nonattachment. Don't become attached to anything or anyone, the Stoics said; seek to master your desires rather than trying to master things that lie outside your control. Probably the most expert thinker on nonattachment among the Stoics

was Epictetus, who was born a slave but whose wisdom was collected by a loyal pupil in a work known as *The Enchiridion*, or "Handbook."

The Enchiridion begins rather bluntly: "Some things are within our control and others are not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions."⁴ This statement is pretty easy to understand and maybe even somewhat comforting. But nonattachment is where Stoicism gets a little uncomfortable for some people. Epictetus also advised the following: "With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed."⁵

Fine advice, even for contemporary life. Replace *ceramic cup* with *car*, *Nikes*, or *iPhone*, and you've pretty much got the gist of it. But then Epictetus writes, "If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either one of them dies."⁶

Marcus Aurelius Should Be President of Panem

I bet that you're starting to squirm. You may be thinking that you would most definitely be disturbed if your spouse died—unless perhaps he or she has been brainwashed by a creepy totalitarian government to kill you. Even then, the death of someone you once loved might still be pretty disturbing. Prim's death disturbs Katniss to the point that she turns her back on Gale once and for all. And if you have a child, *disturbed* does not even begin to describe how you'd feel if he or she died.

Don't feel bad; a lot of people don't make it very far with Stoicism. That's why it's good for us to turn now to Marcus Aurelius. As an emperor and a man of politics, Marcus Aurelius may not seem like an ideal candidate for a life of nonattachment—How's this for a disastrous campaign slogan: "I run on a platform of nonattachment"?—yet he turned Stoicism into an eminently practical philosophy that has been useful to countless people for nearly two millennia.

Marcus Aurelius gained a well-deserved reputation as one of the good emperors of Rome. He was fundamentally different from someone like President Snow, since he was far more focused on making himself a better person than on bending his subjects to his will. Most of what we know of Marcus Aurelius today comes from the collection of his thoughts known as the *Meditations*, a title perhaps better translated from the Greek as "To Himself." The latter translation reminds us that Marcus Aurelius intended the *Meditations* not as teachings to the masses but as touchstones to keep him aware of the kind of life he wanted to live.

The *Meditations* transmit advice for living that's accessible and immediately applicable to us today while also hewing pretty closely to traditional Stoic philosophy. On the subject of keeping it simple, he sounds a lot like Zeno: "Just because you've given up on becoming a great logician or a student of physics, don't despair of being free, modest, unselfish, and obedient to the will of God."⁷

Marcus Aurelius, like Seneca, understood the shortness of life: "As if you were on the road to death, despise the flesh for its blood and bones. . . . Concentrate on the mind, your ruler: you are old; it's time to stop your mind acting like a slave, pulled puppet-like by the strings of your savage desires."⁸ As for nonattachment to material objects and wealth, à la Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius nailed that, too: "Accept prosperity without pride, and always be ready to let it go."⁹

Marcus Aurelius might be a slightly easier “Stoic for beginners,” especially in his advice about relations with other people. Concerning the “virtues of family and friends,” he wrote, “When you want to cheer yourself up, think of the good qualities of those you live with. . . . For nothing gives us as much pleasure as seeing the examples of the virtues presented in abundance by those who live among us. Therefore always keep them near at hand.”¹⁰ He also spoke of a connection among all living things: “Since all created things are joined together in harmony, so all phenomena coming into existence show not just succession but a wonderful organic connection.”¹¹ In these and other passages, he comes off as somewhat less cold and perhaps more relatable than Epictetus.¹²

We see in Marcus Aurelius’s teachings a way of looking at the world that differs fundamentally from the outlook of the citizens of the Capitol and President Snow. On the one hand, Marcus Aurelius advocates moderation, nonattachment, and affirmation of the relationships that bind us to our fellow human beings and other living creatures. On the other hand, the culture of the Capitol encourages self-indulgence, greed, and selfishness. Compared to the wickedness and excess of the Capitol, Stoicism seems very wise indeed.

Katniss the Stoic?

Let’s return now to our heroine, Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire. Does her life exemplify any of the tenets of Stoicism we’ve looked at here? There’s some good evidence in the Hunger Games trilogy to suggest that Katniss has something of the Stoic about her, even if she probably never sat on a porch in her life.

Katniss, for example, has a strong moral code, a sturdy sense of right and wrong, even if her participation in the Hunger Games (particularly in their 74th iteration) makes living by that code difficult, if not impossible, at times. At the core of her

morality is steadfast loyalty to her family. Ever since her father’s death, she has worked to keep her mother and her sister alive and safe. Even during the Hunger Games, their welfare is her overriding consideration, more important than even her own survival.

It’s painfully obvious as well that Katniss lives with a much fuller appreciation of the shortness of life than most teenage girls. The prospect of an early death is a fact of life for all of the children in the districts of Panem as they wait to see if they will be chosen for the Hunger Games and face the possibility of starvation should their parents become unable to provide for them. Katniss is reminded of this reality each year when she signs up for tesserae, extra entries to the Hunger Games that bring her family a small additional ration of food, knowing that she’s increasing her likelihood of being chosen for the Games. Both Katniss’s and Gale’s fathers were killed in mining accidents that are common in District 12, another constant reminder of the precarious nature of life. It’s perhaps living in the shadow of death that allows Katniss to take pleasure in the small moments of joy in her pre-Hunger Games life, such as hunting with Gale or watching Prim care for her goat.

We also learn early that Katniss isn’t very concerned about material comforts. In a world where basic survival is a challenge, Katniss treasures only a few small things, such as her father’s hunting jacket and her mother’s book of home medical remedies. She views everything else among her possessions as mere means to ends, not at all precious in themselves. Consider her lack of pleasure in the sumptuous fashions and furnishings the Capitol provides to her as a contestant in the Hunger Games. She does enjoy the food, but only because she isn’t used to eating so well and needs it to bolster her strength. She loves Cinna’s costumes, but only because they remind her of Cinna’s belief in her.

When we consider her attachments to other people, however, Katniss ceases to look like a Stoic. Indeed, many of her

most momentous—and, from a Stoic perspective, perhaps even ill-considered—decisions stem from her powerful attachments to others. Expressing her grief at the death of Rue, she makes herself a target of the Capitol in the Games. She comes to appreciate Peeta's loyalty to her and even starts to believe that he might love her as he says he does. She's totally unwilling to kill him, preferring to commit a joint suicide rather than have him die at her hand, even though she knows that killing him would allow her to go home to her mother and her sister. And, in the end, it's her desperate love for her sister that turns her away from Gale, her best friend and partner in so many things, and delivers her into the arms of Peeta. Katniss Everdeen a model of nonattachment to other people? Not so much.

Why Katniss Chooses Peeta

Katniss eventually chooses Peeta as her romantic partner, to the surprise—and perhaps also the disappointment—of some readers of the Hunger Games trilogy. Was he the better choice? No one can fault his extraordinary loyalty to Katniss throughout *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, and even his anger and cruelty in *Mockingjay* are the result not of a true change of heart but of merciless torture and brainwashing by the Capitol. Still, the Peeta with whom Katniss is left at the end of *Mockingjay* is not the entirely earnest and trustworthy young man she knew in the previous books.

Gale, in contrast, though complicit in Prim's death, has known Katniss longer, been through more with her, helped her family, and has a similar upbringing, which gives him insight into how she experiences life. There are many good reasons for Katniss to choose Gale.

But she doesn't, perhaps because by the end of *Mockingjay* Katniss really is a Stoic. By choosing Peeta, she forgives him for behavior over which he had no control. She chooses him despite her ambivalence about his feelings toward her during their time

in the Hunger Games. She chooses him knowing that in some way he will always be a bit broken because of what the Capitol did to him, accepting him for what he is rather than what she might wish he were.

Finally, she chooses him because the alternative, choosing Gale, would mean a betrayal of one of her highest values: the preservation of innocent life. For Katniss, choosing Gale would be an implicit endorsement of his plot with Coin that killed her sister and other innocent young people. That's a choice she cannot abide. Like Zeno, she has a robust sense of what's morally right, and she won't betray it, even for the sake of a friendship or a romantic love that many other people might call good.

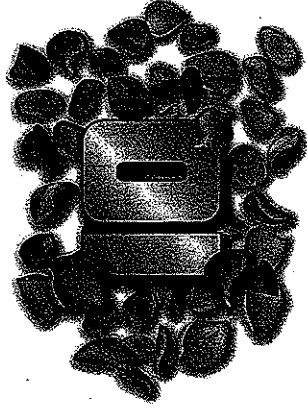
"An act that accords with Nature also accords with Reason," Marcus Aurelius wrote near the end of his *Meditations*.¹³ Because Katniss remains true to her nature by choosing Peeta, her choice makes sense, rationally and morally. Given everything we know about her, it's the only choice that does make sense. Gale is correct when he says that Katniss would choose the one who would best help her to survive—but it's not just physically. Peeta helps her to survive as herself, with her values intact.

At the end of *Mockingjay*, Katniss can finally contemplate a life that goes beyond mere physical survival. At last, after her ordeals in the arena and in District 13, she has an opportunity to live again in fidelity to her highest values. She chooses Peeta in order to make the most of that opportunity. Her choice may seem unromantic, but the only kind of romantic love that Katniss can imagine is one that allows her to stay true to herself. She has chosen, then, very much like a true Stoic.

NOTES

1. Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 329.
2. For more on Stoicism and Seneca in particular, see chapter 18, "All of This Is Wrong: Why One of Rome's Greatest Thinkers Would Have Despised the Capitol."
3. John Davis, ed., *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143.

4. Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (Los Angeles: Bukamerica, 2007), 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Mark Forstater, *The Spiritual Teachings of Marcus Aurelius* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 121.
8. *Ibid.*, 141.
9. *Ibid.*, 100.
10. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
11. *Ibid.*, 229.
12. Epictetus wasn't totally cold and devoid of emotion, however. For example, quite late in his life, he adopted an abandoned infant and married a woman to help him take care of the baby.
13. Forstater, *The Spiritual Teachings of Marcus Aurelius*, 228.



“SHE HAS NO IDEA. THE EFFECT SHE CAN HAVE.”

Katniss and the Politics of Gender

Jessica Miller

When we first meet Katniss Everdeen, she's just waking up on the day of the reaping, when two children in her district will be chosen by lottery to participate in the Hunger Games. The Hunger Games are a public fight to the death between twenty-four contestants, one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts of Panem. But Katniss isn't thinking about the reaping just now. She has to provide food for her family. She dons hunting boots, trousers, and a shirt. She retrieves her contraband bow and arrow from their hiding spot and heads into the woods to hunt, which is illegal in her district. Except for the reference to her “long dark braid” (which she tucks into a cap) there's nothing to suggest that Katniss is a girl.

Katniss's clothing, actions, and attitude reveal that she's not your stereotypical teenage girl. Far from being boy crazy, she insists that “there has never been anything romantic between Gale and me,” despite his good looks, charm, and obvious interest in her.¹ And she declares that she will never have children,