

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this paper was to analyze the appearance of feminism throughout The Hunger Games, especially when pertaining to the lead female character of Katniss Everdeen. The thesis of this paper is that, while characteristics of all three “waves” of feminism were present within the motion picture, third-wave feminism prevailed as most apparent.*

## INTRODUCTION

The golden days of Scarlett O’Hara are long past. References of never being hungry again—aimed at the young-adult generation—fall on deaf ears. The man-eating, hard-working female protagonist had fallen completely off the cinematographic map—until 2012, that is. Originally a bestselling trilogy series by Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* motion picture was released on March 12, 2012. Juxtaposed to its pop-culture counterpart, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* endorsed a story line that was predominately plot-centered and had romantic sub-plots (*Twilight* contained the opposite). However, the true enigma in *The Hunger Games* was not its plot, it was its protagonist: the bitter but never brutal, lovely yet lethal, Katniss Everdeen. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the appearance of feminism throughout *The Hunger Games*, especially when pertaining to Everdeen. The thesis of this paper is that, while characteristics of all three “waves” of feminism were present within the motion picture, third-wave feminism prevailed as most apparent. This study began with a close examination of the cinematic version of *The Hunger Games* and feminism’s history within the United States to date; it then delved into the inter-lapping sections of the two and analyzed the implications of said intersections; it concluded that feminism is evident within *The Hunger Games*, with third-wave characteristics being most prevalent in the film’s ideologies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OF FEMINISM

The term “feminism” has become misconstrued and negatively associated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “Essential feminism suggests anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual, feminist woman—hate pornography, unilaterally decry the objectification of women,

don't cater to the male gaze, hate men, hate sex, focus on career, don't shave" (Gay, 2012). The source of this strife can be found within feminism's constantly shifting foundation; as the world evolves, so do the problems that women face. What women once picketed and protested for is now a modern day convenience. Feminism, "a movement whose primary purpose is to achieve equality, in all realms, between men and women [is being ridiculed because] articles make it seem like there is, in fact, a right way to be a woman and a wrong way to be a woman. And the standard appears to be ever changing and unachievable" (Gay, 2012). This evolution would not be an issue were it not for the fact that "our culture is deeply committed to clearly demarcated sex differences, called masculine and feminine, that revolve on first, a complex gaze-apparatus; and second, dominance-submission patterns" (Kaplan in Johnson, 2009). In lieu of this evolution, feminism is now broken into three distinctive "waves."

First-wave feminism "refers to a period of feminist activity during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth century throughout the world, particularly in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands and United States. It focused on *de jure* (officially mandated) inequalities, primarily on gaining women's suffrage (the right to vote) ("First-wave feminism," 2013). Within the United States, first-wave feminism can be seen as women attempting to gain the *same* rights as men. Feminists "were more moderate and conservative than radical or revolutionary," and yet they advocated for shared ownership of children, allowing them to have a say in their children's wills, wages, and granting them the right to inherit property ("First-wave feminism," 2013). Feminism, being traced back to Christine de Pizan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, concluded its first "wave" in 1920 with the addition of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution—granting women the right to vote (McHugh, 2009).

Second-wave feminism contains many aspects of first-wave feminism; however, second-wave feminism also includes the aspiration for distinctively *female-only* rights. Advocacy for abortion, marital rape laws, against the objectification of the female body, and battered women's rights was seen predominately within this "wave." Beginning in the 1960s, "in the United States the movement was initially called the Women's Liberation Movement and lasted through the early 1980s" (Second-wave feminism," 2013). "Molly Haskell in *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 'suggests that the typical female character of the sixties and seventies films is 'a mail-order cover girl: regular featured, [with an] inability to convey any emotion beyond shock or embarrassment and an inarticulateness that was meant to prove her "sincerity" (Johnson, 2009). Widely credited for starting second-wave feminism is Betty Friedan's 1963 bestselling book, *The Feminine Mystique*—in which she "explicitly objected to the mainstream media image of women, stating that placing women at home limited their possibilities, and wasted talent and potential. The perfect nuclear family image depicted and strongly marketed at the time, she wrote, did not reflect happiness and was rather degrading to women" (Epstein, 1988).

Third-wave feminism within the United States "is a term identified with several diverse strains of feminist activity and study, whose exact boundaries in historiography of feminism are a subject of debate, but are often marked as beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to the present" ("Third-wave feminism," 2013). Third-wave feminism (also often referred to as post-feminism) encompasses a much broader variety of women including "many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds," juxtaposed to the upper-middle-class white women of which the second-wave predominately served (Tong, 2009). Third-wave feminism "ideology focuses on a more post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality" (Third-wave feminism," 2013). Sexuality, as interpreted by the third-wave, has been embraced as a natural part

of life; and even more than that, it is something that should be celebrated as a source of empowerment and a positive aspect of life (“Third-wave feminism,” 2013).

Third-wave feminism has expanded women’s sexual freedom and “has thrust women into a kind of ‘double jeopardy,’ in which they are exposed to what they perceive as the demands of the feminist world—to achieve in the public realm—even as more traditional demands on women—to shoulder the bulk of work in the family, to present themselves as desirable sex objects—remain in place” (Press, 2011). It is with this new sexual freedom and pressure that the term “feminist” has acquired negative connotations. Women avoid the label “feminist,” while men classify those under the category as “undesirable;” “all feminists are angry instead of passionate” (Gay, 2012). The third “wave” of feminism, more so than the prior two, emulates the complexity of a women’s journey through life and recognizes the fluidity of womanhood and its many forms —whether she be white or of color, religious or atheist, homosexual or heterosexual—and accepts that the term “feminist” is equivalent to “being forced into a box that cannot quite accommodate a woman properly” (Gay, 2012).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE HUNGER GAMES**

“[A] book that reads like crack on paper, *The Hunger Games* is a complicated story, with many layers and lots of sharply drawn characters” (Pollitt, 2012). Suzanne Collin’s first book in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, aptly titled *The Hunger Games*, was released by Scholastic Press on September 14, 2008. Within two years, the book sold over 800,000 copies, won the California Young Reader Medal, and was named one of *Publishers Weekly*’s “Best Books of the Year” (“*The Hunger Games*,” 2013). Following the release of the two other books in the trilogy

(*Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*), in 2012, Collins co-wrote and co-directed the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* (“*The Hunger Games*,” 2013).

Within Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia’s online page “*The Hunger Games* (film),” summarized the movie as follows:

*The Hunger Games* is a 2012 American science fiction adventure film directed by Gary Ross [...] The story takes place in a dystopian post-apocalyptic future in the nation of Panem, where certain boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 must participate in the Hunger Games, a televised annual event in which the ‘tributes’ are required to fight to the death until there is one remaining victor. (2013)

The cinematic version of the *The Hunger Games*, distributed by Lions Gate Entertainment, closely followed the book’s plot and earned reviews such as: “it’s amazing how much of the book the movie gets right” (Pollitt, 2012). The film, released in the United States on March 23, 2012, grossed \$67.3 million on opening day and \$152.5 million its opening weekend (“*The Hunger Games* (film),” 2013). By comparison, *Twilight*, the 2008 young-adult fiction phenomenon grossed \$35.7 million opening day and \$69.6 million its opening weekend (“*Twilight* (2008 film),” 2013).

Reviews of *The Hunger Games* film favored on the positive side. Online movie review forum, Rotten Tomatoes, gave the film an average score of 7.2 out of 10 and an 85% “Certified Fresh” rating (Rotten Tomatoes, 2012). Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* allotted the film three out of four stars and described the film as “effective entertainment” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 2012). *The Washington Times* review writer, Peter Suderman wrote:

Maybe it's a liberal story about inequality and the class divides. Maybe it's a libertarian epic about the evils of authoritarian government. Maybe it's a feminist revision on the sci-fi action blockbuster. Maybe it's a bloody satire of reality television, but the film only proposes these theories and brings none of them to a reasonable conclusion. (*The Washington Times*, 2012)

## **ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE**

The character of Katniss Everdeen is an anomaly in the cinematic world. Portrayed by actress Jennifer Lawrence, Everdeen is a sixteen year old girl living in a lower-class dystopian society. However, although her circumstances are poor, they are not what make her character subject to debate. Instead, it is the overwhelming mixture of both “feminine” and “masculine” characteristic that are assigned to her. Everdeen is “feminine” in that she; is family-centered/selfless; does not have a drive to advance professionally; is nurturing and assumes the role of care-giver in multiple situations; is modest; and kills only in self-defense. Her overwhelming “masculine” characteristics include that she; is the film’s protagonist; drives the action within the film; is the head of her family; is exceptionally skilled with a bow and arrow while hunting; is physically strong, athletic, and courageous; has no interest in romantic endeavors; dislikes verbalizing her emotions and struggles to connect with others; and that she is not motivated to refine her physical appearance beyond her trademark braided hair.

One of the strongest examples of Everdeen’s femininity is also one of the strongest of her masculinity. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Everdeen’s younger sister is randomly selected to compete in the fight-to-the-death competition named the Hunger Games. Everdeen shows overwhelming selflessness, compassion, and family-orientation by volunteering in place

of her sister. Conversely, her courage to volunteer as tribute and stoic appearance afterwards displays distinctively “masculine” characteristics. This mixture of both “feminine” and “masculine” qualities occurs frequently throughout the film.

It can be easily observed that Everdeen’s character is the head of the household (her father died in a mining accident). Her attitude toward her mother is one of domination, while her mother is clearly submissive to her teenage child. Whenever addressing her mother, Everdeen’s body language is open, shoulders squared, with a raised chin. Conversely, her mother’s is slouched, shoulders rolled forward, and chin tilted downward. Everdeen’s mother would fall into the category of a first-wave stereotype: “good women are modest, chaste, pious, submissive” (Gay, 2012). Meanwhile, Everdeen is an intricate mixture of “feminine” and “masculine” qualities. By taking the role as the head of her family, Everdeen asserts her domination; she assumes the typically male role of being the “bread winner.” And yet, despite her authority, Everdeen displays genuine “feminine” characteristics when interacting with her family members. In the first scene of the movie, she tenderly embraces her younger sibling and provides comfort from a nightmare. Everdeen even sings to her sister in a motherly and nurturing gesture. While providing for her family is her job, Everdeen shows no interest in advancing professionally or exerting more work than is needed to keep food on the table. Everdeen is the authoritative head of the household and, yet, is family-centered.

An obvious example of Everdeen’s masculinity is her knowledge and skill with a bow and arrow (though her use of said skill is in a “feminine” way). “Katniss has qualities usually given to boys: a hunter who’s kept her mother and sister from starving since she was 11, she’s intrepid and tough, better at killing rabbits than expressing her feelings, a skilled bargainer in the black market for meat” (Pollitt, 2012). Despite her accuracy with a deadly weapon, she is not

boastful or ruthless. Within the film, Everdeen is never the aggressor and only kills out of self-defense. These gender-mixed traits are explained by viewing “Katniss as a version of the goddess Artemis, protectress of the young and huntress with a silver bow and arrows like the ones Katniss carries in the games” (Pollitt, 2012). Everdeen is a distinctively different type of cinema character, “armed with Diana’s bow and a ferocious will—Katniss is a new female warrior [...] she doesn’t need saving, even if she’s at an age when, most movies still insist, women go weak at the knees and whimper and weep while waiting to be saved. Again and again Katniss rescues herself with resourcefulness, guts and true aim [...]” (Dargis, 2012).

Another conflicting quality Everdeen possesses is her inherent lack of interest in the opposite sex. While her rough attitude can be interpreted as “masculine,” it can also be linked to third-wave’s definition of a feminist: “women who don’t want to be treated like shit” (Gay, 2012). Everdeen is not the “typical young-adult heroine, [who is] ‘greatly worried’ about whether ‘guy number one’ likes her and what ‘guy number two might think about that’” (Pollitt, 2012). An example of said “typical young-adult heroine” would be Bella Swan from the 2008 motion picture, *Twilight*. “Katniss is a rare thing in pop fiction: a complex female character with courage, brains and a quest of her own [...] the opposite of Bella, the famously drippy, love-obsessed heroine of the *Twilight* books” (Pollitt, 2012). The stark contrast between the two raised the question of “why, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, did a narrative [*Twilight*] featuring a clumsy, often incoherent, and singularly untalented white girl [...] become such a wild success?” (Click, Stevens, & Behm-Morawitz, 2011).

With all characteristics considered, Everdeen is essentially a living embodiment of third-wave feminism. Coming from a poor economic background, Everdeen does not fit into the predominately middle-class second-wave. Her overlapping “feminine” and “masculine” qualities

fit within the fluid interpretation of gender and sexuality the third-wave embraces. Everdeen could easily be seen a stereotypical “man-hating feminist” that second-wave implies is necessary for female success—which is more deeply understood by third-wave as a personality choice instead of a societal statement. While Everdeen would not be expected to settle for anything less than equal treatment within the competition, inequality of the sexes due to rights was not an issue. On the contrary, from each “district,” one male and one female “tribute” were chosen. The women tributes were given no special treatment, nor did they get a “head start” in the completion. If first-wave was seen in the film, it was solely in the fact that Everdeen was determined to survive even though there were stronger male competitors. Everdeen was not purely “feminine,” purely “masculine,” or even gender neutral; instead, she is a complicated mixture of characteristics that reflects sexuality and real personalities in a believable, compound way.

Everdeen’s unorthodox character is a benefit to American culture. To understand the benefit of such a character one must have an understanding of the word “culture.” Raymond Williams explained that:

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. (Williams within Jones & Holmes, 2011)

This dualistic definition appropriately fits the multidimensional character of Everdeen. By exposing the audience to a different set of cultural norms, Everdeen is broadening the audience’s culture in the second meaning of the term. While the American world view remains to be

judgmental, Everdeen's gender unspecific qualities open minds to a different type of female. She is a role model for young-adult women watching the film as a strong, yet nurturing woman, and yet is also a positive display to men that a woman can be powerful and attractive none the less. She doesn't glamorize, but normalizes a female who does not feel the need to be overtly "feminine." Likewise, it reaffirms that an independent woman can still be revered by her male counterparts.

## CONCLUSION

Feminism within the United States took root early in American history and is still prevalent today. The feminist movement has taken place in three distinctive "waves." The first "wave" focused on gaining equal legal rights with men. Second-wave feminism focused primarily on female-only rights, such as abortion and objectification of the female body. The third "wave" was open to women of all ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientation. Third-wave feminism focuses on the fluidity of a woman's sexuality and her right to flaunt or minimize it. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* would be an example of the second. The film, released in 2012, became a phenomenon in the United States and sparked debate of feminist themes. Everdeen holds many "feminine" and "masculine" characteristics. She is a nurturing care giver, and yet is lethal with a bow and arrow. After analysis of both feminism and *The Hunger Games* separately, it is obvious that there are overlapping sections. Everdeen can be seen as an embodiment of third-wave feminism in its flexibility of sexuality and support of female empowerment. An area of further study would be to look into the second leading character: Peeta Melark. This male character does equally as much gender quality swapping as Everdeen. Melark is a cake decorator, overtly emotional, and is at ease in social situations with new people—many trademark "feminine" features. A cross analysis of his character would not

only broaden gender studies, but would also build support for untraditional cinematic characters such as Everdeen.

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