

## Feminist analysis of *The Hunger Games*

While a cursory examination of *The Hunger Games* will suggest messages of gender equality and equal opportunity for females, a deeper analysis will yield that the film, while set in the future, serves to reinforce the current patriarchal society. The film establishes there are 12 poor districts in the country of Panem surrounding the Capitol, characterised by their own exports and exist only to fulfil the needs of the hegemonic Capitol. Katniss Everdeen, the female protagonist, is an oppressed citizen residing in District 12, the coal-mining district.

The film was adapted from the novel of the same name, written by female author Suzanne Collins. It can be considered a work of *écriture féminine*, a term coined by French theorist Helene Cixous to describe the concept that language is written by men for men. It is therefore difficult for female authors to use language as a tool to narrate a story from a female perspective and the literature therefore contains highly masculine language and themes. *The Hunger Games* reinforces this concept as it portrays the role of males as those in positions of power, and the skills associated with power; strength, athleticism and prowess at hunting, are all skills which the heroine possess. Even though Collins deliberately chose to have a female protagonist, Katniss' skills are still traditionally masculine, reinforcing the concept of *écriture féminine*.

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In many Hollywood action films, such as *Tomb Raider* or *Catwoman*, the heroine is often sexualised and objectified, however Katniss Everdeen is not. The reason is, Katniss' father dies. The patriarchy has therefore failed and as a result, Katniss is forced to step in as the provider for the household, a male position, developing her skills at hunting and archery. To allow an audience to empathise with the protagonist, male orientated language and themes like arson, violence and gore must be employed to the point that if Katniss were a male, the basic story line would not be that much different. This is an example of how a writer using a female protagonist is faced with the issue of *écriture féminine*. Even if Suzanne Collins had wanted to avoid stereotyped roles, to be able to tell a story the audience can relate to, she needs to conform to the male model of the world.

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Katniss also acts as the protector for her younger sister, Primrose Everdeen, again the fulfilling role of the father. She fulfils this role to the extent of volunteering to compete in the Hunger Games in lieu of her sister who was first elected. She felt a duty to protect her sister as she was the provider and protector of the household. When Katniss is taken away she is isolated in a room and given 3 minutes to speak with her family and friends. When she is talking to her mother about caring for Primrose, she speaks very emphatically. Her tone and language is not consistent with a conversation between daughter and mother. Cixous claims that it is our sexuality that is directly tied to how we communicate in society. Katniss' manner of speaking is more consistent with a conversation between husband and wife, she is telling her mother to look after Primrose, "No matter what you feel, you have to be there for her, do you understand? Don't cry. Don't."

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This process of being cut off from her family and friends, and kept in isolation before she is transported to the Capitol is a form of social castration. She leaves behind all that is meaningful to her and is identified as the girl on fire from District 12, or the girl from District 12 for the majority of the Hunger Games. This is a reflection on the idea that girls do not actually know their own names until they are married. The tradition of the patriarch is for female to take their husband's name. When Katniss first enters the room where she is assessed on her abilities as a hunter and a fighter, the Gamemakers show her no attention at all. They act as if she does not exist. She has to prove to them, by spearing the apple in the pig's mouth at the buffet table with one of her arrows, that she is worth recognition. This feat is similar to that displayed by Robin Hood, a male. This is another reflection of how a female must perform acts usually associated with masculine behaviours in order to be worthy of respect, and reinforces the *écriture féminine* idea of how meaning is created from a male viewpoint, reinforcing ultimate male power. When Katniss and the others from District 12

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arrive in the Capitol, they are greeted with a glimpse of the skyline. Many testaments to the wealth of the Capitol populate the area, however one building in what appears to be the harbour is worthy of particular mention. It extends out in to the water and appears for about 4 seconds in the centre of the screen. It is a building built by men, and resembles a phallic symbol. The purpose of feminist literary criticism is to expose “the mechanisms upon which patriarchal society rests and by which it is maintained” (Makaryk). This phallic symbol is a figurative representation of the power and wealth that the Capitol holds, furthermore the ultimate symbol of power in the country, the President of Panem, is a male. The ultimate symbol of power in our western world currently is the President of the United States, the fact that The Hunger Games is set in the future is a concern. It suggests that even in this post-apocalyptic world, we still have not moved past the notion that the President must be a male.

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The suggestion that the ultimate power in the country of Panem rests on a man’s shoulders indicates that they deem women incapable of such power and responsibility. The fact that we there is still a disparity of income and roles at the top for females compared with males shows us that while many may think that feminism is all a bit over the top and exaggerated, that we all have equal rights and opportunities it is not necessarily true. The New Zealand Stock exchange’s recent criticism of the under-representation of women as company directors (Women hold 9.57% of directorships, unchanged since 2008) shows the reality is

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that popular culture and society wants us to be sexist and wants to maintain the current patriarchal system. Bertolt Brecht once said, “Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer to shape it.” The Hunger Games is set in the future and still maintains all the current patriarchal societal structures. I am frightened for the future, as The Hunger Games, on the surface, appears to be a tale of empowerment and how one girl can set out to defeat any

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man or woman who stands in the way of her goal. As a result, the premiere of the film saw a 60% female audiences in the 16-25 age bracket. What audiences and parents alike worldwide don’t realise is that The Hunger Games is subtly reinforcing the patriarchal system in which we live.

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Makaryk explains: “...feminist critics have been particularly interested in deconstructing texts in order to make explicit the relations of power”, but Suzanne Collins still creates a world where ultimate power is shown by masculine behaviour and symbolism. Art

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is a hammer to shape reality. The Hunger Games is a precursor to where we are heading in terms of gender equality, and the future doesn’t look good.

Research references:

Primary source: *The Hunger Games*. Directed by Gary Ross, based on the book by Suzanne Collins

Secondary sources: *The Literary Looking Glass*. Sian Evans, chapter 5, Feminist criticism. ‘A Radical Feminist’

Feminist criticism: Anglo-American & French. P.39-50. In *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Irene Rima Makaryk. Univeristy of Toronto Press Inc, Canada. 1993.

**(The student’s data evaluation chart was completed, but not included with this exemplar.)**