 Idealized Gendered Behaviors in The Hunger Games Trilogy by Suzanne Collins

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Abstract

Suzanne Collin’s trilogy *The Hunger Games* has become an international bestseller, and tells the story about Katniss Everdeen, a young citizen of District 12 in Panem. The object of this essay is to demonstrate that nurturing, being a warrior and pursuing beauty are the most idealized behaviors in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. By analyzing these behaviors from a gender perspective, based on the standpoint of Western society, I demonstrate how nurturing and pursuing beauty are feminine behaviors, and being a warrior is a masculine behavior. Furthermore, I outline how the characters’ behavior reflects their upbringings or the circumstances they are in. I conclude by considering what the popularity of Collins’s series indicates about contemporary perceptions of these behaviors, that are traditionally deemed as feminine or masculine in Western society. The result of the analysis indicates that the characters are being rewarded for both feminine and masculine behaviors. However, the characters showing a combination of both feminine and masculine traits gain more than the characters that possess either feminine or masculine qualities only. The contemporary views on femininity and masculinity are changing in Western society, and *The Hunger Games* trilogy gives us an indication about today’s view on the gendered behaviors in this essay.

**Keywords:** The Hunger Games, gender performativity, traditional gender roles, masculinity, femininity, idealized behaviors
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Introduction

Suzanne Collins’s trilogy *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian story that has become an international bestseller. The three novels, *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010) made it into the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, and were subsequently developed into four major motion pictures and associated merchandise. The story is about Katniss Everdeen, a young citizen of the future North America, then named Panem. The reigning and wealthy Capitol, surrounded by twelve districts, keeps the districts in order by arranging the annual Hunger Games. One boy and one girl are chosen randomly from each district, and are sent to the games where they fight to their deaths on live TV. Katniss volunteers to take her sister’s place in the games, and as a result of her choices throughout the story, Katniss becomes the symbol of an uprising against the Capitol, and plays a critical role in the establishment of a new order.

In this essay, I wish to argue that nurturing, being a warrior and pursuing beauty are the most idealized behaviors in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The characters in the novels are in different ways glorified and rewarded for their behaviors by other characters, and as a consequence, their behaviors are idealized. By analyzing these behaviors from a gender perspective, based on the standpoint of Western society, I demonstrate how nurturing and pursuing beauty are feminine behaviors, and being a warrior is a masculine behavior. Furthermore, I outline how the characters’ behavior reflects their upbringings or the circumstances they are in. I conclude by considering what the popularity of Collins’s series indicates about contemporary perceptions of these behaviors, that are traditionally deemed as feminine or masculine in Western society.

Drawing on the work of Lois Tyson, Judith Butler and Julia Wood, I adopt a feminist approach to discuss the behaviors from a gender perspective. In order to define these behaviors, I consult Julia Wood (2011), who introduces theories, research and information about how contemporary views on femininity and masculinity are shaped. Wood’s six themes of manhood and five themes in current views on femininity have been useful in analyzing the behaviors from a gender perspective. By consulting Wood’s themes of manhood and femininity, I am able to establish whether nurturing, being a warrior, and the pursuit of beauty are feminine or masculine behaviors according to Western society. Furthermore, I will discuss the traditional gender roles explained by Lois Tyson (2006). Tyson’s definition of the traditional gender roles and the features assigned to femininity and masculinity provide the main views on today’s gender roles, hence supporting the claim that these behaviors are gendered.

Also, I will discuss Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity and how it relates to the idealized behaviors in *The Hunger Games*. When the characters perform these behaviors, they also perform gender. In other words, depending on which gender role the behavior is associated with, the
characters perform masculinity or femininity. The definitions of femininity and masculinity are established by culture, and as a consequence, a behavior that is considered feminine in a certain social group might be considered masculine in another. For instance, the Agda people in the Philippines and the Tini Aborigines in Australia believe that the ability to hunt is a feminine ideal (Wood, 2013, p. 8). In the Tchambuli society in Papa New Guinea, the women are domineering and sexually aggressive, while the men are treated as fragile and are taught to wear appealing clothes and curl their hair to attract women (Wood, 2013, p. 24). However, these examples are exceptional, and since views on femininity and masculinity are based on the norms, attitudes and values of each social group, I will base my analysis on the Western viewpoint, in which Collins produced her trilogy.

I begin this essay by presenting the traditional gender roles and Butler’s notion of gender performativity. Next, I identify three behaviors that are idealized in the novels, and start by introducing nurturing, one of the three idealized behaviors, for the reason that Katniss is introduced as a nurturing person from the very beginning of the story. Next, I analyze the behavior of being a warrior, since District 12 first and foremost sees Katniss as a hunter. Finally, I discuss the behavior of pursuing beauty, a theme that is present throughout the story. Lastly, I conclude the observations and analyze what the popularity of Collins’s series indicates about contemporary perceptions of how these behaviors, that are traditionally deemed as feminine or masculine, are valued.

**Traditional gender roles and gender performativity**

Feminist criticism is a literary theory approach that examines the way literature and other cultural productions support or reduce the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, 2006, p. 83). Adopting a feminist criticism approach to *The Hunger Games* will illustrate the idealized behaviors from a gendered point of view. It will assist in determining whether the behaviors are feminine or masculine, based on the Western standpoint. For the reason that femininity is not automatically linked to females only, and masculinity is not linked to males only, feminist scholars distinguish sex from gender. Sex refers to the biological constitution of females and males, and gender refers to the cultural programming of femininity and masculinity (Tyson, 2006, p. 83). In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. As Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist who laid the foundation for the modern feminist movement, stated: “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (in Tyson, 2006, p. 96). Hence, it is the behaviors that make an individual feminine or masculine.

The gender categories are established by society, and culture determines our gender, whether it be masculine or feminine. The features that are assigned to femininity and masculinity are at-
tained throughout life, as opposed to being innate. The traditional gender roles in Western society depict men as rational, strong, protective and decisive, whereas women are depicted as being emotional, weak, nurturing and submissive (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). The traditional gender roles described by Tyson will assist in bringing about more clarity on what is considered feminine and masculine. “All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology” (Tyson, 2006, p. 92), meaning that the features and behaviors assigned to women and men according to the traditional gender roles are entrenched and presupposed in Western society.

Judith Butler states that both gender and sex are fictive because they are “constructed through discursive and non-discursive practices” (in Jackson & Jones, 1998, p. 137). A discursive practice is the way in which a discourse is acted on and circulated within a culture. So, as a consequence of sex and gender being constructions, the body would not have pre-given essential sex. According to Butler, “bodies become gendered through the continual performance of gender” (in Jackson & Jones, 1998, p. 137). Hence, gender is performatory, and being feminine is to perform femininity. Butler argues that instead of thinking of ‘performative’ as a performance, one should think of ‘performativity’, which has its origin in linguistics. Linguistic performatives are forms of speech that, as they are pronounced, “bring what they name into being” (in Jackson & Jones, 1998, p. 137). So the utterance ‘it’s a girl’, at a child’s birth, brings the girl into being and begins the process of “girling the girl” (in Jackson & Jones, 1998, p. 137). Butler is of the opinion that gender and sexuality are established only through performance, and that we always act out sexuality or gender “according to (or against) the norms established by society” (in Rich, 2014, p. 79). This implies that individuals are linked to a certain gender, masculine or feminine, depending on their behavior. With Butler’s gender performativity in mind, I would like to emphasize that the behaviors in this essay do not describe who the characters are, but rather demonstrate how their behavior reflects their upbringing or the circumstances they are in. In the next section, I introduce the first idealized behavior: nurturing.

**Idealized behaviors in *The Hunger Games***

**Nurturing**

Nurturing refers to a person’s efforts to encourage individuality and self-regulation by reacting to someone else’s needs, providing emotional support and being involved (Sebire et al., 2016, p. 19). The nurturing behavior is present throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and it is also idealized in the sense that the characters who perform this behavior are rewarded in various ways. Nurturing is
an essential contrast to the brutality in the Hunger Games, and it is practiced by those who protect and care for other individuals in the story.

I begin this section by identifying what constitutes nurturing, and which characters practice such behavior. This will enable me to clarify how the characters are rewarded for their behavior and their actions. Drawing on Wood’s presentation of contemporary views on gender roles, and also Tyson’s work on traditional gender roles, I outline how the behavior is gendered and what this indicates about contemporary conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

When Katniss’s father dies in a mining accident, she effectively loses both her parents, as her mother disappears into depression. As a consequence, Katniss has to take on both the paternal (providing) and maternal (nurturing) role in her family. Even though “the third novel ends with Katniss becoming a biological mother, she spends most of her time in the role of ‘othermother’ for various characters, among them Prim, Peeta and Rue” (Arosteguy, 2014, p. 155). Despite the fact that Katniss feels reluctant towards having her own children, she adopts the maternal and nurturing qualities due to her mother’s absence as a parent. Because she takes on the maternal role in her family, Katniss decides to volunteer for her younger sister Prim in the games, in defiance of the risk of being killed herself. Even though circumstances encourage Katniss to practice nurturing behavior, she is rewarded with the respect of her district, along with that of the audience of the show. In the arena of the games, Katniss meets another participant named Rue. Rue is a young girl who reminds Katniss of her sister Prim, and she decides to protect her, considering “Rue has only” her (Collins 2011/2008, p. 249). Katniss is determined to defend her, but fails as Rue is killed by another contestant. Katniss decorates her body with flowers, and as a result, she receives a loaf of bread from Rue’s District 11 as a sponsor gift in the games.

Katniss also cares for and protects Peeta in the Hunger Games. She tends to his wounds and refuses to be the sole survivor, if it means that Peeta has to die. By protecting and caring for the two younger girls, Prim and Rue, as well as Peeta, Katniss is being rewarded with respect and gifts that help her survive in the arena. However, Katniss is not only a nurturer; she requires nurturance as well. Peeta is the male participant from District 12, and throughout the story, he protects and nurtures Katniss. Peeta and Katniss are the two final participants in the first Hunger Games, and he is willing to sacrifice himself, in order to ensure Katniss’s survival. As he learns that their mentor Haymitch prioritized Katniss’s survival in the arena, Peeta reveals: “I know you had to choose one of us. And I’d have wanted it to be her” (Collins 2011/2009, p. 76). Gale, Katniss’s friend from District 12, who also loves her, effectively loses Katniss because he can dismiss such nurturing behavior. Peeta’s “caring and attempt to protect is very different from Gale’s, as he does not use toughness and violence but cleverness and wit” (Woloshyn, Taber & Lane, 2013, p. 153). So, as a consequence of his nurturance, Peeta is rewarded with love from Katniss and the audience.
Katniss’s younger sister Prim also possesses the nurturing trait. She cares for her animal and for her mother, and withholds information that could upset her. Prim’s nurturing behavior results in her becoming employed as a healer in the hospital in District 13 during the uprising, alongside her mother. Even though she is initially rewarded for her nurturing behavior, by becoming a doctor-in-training, her caring trait is also what ultimately takes her life. Her passion for healing situates her amongst the injured children that are bombed by President Coin, and she becomes a victim herself as the second bomb explodes.

Nurturing is, as many other behaviors, gendered. In Western society, it is conceived as a feminine behavior. Being sensitive and caring for others is a cultural expectation of women (Wood, 2013, p. 181). They feel pressured to be nice and helpful, which is not required of men to the same degree. Women take on the primary responsibility for caring for children, as well as the elderly and sick. This behavior is taught and rewarded at an early age, as daughters, more often than sons, are taught to do chores involving the care of younger brothers and sisters. This supports the belief that women should engage in home and family (Wood, 2013, p. 32). Also, the traditional gender roles discussed by Lois Tyson (2006), support the claim that women are taught to be nurturing. This nurturing behavior is accepted as feminine, and is therefore considered traditional in our society.

Katniss and Prim, both females, have adopted the caring demeanor that is expected of women, and are both rewarded for it. Katniss’s nurturing and feminine behavior reflects the circumstances with her parents’ absence, hence, she is performing femininity. This correlates to Butler’s notion of gender performativity which indicates that individuals act out gender. Also, circumstances in the arena make her more nurturing, and as a result, Peeta does in some ways highlight Katniss’s feminine side considering that “Katniss performs the role of nurturer above all in relation to the wounded Peeta whilst in the Hunger Games arena – thus, Peeta effectively serves to ‘feminize’ Katniss” (Guanio-Uluru, 2015, p. 10). This implies that Katniss becomes more feminine to the readers as she is tending to Peeta’s wounds, and Peeta, without realizing, enables her femininity. Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) discuss Katniss’s maternal behavior, regardless of her inability to being affectionate when it comes to romance:

Importantly, despite Katniss aversion to romance, she seamlessly enacts conventional feminine maternal behavior, behavior presented as essential to her construction as heroic. She is instinctively maternal (with Prim, Rue and Peeta), a consistent marker of her behavior and what sets in motion the action when she volunteers to take her sister’s place in The Games. (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 405)

Subsequently, even if she is not comfortable with showing affection towards the male characters, Peeta and Gale, her maternal and caring behavior is important in her relationships. Her nurturing behavior is what ultimately makes her a hero, as she takes her sister’s place in the games, and refus-
es to kill Peeta in the final. Not only does she protect and care for people, but her nurturing qualities are also what makes her the symbol of the rebellion.

Katniss, despite her nurturing behavior, is reluctant to having children of her own, much because of the fear of them having to participate in the Hunger Games. Dubrofsky and Ryalls make an interesting observation about Katniss’s hesitation towards having children:

Most distressing is how the forefronting of Katniss’s maternal instincts emerge against Katniss’s express desire not to have children. The implications are significant, suggesting good women are always already mothers, and their value, strength, and heroism stem from their maternal instincts and conventional heterosexual femininity. (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 407).

Thus, despite her exceedingly nurturing side, she is reluctant to taking on the most nurturing role, that of being a mother. Dubrofsky and Ryalls indicate that in order to be considered a “proper” woman in Western society, one has to be a mother, either biologically, or by having maternal instincts. Hence, Katniss is being feminized in the eyes of the readers by her maternal instincts, and by caring for other characters.

Peeta also adopts the nurturing behavior that is predominantly considered feminine. “Peeta is more often represented as possessing marginalized masculine characteristics” and this is manifested in his masculinity infused with his feminine behavior that is nurturing (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 153). ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities and in relation to women (Connell, 1987, p. 183). Much has been written about Peeta’s resistance to hegemonic masculinity, and he is described as “the sensitive new man” who is affectionate, calm and considerate (Guanio-Uluru, 2015, p. 12). He is also depicted as a person who is a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities, in other words, he is confident but trusting, physically strong but avoids violence, and has a nurturing side (Guanio-Uluru, 2015, p. 14). So, not only is he capable of protecting himself and Katniss in the midst of the brutality in the arena, he is also a compassionate and caring person.

In conclusion, Katniss and Prim adopt the feminine nurturing behavior, that is expected of women. Peeta, on the other hand, wins Katniss’s affection because he practices the nurturing, hence feminine behavior, that Gale dismisses. As a consequence, this implies that hegemonic masculinity is not as desirable in the novels as marginalized masculinity. In other words, for a male to adopt a feminine behavior, such as nurturing, generates a more rewarded character in the novels. In the next section, I will discuss another behavior that is idealized in *The Hunger Games*: being a warrior.
Being a warrior

A warrior is someone who is engaged or experienced in warfare. Trying to survive, by killing others, is the essence of the Hunger Games, and the participants are being trained to kill the others. Brutality inside, and outside, the arena is not uncommon in The Hunger Games trilogy. Being a warrior is idealized as some of the characters who adopt this behavior are rewarded, especially in their careers.

In this section, I identify what being a warrior involves and how the characters reflect the behavior of being a warrior. This enables me to define how the characters are rewarded for their actions. Lastly, with the help of Wood’s and Tyson’s work on gender roles, I analyze how the behavior is gendered and what this implies about contemporary views on femininity and masculinity.

When Katniss’s father dies in a mining accident, her mother is left depressed and unable to work, making Katniss the sole provider of the family. She remembers that all she “can see is the woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones” (Collins, 2011/2008, p. 9). Her mother’s inability to provide for her family compels Katniss to hunt in order to gather food. In the trilogy, she is depicted as a strong and independent young woman, who is capable of fending for herself. Katniss excels at shooting with her bow, and this becomes her main weapon in the Hunger Games. During the games, the readers learn that Katniss is willing to kill another participant in order to save someone she is determined to protect. In The Hunger Games (2011/2008), the gruesome death of the young boy who killed Rue is described: “The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the centre of the neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood” (Collins, 2011, 2008, p. 272). So, despite her nurturing side, Katniss is able to spear someone to death without showing any real remorse.

In Mockingjay (2011/2010), Katniss perceives herself as a ruthless person, and is convinced Peeta does too: “Finally, he can see me for who I really am. Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly.” (Collins, 2011, 2010, p. 259). However, even though Katniss is portrayed as a warrior, her violent behaviour is encouraged by her desire to protect: “when Katniss does kill, it is motivated by her care and concern” (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 406). For instance, she kills Cato in the first Hunger Games in order to spare him from the pain he is suffering from being attacked. Also, at the moment Katniss learns that President Coin is responsible for the bomb that killed Prim, she puts an arrow in her. Therefore, even if she is a warrior who kills, she is driven by her caring qualities. Katniss’s reward for her warrior-like behavior, is that she becomes the Mockingjay, the symbol for the rebellion.
Gale, Katniss’s hunting friend from District 12, joins the cause of the rebels to establish a new order. He is fearless and capable of doing whatever necessary to win the fight. He does not hesitate to blow up the Nut in District 2, which contains the command and control centre for the Capitol’s defences, even if the rebels own spies are inside. “I would sacrifice a few, yes, to take out the rest of them” he says when Katniss advises him against blowing up the centre (Collins, 2011, 2010, p. 229). Gale’s ruthless actions land him a part of the squad who are sent out to kill President Snow. As a reward for being a warrior, he is promoted to District 2, where he works for Panem’s new government. Gale is not the only character who is willing to sacrifice innocent people for the cause of the rebellion. President Alma Coin is the president of District 13, and the leader of the rebellion against the Capitol. Coin is ruthless, cold and hungry for power, and has no limits to what she will do to attain her goals. She is the one who ultimately makes the decision to fire the bomb that eliminates Katniss’s sister Prim and her colleagues, completely indifferent to the damages to civilians. Just like Gale, Coin is rewarded for her brutal behavior, which includes no sympathy for innocent people. Her behavior has helped her gain the position of a leader, and the powerful influence over the rebellion.

One of Wood’s (1994) six themes of manhood is being aggressive. Young boys are at an early age rewarded for being “daredevils and roughnecks” (Woods, 1994, p. 175). They are taught to be tough, not afraid of confrontations, and they are taught to emphasize aggression and toughness in sports. This masculine code within sports “tells men to fight, defeat others, endure pain stoically themselves, and win, win, win” (Wood, 1994, p. 175). This is the sentiment of the Hunger Games, and especially the characters who are called ‘the careers’, participants who are trained to kill from a young age, and who volunteer to join the games because they believe it is prestigious to win. Also, Tyson’s (2006) traditional gender roles depict men as strong, and women as weak, implicating that women cannot be warriors. Thus, being a warrior is predominantly a masculine trait in Western society, and when it comes to fiction, “heroes must be aggressive and daring in the face of danger. Although women can be assertive in the feminist age, aggression remains a personality characteristic that has remained off bounds for women” (Calvert, Kondla, Ertel and Meisel, 2001, p. 32). So, the aggression that is shown by the women in The Hunger Games trilogy is considered uncustomary in Western society.

Katniss is behaving like a warrior for two reasons. Firstly, she is compelled to provide for her family, which makes her hunt and develop her skills with the bow. Secondly, she is forced to fend for herself in the arena in order to survive. So, as circumstances influence her behavior, she is performing masculinity through her actions. Katniss’s ability to hunt and fight disconnects her from traditional gender roles. She is considered feminine because of how she cares and nurtures, but she is also considered masculine due to her behavior in combat. This fusion of gendered behaviors is
commented on by Dubrofsky and Ryalls: “remarkably, Katniss wins The Games while eschewing aggressiveness, a masculine trait, and showcasing a prized feminine quality, maternal instincts” (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 406). This implies that Katniss’s combination of feminine and masculine qualities is what ultimately helps her sustain the hardships in the games. Her nurturing trait allows her to gain viewer support and allies, and her warrior-like behavior helps her through dangerous situations in the arena.

Katniss herself realizes that she does not live up to the traditional gender role of a woman, as emotional, weak or submissive. In Catching Fire (2009), she reflects: “But the only thing that distracts me from my current situation is fantasizing about killing President Snow. Not very pretty daydreams for a seventeen-year-old girl, I guess, but very satisfying” (Collins, 2011/2009, p. 369). She acknowledges that dreaming about killing someone is not a conventional thought for a young woman. Katniss’s image as a warrior, and her masculine traits does however subside at the end of Mockingjay (2011/2010). “Many female characters, who initially may appear to be strong role models, often remain constrained by patriarchal norms of emphasized femininity in that they eventually are returned to traditional roles” (Woloshyn et al., 2013). Katniss masculinity is surpassed by her femininity, as she takes on the role as a mother. However, she does still hunt, which implies that she does not completely return to her traditional gender role.

Gale, on the other hand, is altogether masculine in the sense that he does not adopt the nurturing, hence feminine, behavior that both Katniss and Peeta practice. He is acting according to traditional gender roles, and his “hunter prowess and warrior mind-set” are “both facets of hegemonic masculinity” (Guanio-Uluru, 2015, p. 5). Thus, he is considered masculine, but Woloshyn, Taber and Lane also state that “the ways in which Gale enacts masculinity move on a spectrum from hegemonic to hypermasculine. As he participates in violent activities he increasingly becomes disconnected from any traits related to caring and nurturing” (Woloshyn et al., 2015, p. 152). This may be a consequence of the fact that even though hegemonic masculinity is related to toughness and hardness, it is also linked to moments of compassion and vulnerability (Woloshyn, 2013, P. 152).

So, as the contemporary masculine ideals are changing, hegemonic masculinity, that was considered the most masculine, has become somewhat more feminine and the contemporary warrior man is now ‘hypermasculine’. Consequently, the more masculine someone is, the less nurturing the person becomes. In conclusion, Katniss performs the masculine behaviour of being a warrior, but is motivated by her feminine nurturing personality. Gale, on the other hand, does not have the nurturing qualities that Peeta and Katniss possess. He is altogether a warrior, which makes him ultra-masculine. Being a warrior is a masculine behavior, however, in the next section, I will discuss the feminine behavior of pursuing of beauty.
The pursuit of beauty

Physical attractiveness or beauty is the degree to which a person’s physical features are considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. Some of the characters in *The Hunger Games* trilogy are forced to comply with the beauty ideals in the Capitol, and are also compensated for their beauty. However, some of them consider beauty a reward in itself.

I begin this section by identifying what constitutes the pursuit of beauty and which characters practice this behavior. This allows me to demonstrate how the characters that attain beauty are rewarded, and how the citizens of the Capitol are rewarded with beauty. Furthermore, drawing on Wood’s and Tyson’s presentation of traditional gender roles, I continue to discuss how the pursuit of beauty is a gendered behavior and an integrated part of the Western gender roles, and what this indicates about contemporary perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Physical appearance is not prioritized by Katniss in District 12, however, when she enters the Capitol and is being prepared for the televised interviews, her appearance is a means to gain sponsors during the games. She, as well as Peeta, is assigned her own stylist and an entire beauty team to get her prepared for the televised appearances. Although Katniss complies during the makeovers, she secretly opposes to the alterations made in the Capitol.

As her beauty team is discussing what they could do to alter Katniss’ s appearance, she considers:

Do what? Blow my lips up like President Snow’s? Tattoo my breasts? Dye my skin magenta and implant gems in it? Cut decorative patterns in my face? Give me curved talons? Or cat’s whiskers? I saw all these things and more on the people in the Capitol. Do they really have no idea how freakish they look to the rest of us? (Collins 2011/2009, p. 55-56)

Katniss is obviously not content with their suggestion that she should alter her appearance, and she considers the bodily decorations in the Capitol bizarre. After Katniss’s and Peeta’s engagement has been announced, Katniss is forced to participate in a photo shoot showing off the wedding gowns in order for the citizens of the Capitol to vote for their favorites. Katniss's reward for doing this is making peace with President Snow. However, Katniss, once more, feels uncomfortable and “like a dough, being kneaded and reshaped again and again” (Collins, 2011/2009, p. 189). Despite the fact that Katniss disagrees with the beauty ideals in the Capitol, she also acknowledges that there is a reward for her physical attractiveness. Katniss’s transformations make the audience euphoric with excitement, and she gets attention for her looks. Furthermore, her reward for being attractive is the approval of the audience and gaining sponsors during the games. Even as a rebel, outside the arena and the Capitol, Katniss is expected to be physically attractive as a symbol for the rebellion. As opposed to the preparations for the Hunger Games’ interviews, involving sparkling dresses, this time she is supposed to look like a stunning warrior. Plutarch Heavenbee’s assistant Fulvia asks:
“Yes, but is she scarred and bloody? Is she glowing with the fire of rebellion? Just how grimy can we make her without disgusting people?” (Collins, 2011/2010, p. 50). The propaganda shots that Katniss features are shown to the rebels, and the reward for her appearance is once again the love of the audience.

The pursuit of beauty can also be viewed as a reward in itself. The citizens of the Capitol take great pride in their appearance and cover their bodies in tattoos, colors, and they wear extreme wigs and makeup. The districts are less fortunate and do not have the luxury, or need, to prioritize their physical appearance. The reward for the citizens of the Capitol is the indulgence in beauty. Katniss’s beauty team demonstrates how extreme the beauty ideals are in the Capitol. Venia is “a woman with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows” (Collins, 2011/2008, p. 70), Faevius, a man who “gives his orange corkscrew locks a shake and applies a fresh coat of purple lipstick to his mouth” (Collins, 2011/2008, p 71), and Octavia, “a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green” (Collins, 2011/2008, p. 71). Effie Trinket, District 12’s escort of the participants, constantly wears colorful outfits and wigs. This extravagant appearance is their right as privileged citizens of the Capitol.

The behavior of the Capitol citizens is linked to that of the citizens in Western society, where there is an interest in altering our physical appearance. This includes “cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, dietary modification, exercise regimes, and eating disorders”, and a fascination with pursuing the perfect body (Jackson & Lyons, 2012, p. 25). This pursuit of beauty within the Capitol is extreme, and the citizens even show narcissistic tendencies. They lose perception of reality and continue with their alterations, despite the fact that they worsen their appearance, rather than improving it. Furthermore, it is important for them to be complemented on their looks and to be admired by others, which are all features of narcissism. Also, individuals who have these narcissistic features are “unable to engage in interpersonal relationships, mostly due to the fear of being dependent on other people, or lack of empathy” (Lipowska & Lipowski, 2015, p.2). This correlates to the citizens’ lack of compassion, and is an explanation to why they enjoy watching the Hunger Games. Jackson and Lyons (2012) conducted a study to see how women and men talk about female and male bodies typically presented in media. The outcome of the study was that both men and women believed that attractive people have “unfavorable inner characteristics” (Jackson & Lyons, 2012, p. 28). This indicates that the more a person pursues beauty, the less sympathetic he or she is. Hence, Collins’s depiction of the citizens’ extreme appearance reinforces the reader’s view about their unpleasant personalities.

Appearance is one of Wood’s (2013, p. 179) themes in current views on femininity. The focus on physical attractiveness starts at an early age and continues throughout life. Girls learn that it is feminine to dress up, wear makeup and do other activities to pursue physical attractiveness (Woods,
Makeup and wigs are featured regularly in gift catalogues for children, and teen magazines are filled with ads for makeup and diet aids. Contemporary ideals for women are thinness and this ideal is communicated in retail stores and the sizes they hold (Wood, 2013, p. 180). The Western culture believes that boys should strengthen their bodies to make them more functional, whereas girls should aim to be attractive and pleasant to look at (Jackson & Lyons, 2012, p. 31). Hence, the pursuit of beauty is a feminine behavior and part of the traditional gender role of a woman.

Beauty and appearance is a part of *The Hunger Games* story, however, the pursuit of beauty is first and foremost depicted as a way for the characters to get rewarded, or as a negative behavior, such as with the citizens of the Capitol. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz state that stories “convey messages about the importance of feminine beauty not only by making beauties prominent…but also in demonstrating how beauty gets its rewards” (in Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 155). This statement supports the claim that pursuing beauty is a rewarded behavior.

The femininity that is associated with beauty is a prerogative, for the fortunate: “where resources are scarce, people stick to the default form of clothing, namely the masculine. Decorative clothes, such as dresses, are feminized and are associated with the monied citizens of the Capitol, like Effie Trinket, whose ‘scary white grin, pinkish hair and spring green suit’ (Collins, 2008/2011, p. 21) betoken her complete affectation” (Byrne, 2015, p. 53). This implies that Katniss is not conceived as feminine when hunting in the woods, but only becomes feminine when dressed up for the televised appearances. She is “forced to assume characteristics related to feminine ideal” as a consequence of the ideals in the Capitol (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 155). Katniss, and Peeta, are pursuing beauty, hence performing femininity, because of the circumstances they are in, in order to gain sponsors and viewer support. Hence, Katniss would not have pursued these beauty ideals, had she stayed in District 12. Therefore, although possessing masculine traits, Katniss is feminized for the others characters, as well as the readers, through her appearance. Woloshyn et al. state that “her female body marks her as a woman with elements of emphasized femininity while her actions encompass elements of hegemonic masculinity” (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 152). So, as her hunting and warrior-like behavior make her more masculine, the makeovers and the sparkling dresses emphasize her femininity. Dubrofsky and Ryalls agree and state that Katniss is “embodying conventional normative standards of heterosexual femininity” (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 404). Katniss’s appearance is to every extent feminine, making up for her masculine actions.

Peeta does also receive makeovers and costumes and reaps the rewards from it, and is also considered more feminine because of it. Taber et al. interviewed four girls about their view on masculinity and femininity in *The Hunger Games*. One girl stated about Peeta: “Actually, he’s a bit girly… He cares what he looks like” (Taber et al., 2013, p. 1030). The girls considered Katniss, on
the other hand, more masculine because of how she is uninterested in her physical appearance: “She acts like a, a boy but wasn’t. She wasn’t visually a boy. She hunted…she didn’t care what she looked like” (Taber et al., 2013, p. 1030). This supports the idea of Wood’s views on femininity, that a woman is supposed to care about her appearance. Peeta has in this case been feminized according to the Western standpoint on femininity and masculinity, because he is not supposed to care about how he looks to the same degree as a woman should.

In conclusion, Katniss is feminized by her appearance, to make up for her masculine behavior as a warrior. She is only considered completely feminine by the characters in the novels when she has been prepared for the televised appearances in sparkling dresses and makeup. Peeta, on the other hand, is being feminized, according to readers, because he cares about his appearance.

Conclusion

In this essay, I claimed that nurturing, being a warrior and pursuing beauty are the most idealized behaviors in The Hunger Games trilogy. The characters are rewarded for their behaviors, and therefore, the behaviors are idealized. I also demonstrated how nurturing and pursuing beauty are feminine behaviors, based on the viewpoint of Western society, and how being a warrior is a masculine behavior. Furthermore, I outlined how the characters’ behavior reflects their upbringings or the circumstances they are in, and how the characters perform gender.

Katniss and Prim have adopted the nurturing behavior that is expected of women, and are both rewarded for it. Katniss’s nurturing and feminine behavior reflects the circumstances with her parents’ absence, and therefore, she is performing femininity. Furthermore, circumstances in the arena make her more nurturing, and as a result, Peeta highlights Katniss’s feminine side as she tends to his wounds. To be considered a “proper” woman in Western society, one has to be a mother, either biologically, or by having maternal instincts, and therefore, Katniss is also being feminized in the eyes of the readers by her nurturing behavior.

Peeta, being a male, adopts this feminine behavior, and is therefore considered having a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities. The fact that he wins Katniss’s affection implies that hegemonic masculinity, that Gale is possessing, is not as rewarded as Peeta’s marginalized masculinity. Thus, Peeta and Gale are the opposites of each other, with Gale being the “hypermasculine” and Peeta the “sensitive new man”.

Being a warrior is predominantly a masculine behavior in Western society, and when it comes to fiction, male heroes must be aggressive and daring, and therefore, the aggression shown by women in The Hunger Games trilogy is considered uncustomary in Western society. As circumstances make Katniss behave like a warrior, she is performing masculinity through her actions. Katniss’s
combination of feminine and masculine behaviors is what ultimately makes her win the games. However, Katniss’s masculinity is surpassed by her femininity to some degree, as she takes on the role as a mother at the end of the story. Gale, on the other hand, is acting according to traditional gender roles, and he is performing hegemonic masculinity. However, as contemporary masculine ideals are changing in Western society, hegemonic masculinity has become somewhat more feminine, and the contemporary warrior, such as Gale, is now considered ‘hypermasculine’.

Physical attractiveness and pursuing beauty is a way for Katniss to gain sponsors during the games. Although Katniss disagrees with the beauty ideals in the Capitol, she recognizes that she is rewarded for her appearance. The pursuit of beauty is also a reward for the citizens of the Capitol, who have narcissistic tendencies. The citizens’ behavior is linked to that of the citizens in Western society, where there also is an interest in altering our physical appearance. Appearance is one of Wood’s themes in current views in femininity, and the Western culture believes that girls should aim to be attractive and pleasant to look at.

The main target audience of The Hunger Games trilogy are girls and young women, and in Western society, they are more interested in fashion and beauty than their male counterpart. A sign of how deeply entrenched the pursuit of beauty is in girls and young women is the immense interest in beauty that The Hunger Games popularity has evoked in real life. CoverGirl, an American cosmetics brand, has launched a line of makeup inspired by the twelve districts called “Capitol Beauty” (“CoverGirl Gets Inspired”, 2013). Also, numerous of “do-it-yourself” beauty articles with focus on The Hunger Games circle the internet, such as “The Hunger Games Beauty: Get All Four of Katniss’s Looks” (O’Neill, 2012). So, even as the novels do not encourage the traditional gender roles completely in regards to beauty, the major motion pictures’ popularity indicates that current views on femininity discussed by Wood is entirely accurate.

In conclusion, the characters are being rewarded for both feminine and masculine behaviors. However, the characters showing a combination of both feminine and masculine traits gain more than the characters that possess either feminine or masculine qualities only. Katniss, with her feminine nurturing traits and physical appearance, and her masculine warrior behavior, wins the games and becomes the symbol of the rebellion. Peeta, showing the same qualities, wins the games as well as Katniss’s affection. Gale, who only possesses the masculine behavior of being a warrior, is rewarded with a career, but loses Katniss. President Coin and Prim, who mainly show masculine and feminine behaviors, respectively, are ultimately killed in the novels.

The idealized behaviors in The Hunger Games trilogy give an indication about contemporary society’s view on these gendered behaviors. The idealization of Peeta’s nurturing behavior and his focus on pursuing beauty is a suggestion that these behaviors are also more idealized in Western society today. For instance, the “metrosexual” man has come forth, who wears perfume and
makeup, and cares about his physical appearance. Also, the “hipster” has emerged, a man who bakes and stays at home with his children. However, there are also girls who read the novels that claim that Peeta is too girly.

Even though the novels are quite critical of how Katniss is being forced to adapt to the feminine beauty ideals, the behavior of pursuing beauty is still idealized in magazines and by young girls, who like the films and novels. Also, the idealization of Katniss’s warrior-like behavior suggests that this is a more idealized behavior also in contemporary Western society. Women today are hunting and training martial art, and a beauty ideal that is becoming more and more popular is women with muscles. So, the contemporary views on femininity and masculinity are changing in Western society, and *The Hunger Games* trilogy gives us an indication about today’s view on the gendered behaviors in this essay.
References


