May The Odds be Ever in Your Favor:
The Use of The Body as an Agent in The Hunger Games

By Alanna Mabry

Beauty, as much as one may hate to admit it, is sometimes seen as essential in order to be taken seriously, to gain power. For Katniss Everdeen, the leading lady in The Hunger Games series by author Suzanne Collins, this fact becomes a reality. Growing up in a lower class community where physical appearance was not an issue, Katniss is suddenly brought into a culture where beauty and appearance brings you power. In this essay, I am going to look at how the body is used as an agent for power in Panem, and how Katniss uses this to her advantage, without losing sight of her true character. To conclude, I am going to look at Katniss as a model for young girls today, showing that they too do not have to let beauty culture define who they are.

The Hunger Games, set in the future, is set in the country of Panem (a fictional country located where North America currently lies). Panem is divided into 12 (previously 13) districts, and a Capitol. The Capitol, being the richest part of Panem, sets all of the laws for the country. Due to a rebellion against the Capitol, the thirteenth district was destroyed. As punishment, each year one male and female tribute between the ages of 12 and 18 are chosen in a lottery to participate in the annual Hunger Games. The Hunger Games is a televised event in which the 24 chosen tributes participate in a fight to the death.

Katniss, who lives in District 12, volunteers as tribute once her
younger sister, Primrose, is chosen in the lottery. After their father passed away in a mining accident a few years prior, Katniss has made a point to become the protector in her family. The Everdeens are not wealthy, and have learned to live with only the necessities. Keeping a tidy body and appearance were not essential to most of those living in District 12. The Capitol, being the wealthiest area of Panem, is a whole different world than District 12. Once taken to the Capitol for training, Katniss clearly sees this and realizes that a lot of things are going to need to change about her appearance before she participates in the games.

In the article, *Class and Feminine Access: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith*, the author explains how class can be categorized: "Class has not been replaced by other categories of difference, such as race and gender, but is expressed through them" (75). Katniss is not used to the role that she will have to portray, but knows that she will not lose sight of who she is through the process. Once Katniss reaches the Capitol a team of people join her, who will prepare her for interviews that the whole country will be viewing. These interviews are essential, because if you make a good impression, you will gain more sponsors. Sponsors will help you during the games in the arena, and send you items for survival that you may need. Katniss, knowing that she can use all the sponsors that she can get, abides to being "beautified", hoping it works in her favor in the arena.

In a key scene in the first novel, Katniss is at the Capitol, with a team of beauticians at her side, preparing her for her reveal and interviews. It is important that Katniss looks her best, for the more beautiful, more likeable she is, the more sponsors she will obtain. While waxing her, Octavia, one of the members of her prep team exclaims "I'm sorry! You're just so hairy!". While Katniss, not used to being pampered in this way, is still getting used to the process she expresses that being waxed hurts, Venia, another member of the prep team states "If there's Grease her down!" Once the process is over, "Excellent! You almost look like you're going to be absolutely gorgeous; we've gotten rid of all the hair and you look nice in district 12", to which Katniss responds with "poor darling!" Venia continues to "You're going to be absolutely gorgeous; we've gotten rid of all the hair and you look nice in district 12", to which Katniss responds, "poor darling!"

In the article *Milkshakes and Boobies: How the Sexualization of Young Ages, and gives them a sense of empowerment, while expressing beauty are manifestations that we choose, there is little scope to express girls personal and social development. Katniss and Cinna get her further prepared, he assures her impression. Cinna and Katniss decide that Cinna will help her to the best of his job, and Katniss gets a standing ovation. In the article *The Body Beautiful World*, the use of the body as an art form, it is important to note that the "subject" is not to assert oneself per se, but rather that
After their father passed, Katniss has made a point to present herself as not wealthy, and have a tidy body and appearance. The Capitol, being the capital of Panem, is far more beautiful than District 12. Katniss, trying her best to be grateful responds with “Thank you. We don’t have much cause to look nice in district 12”, to which Octavia replies: “Of course you don’t! You poor darling!” Venia continues by saying “By the time Cinna is done with you, you’re going to be absolutely gorgeous! We promise! You know, now that we’ve gotten rid of all the hair and filth, you’re not horrible at all”.

In the article Milkshakes, Lady Lumps, and Growing up to Want Boobies: How the Sexualization of Popular Culture Limits Girls Horizons, the author’s main argument is that popular culture promotes sexuality to girls at young ages, and gives them a skewed view of beauty through the media. The article states: “As this sexualized ‘identity story’ is often regarded as not only gender appropriate but also an indicator of contemporary female empowerment, while expressing a sexualized self and selling femininity/beauty are manifestations that women can do and achieve anything they choose, there is little scope to engage in discussions of it as harmful to girls personal and social development”.

In the article The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World, the use of the body as an agent is a main argument: Because the way we think about concepts or entities in themselves, or about the relationships between them, is highly influenced by the way we talk about them, a theory that seeks to reframe the way we conceive of the body as an active participant in the social domain. Thus, to say that the body is an “agent” or “subject” is not to assert that subjectivity is a feature of the body per se, but rather that bodies, because they are constitutive of
subjectivity and also mediate the relationship between person and world, necessarily participate in the agency of the person (307).

Katniss is well aware that her character and skill will be essential to her success in the area. While other tributes spend much time working on their fighting technique, Katniss relies on her hunting experience to get her through. Her appearance, though, is used as an agent in gaining attention, gaining support from sponsors. Katniss’s prep team does everything in their power to be sure that Katniss gets the best response possible. The more sponsors she has, the supporters she has. The more supporters she has, the more power she has.

Beauty and appearance, in the Capitol, are essential to the games, and the prep teams do everything they can to assure the tributes of this. Katniss, still struggling with the idea that beauty is essential, relies fully on her team to prepare her for gaining support. As the time for prepping for the games continues, Katniss continues to rely on her appearance to get sponsors. Being interested in more masculine activities than most girls, she is aware that she will excel in the arena. Her mentors, Haymitch and Effie, see this as well, and agree that her appearance and likeability are what needs to be focused on for her in order to gain more support. In The Body Beautiful, the authors argue that good looks have won out over good character:

Girls a century ago rarely focused their attention on their bodies as a means of bettering themselves or achieving personal distinction. On the contrary, the way to self-improvement was through minimizing the importance of the body and focusing instead on character development and performing good works for others. Today, good looks has clearly won out over good works. With the help of a consumer industry that touts its ability to sanitize and perfect the human form, the body has now become the most significant and reoccupying project of American girls because of its status as the “ultimate expression of the self” (306).

One of the most admirable things of Katniss is putting the costume designed for her in the Hunger Games to real life. She is put into a situation that she is able to conform to these beauty ideals. Katniss is put into a situation that she is able to be herself throughout the process. Gaining sponsors is an issue that is addressed by the authors in The Body Beautiful, in which the body by inscribing standards of beauty, or ‘normalcy’, are simultaneously in conflict with understanding” (307). Those that seek to improve their physical appearance, be they pounds or calories, are in shock. This does not necessarily mean that Katniss herself, had planned.

Another key scene to be centered around is the moment Katniss and Peeta, the male tribute from District 12, first meet in The Hunger Games. Katniss, with her limp, is looking for Peeta. Something is off about Peeta’s limp, and Katniss is curious, she examined her body, and found that Peeta’s limp was caused by an injury in the arena just days prior. The audience, as well as the Capitol, were shocked. The Capitol took beauty so seriously that even the tributes from the Hunger Games, they would return home victorious, but their beauty must be defined. In The Body Beautiful, the authors discuss how tributes that are modified for many reasons become a way for individuals within a social group, to claim an identity and achieve a significant change in social status. Katniss, at the end of most body work is the product of the surgeons that was worked.
One of the most admirable things about Katniss is the fact that she may conform to these beauty ideals, but she does not let them define her. She is put into a situation that she is not familiar with, and does what she can to be herself throughout the process. In Class and Feminine Access, class standing is an issue that is addressed frequently: “Attempts to discipline the body by inscribing standards of beauty, perfection, social and sexual ‘normalcy’, are simultaneously attempts to normalize the subjects class standing” (77). Those that see Katniss after the prep team has done their work, are in shock. This does not look like the girl that volunteered to be a tribute just days prior. The audience responds just as her team, as well as herself, had planned.

Another key scene to look at is towards end of the first novel. Katniss and Peeta, the male tribute from District 12, have become the victors of The Hunger Games. Katniss, waking up from a slumber, arises and starts looking for Peeta. Something is different. Her leg had been wounded in the arena, she had a limp to her walk in the arena, but now she did not. More curious, she examined her body. None of the battle scars that were obtained in the arena were there anymore, for they had been surgically removed. The Capitol took beauty so seriously that even after the victors had won the games, they would return home without a scar on their bodies (348). In The Body Beautiful, the authors discuss what the body means in society: “Bodies are modified for many reasons—for example, to register participation in a social group, to claim an identity in opposition to a social group, to signal significant change in social status—but the overwhelming theme and primary end of most body work is the pursuit and attainment of beauty, however it may be defined” (297). Although the initial battle is over, and Katniss was victorious, she is fully aware that the Capitol is not finished with her. One of the surgeons that was working on Katniss’ skin insisted that she also get
breast enhancements, but luckily, Cinna knew that Katniss would not be happy with that decision, and refused to allow them to do such a procedure.

Although The Hunger Games is a fictional epic novel, the message that beauty is power is clearly seen in our society as well. We are constantly being reminded on how "the perfect body" looks like through the media. We see television shows such as "I Want a Famous Face" that promote cosmetic surgery. Women are usually the targets in such shows. Katniss is a clear example of a girl who does not let her appearance define her entirely. This is an important thing for young girls to learn, for the media could sway their viewpoint in the opposite direction. Katniss uses her skills, which are typically prescribed for men, in the arena. Many residents of Panem respect her for this. I think that it is important to be aware of how society is marketing beauty to women, and do everything we can to not let it define us entirely. Katniss is a good model for girls to see that beauty culture, although they can abide to it to an extent, does not have to define them entirely. It is character that defines people, no matter how much the media would like us to think otherwise.

Works Cited


