Superkids and Feminism in *The Hunger Games* and *Winter’s Bone*
Abstract

This essay discusses *The Hunger Games* and *Winter’s Bone* as feminist novels which contain main characters portrayed as superkids. Initially, gender studies and a feminist approach are presented as a background to discussing the novels from a feministic perspective. A discussion about the phenomenon of superkids is also presented in order to analyse the chosen novels against that theme. The conclusion reached is that both novels include a main character who meets the definition of a superkid. Both books also show clear signs of feminism. Finally, a discussion about why these books are excellent to use in school is raised.
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Introduction

In addition to the artistic dimension, creative forms of writing can give insights into human experiences and improve awareness of social reality. Literature has intentionally been used to provoke, influence and persuade readers. In Feminist Thought Rosemarie Tong claims that the “emotional impact of imaginative writing” can raise awareness concerning gender discrimination and help to reduce it (7). Roxane Gay writes in “Theses on the Feminist Novel” that a feminist novel is both about who we are and how we live (45). It “is a novel where the concerns of women and womanhood are the alpha and the omega of the narrative but it also deals explicitly with stories, with the lives of women” (45). However, a feminist novel does not only deal explicitly with the lives of women, it also “illuminates some aspect of the female condition and/or offers some kind of imperative for change and/or makes a bold or unapologetic political statement in the best interests of women” (46).

Thus a feminist novel explores what it means to be a woman, but also what it means to be a woman from a certain time and place. Gay writes that “it explores the question of identity — the stories of who we are” (46). Another characteristic of feminist novels is that they often must deal with “the experience of trauma and also of grief” (47). A feminist novel does not shy away from what makes its protagonists or its readers uncomfortable. It can often include what has been taken away, “about the ways women often feel a sense of loss” (47). Gay claims that “a feminist novel is not afraid to make the reader hurt” (47).

In this essay two novels that do make the reader hurt will be analysed, The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008) and Winter’s Bone by Daniel Woodrell (2006). As a future teacher I wish to analyse novels that can be useful in my professional life, and these are novels about young people and, more importantly, they are novels that
teenagers read. The books will be studied in terms of gender issues and this perspective will be linked to the current trend in teenagers’ and young adults’ literature of young people taking adult responsibilities as a result of dysfunctional adults. Furthermore, they will be discussed in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Swedish upper secondary school.

In the syllabus for English 5 at upper secondary school the core content section says that teachers must touch upon “literature and other fiction” (3) and also “content and form in different kinds of fiction” (3). In English 6 it says that “themes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods” (7) should be studied. New curricula were introduced in Sweden 2011 for all types of schools, and they have clear directions for how schools should work actively with equal rights for women and men. In the curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre, and also in the curriculum for the upper secondary school, it says that “the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart” (4). In the curriculum for the upper secondary school it also says that “the school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Students should be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice to gender differences” (5). On the basis of these instructions in the curriculum and syllabuses, I will argue that the chosen books can be used for teaching EFL in upper secondary schools because of their content.

*The Hunger Games* begins on the day of the reaping in District 12. The book is about 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen. She lives with her mother and her younger sister Prim, both of whom have depended upon Katniss for survival ever since Katniss' father died in a mine explosion when she was 11. At the reaping two tributes, a boy and a girl, are chosen in each of the 12 districts, and the 24 tributes are sent to an arena
where they fight until only one remains alive. The Games, put on by the Capitol, are meant to punish the 12 districts of Panem as well as to remind them of how the 13th district was obliterated for its uprising against the cruel Capitol. Prim's name is selected at the reaping and Katniss volunteers to take her place and becomes District 12's girl tribute for the 74th Hunger Games. Peeta Mellark, a boy of the same age as Katniss, is the other tribute. The fact that Peeta is selected does not bode well for Katniss, who feels that she owes Peeta for saving her life when they were children, which is inconvenient considering that she is now expected to kill him. In the book we get to follow Katniss in her preparations and in the arena, where she makes decisions that have far-reaching consequences for herself and for many others.

Winter's Bone is about sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly. She lives with her family in the Ozarks, a backward part of Missouri in the U.S. that is more like a third world country. She looks after her mentally ill mother and her younger siblings Sonny and Harold. Every day Ree makes sure that her siblings eat, and she teaches them basic survival skills like hunting and cooking. Ree's father, Jessup, has not been home for a long time and his location is unknown. He is out on bail after having been arrested for manufacturing methamphetamine. The sheriff tells Ree one day that if her father does not show up for his court date, they will lose the house because it was put up as part of his bond. Ree turns to her relatives for help, but everyone lets her down. The reader follows Ree on her hard journey to save her family in a world where meth use is common, violence is frequent, women are scared of their men and people are tied by codes of loyalty and secrecy.

The aim of this essay is to analyse Hunger Games and Winter’s Bone and discuss them as feminist novels according to Roxane Gay’s understanding of the term. This essay will also look at the theme of a society where adults have abdicated their responsibility, and where teenagers are forced into adult roles under harsh conditions,
discussing the main characters as so-called superkids. First, a basic presentation of
gender studies will be given as a background to the discussion of feminism and gender
roles in the novels. Then, third-wave feminism, marxist feminism and characteristics of
feminist novels will be investigated, since they make up one aspect of the essay’s focus
and will be used in the analysis. The second purpose of the analysis is to discuss the
main characters as superkids, and therefore this phenomenon will be presented. This
entails a discussion of developmental psychology, and the branch of psychology that
studies the social and mental development of children and teenagers who live under
untenable conditions, just like the main characters of the two novels. As a teacher you
may face these children on a daily basis, and to have both knowledge and insight into
this important subject is an important part of teacher professionalism.

**Gender and Feminism**

Following Simone de Beauvoir’s crucial point that gender is constructed from a cultural
restraint, gender theory argues that sex and gender are two central and discrete concepts,
where “sex refers to the biological sex, while gender refers to the socially constructed
sex, man and woman” (Jarlbro 12). By this token, in the “International Journal of
Advertising” Corine Van Hellemont and Hilde Van den Bulck describe gender as “a
social construction, a set of characteristics that a society or culture delineates as
masculine or feminine, determining outcomes of (in) equality” (623). De Beauvoir
argues in *The Second Sex* that this inequality does not come from the biological sex, but
rather from the culture we are a part of (325). From the assumption that gender is the
culturally constructed sex, follows the fact that men and women can play roles that are
not bound up with society’s expectations.
Raewyn Connell writes in *Gender In World Perspective* that the gender order is a power difference where one sex is superior to the other. A regular notion is that men have more power than women, and Connell presents a gender order structured with subject and object. Here, parallels are drawn between the pair man-woman and superior-inferior (127). Connell writes that “through history men have always received the role as active, and become the subject, while women always have been assigned the role as passive and become the object” (127). Symbolically men have been the subject by taking roles as explorers, kings or scientists, while women have been objectified by being represented as Madonnas, mistresses or wives. In this way men have gained power over women (Connell 127). This ties in well with de Beauvoir’s claim that in modern society men are considered as the sex which symbolises power, while women still are addressed as the inferior sex because for the most part men are the ones that run businesses and are managers and consequently have the largest influence in society. We do not see women in these kinds of positions as often as we find men assume them (101).

Connell claims that within the gender order, the respect for men and women is often unequal (128). Connell argues that this is “established in a contempt for women”, frequently expressed through sports and jokes (128). Further, Connell claims that “people construct themselves as masculine or feminine. We claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life. Most people do this willingly, and often enjoy gender polarity” (6). However, she also states that “gender ambiguities are not rare. There are masculine women and feminine men [and] sometimes the development of gender identity results in intermediate, blended or sharply contradictory patterns, for which we use terms like ‘effeminate’, ‘camp’, ‘queer’ and ‘transgender’”(6). Connell writes that
psychological research proposes that the great majority of us combine masculine and feminine characteristics rather than traits from merely one of the genders (6).

In *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions* Susan M Shaw and Janet Lee argue that feminism can be divided into three waves. What they call third-wave feminism is most relevant to my study because in the chosen books you can see traces of this wave. They call the first important step towards equal rights first-wave feminism, and it was connected with the right to vote in the 1920s. This was later followed by other important social movements, for instance the civil rights movement in 1968. The second-wave feminism also includes female-only rights, such as abortion and resisting the objectification of the female body (11). The third-wave feminism is taking place today and Tong writes that a characteristic that third-wave feminists share “is their willingness to accommodate diversity and change” (284). Gay claims in “Bad Feminist” that the “third-wave of feminism emulates the complexity of a woman’s journey through life and recognizes the fluidity of womanhood and its many forms”, and also accepts that the term feminist is equivalent to resisting “being forced into a box that cannot quite accommodate a woman properly” (91). This description applies to both protagonists of the novels.

Tong states that “third-wave feminists are particularly eager to understand how gender oppression and other kinds of human oppression co-create and co-maintain each other” (284-85), and she also writes about different types of feminists in *Feminist Thought*, among others Liberal and Marxist feminists. As I will attempt to show in my analysis, there are traces of both liberal and marxist feminism in the chosen novels, but marxist feminism is more obvious in both of them. Tong writes that liberal feminism is based on humans’ equal rights and liberal feminists “wish to free women from oppressive gender roles – that is, from those roles used as excuses or justifications for giving women a lesser place, or no place at all, in the academy, the forum, and the
marketplace” (34). She also states that liberal feminists “stress that patriarchal society conflates sex and gender, deeming appropriate for women only those jobs associated with the traditional feminine personality” (34). Marxist feminists “use a class analysis rather than a gender analysis to explain women’s oppression” (106). Tong writes that this feminist idea is based on the idea of the class society, and that economic forces and social relations that “brought about the oppression of one class by another, one race by another, and one nation by another, also brought about the oppression of one sex by another” (107).

In “Theses on the Feminist Novel” Roxane Gay writes the following summary of what liberal and marxist feminism are about:

> When I say equality, I mean that women should be able to move through the world with the same ease as men. Women should be able to live in a society where their bodies are not legislated. They should be able to live their lives free from the threat of sexual violence. And when we consider the needs of women, it is imperative to also consider the other identities a woman inhabits. Feminism cannot merely be about gender; it must also be about equality in the fields of race and ethnicity, ability, sexuality, spirituality, class, and the many other markers of who we are. (45)

Gay states in “Bad Feminist” that her favourite definition of feminists is “women who don’t want to be treated like shit” (88). She also discusses the difficulties of being a feminist and writes that “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (88). Gay claims that this tension takes place
in beauty standards but also in the right way to be a woman. She writes that the right way to be a woman according to the traditional gender roles “is to be thin, to wear make up, to wear the right kind of clothes (not too slutty, not too prude, show a little leg, ladies), and so on. Good women are charming, polite, and unobtrusive” (88). She also states that “women who don’t adhere to these standards are the fallen, the undesirable” (88). Gay claims that “we are categorized and labeled from the moment we come into this world by gender, race, size, hair color, eye color, and so forth” (90).

Gay discusses the difficulties of being put in a category as a feminist, and that some people are afraid to be labeled feminists “for fear of what that label means, for fear of how to live up to it, for fear of feminism as something essential, for fear of the punishments — both obvious and indirect — that come with openly owning feminism or doing feminism wrong” (95). However, she will not deny “the importance and absolute necessity of feminism” (95), and she also writes that she is “full of contradictions, but [she] also [doesn’t] want to be treated like shit for being a woman” (95). Gay also writes about sisterhood and claims that “good feminists don’t fear the sisterhood because they know they are comporting themselves in sisterhood-approved ways (94). Gay argues that it is hard to describe what sisterhood really is, but she writes that “because I have so many deeply held opinions about gender equality, I feel a lot of pressure to live up to certain ideals” (94). These ideals that she mentions is the idea that there is a correct way to be a feminist, and that feminists support each other and share opinions about gender equality. A number of the points that Gay makes are particularly relevant to the analysis of Ree in *Winter’s Bone.*
Superkids

In *Dansa med träben* Solveig Cronström-Beskow writes about superkids. She bases her book on sociological facts and interviews with these children. Superkids is a rendering of the Swedish term ‘Maskrosbarn’ recognised by some researchers. A translation from Swedish is hard to identify, but Superkids is as close as it gets. (It literally means “dandelion child”; an image that suggests the tough flower that survives and flourishes against the odds.) These are children and teenagers who have had to take responsibility at an early age because they have grown up in various difficult circumstances such as with mentally ill parents, alcoholism or drug abuse, and violence. Somehow they still have managed to survive and create some kind of sustainable life. Donald Meichenbaum writes in his article “Understanding Resilience in Children and Adults: Implications for Prevention and Interventions” that “research has indicated that 1/2 to 2/3 of children living in such extreme circumstances grow up and ‘overcome the odds’ and go on to achieve successful and adjusted lives” (11). This agrees well with Cronström-Beskow’s point that “superkids are brave children, they grow up into brave adults” (27, my translation). Meichenbaum writes that “the resilient child is one who works well, plays well, loves well and expects well” (13). Both Katniss and Ree are superkids in this sense.

Furthermore, both girls have depressed mothers, and as Cronström-Beskow writes, many of these superkids have parents who are absent in the sense that they are incapable of good parenting. James C Coyne and Geraldine Downey write in their study of children and young people in the United States “Children of Depressed Parents” that as many as 8% of all mothers are clinically depressed (50). Children of depressed parents are “at considerable risk for a full range of psychological difficulties, including depressive symptomatology” (50). Depressed people tend to live in harmful conditions “that may precede, co-occur with, and persist beyond their depression” (51). Coyne and
Downey claim that this is because it provides “a plausible alternative explanation for the difficulties that they and their children experience (51). Studies show that insecure attachments, problems with empathy and “unusual responses to conflicts” (57) are primarily characteristics of children with a depressed parent. More studies also show that these children are at risk for a wide range of disturbance rates and problems in psychological functioning (55). On the other hand some studies show that children with depressed parents have school results identical to children of normal parents (53).

In her study, Cronström-Beskow states that school often functions as a structure that is reliable for these children in their lives (77). Structure is a great balance to chaos, and it is so important that if the school does not function adequately these young people find other structures in order to cope (77). Meichenbaum confirms this, saying that “developmental transition points at school and at puberty are particularly sensitive times for the impact of traumas (11). As a teacher you may face these children on a daily basis, and to have knowledge about how significant structure in school is during adolescence is an important part of teacher professionalism.

Further, Cronström-Beskow discusses studies that show that without love and human warmth, these superkids would not have been able to grow up into brave adults. A reason why they could grow up as functioning adults is that someone else in their environment must have given them some kind of emotional nurture (31). Meichenbaum writes that one of three children is born with the “odds against them” (11). They are vulnerable due to socioeconomic and family factors, but in spite of these high risk factors one child in every three develops into “confident, accomplished and connected adults” (11). This will also be discussed in connection with Katniss and Ree, who have managed to survive due to emotional nurture from someone close to them.

Superkids never have the opportunity to divide challenges into possible and impossible challenges, they simply have no choice (Cronström-Beskow 39). These
children can seem strong and fearless and unaffected by difficult situations, but the inside is often different. Their driving force, including both a carrot and a whip, comes from the responsibility that is put onto them, and that they themselves have taken on since they did not see any other option (40). Superkids continue to take responsibility even if they are questioned or regarded with distrust. With a deficient outer security and a constant anxiety to fail with their duty, they still do their best one day at a time (63).

The experience of being needed brings about a huge sense of responsibility, but it also strengthens the feeling of having an identity and a value, and this gives a reassurance that can carry them through difficulties later in life (63). It also gives the skill that Meichenbaum mentions, namely that superkids are able to monitor their own and others’ emotions (13). This cluster of survival skills is found in both protagonists in the novels, as I will show below.

Cronström-Beskow writes that in adolescence the insight that there is a difference between their own living conditions and other families’ lives increases, the superkids feel an insecurity and a pain that they learn to hide behind a tough surface (100). They develop a bicultural competence and this knowledge about being aware of the differences makes them able to negotiate the cultural divide (Meichenbaum 13). Living with a mentally ill mother places demands on the child’s ability to distinguish the imaginary reality of the sick person and your own reality, and a child has difficulties in drawing those limits. Children take in everything and in order to protect themselves and keep a grip on reality they need to create a space of their own. In one example, a girl sings in order to provide a space where she can protect herself (Cronström-Beskow 72).

To have a close friend during childhood and adolescence provides a space of acceptance and human warmth, and friends could be a sign that these children can develop a good social ability (59). Cronström-Beskow claims that these children have a hard time asking for help, because asking for help feels like a threat to the only life that
they know (103). She also writes that the future both tempts and scares the superkids, and that many of these children feel lost since they do not have any role models to imitate (105). Superkids are trained to cope and understand others’ needs and problems by recognising situations outside their own experience, and this is a substantial asset in their coping strategies (178). Moreover, protective factors may differ across gender, race and cultures. For instance, girls tend to become resilient by building strong, caring relationships, while boys are more likely to build resilience by learning how to use active problem-solving (Meichenbaum 12). Katniss and Ree both have strong relationships to their siblings, and being protective towards them is an every-day act.

**Analysis of The Hunger Games**

In this analysis of *The Hunger Games* I will look at different themes found in the novel. The first point is to identify Katniss’ masculine and feminine traits in order to understand the feminism in this novel. Secondly I will look at elements to identify the novel as a feminist novel. These are connected to characteristics of marxist feminism and sisterhood. I will also discuss Katniss as a main character with superkid traits. The analysis ends with a summary and a discussion about the novel in teaching. Roxane Gay claims in “Theses on the Feminist Novel” that “the challenge of the feminist novel is that a novel has to tell a compelling story. The feminist ambition cannot override the narrative ambition” (45). *The Hunger Games* is an entertaining novel, set in the western world and it is a book read by everyone, a bestseller that certainly tells a compelling story.

As stated above, Connell claims that research proposes that the great majority of people combine masculine and feminine characteristics rather than being one or the other (6), and Katniss’ character is a mixture between the traditionally masculine and feminine. For example, she is very capable with a bow and arrow. As she says, “my
father knew and taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion” (5). Katniss has qualities often ascribed to boys: she is a hunter and the provider of her family, a tough person better at killing animals with the bow than at expressing feelings.

The other tribute is Peeta Mellark, who also displays both traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Katniss remembers the time when he helped her a couple of months after her father’s death during the worst time. Katniss and her family had not eaten for three days, and when she sat in the rain, desperate, Peeta threw out burnt bread from his family’s bakery to her. When his mother hit him for burning the bread Katniss wonders why he would make such a sacrifice for her, but Peeta, like Katniss, has qualities that include making sure that everyone is taken care of and he also shows selflessness. This shows that Peeta is a caring and empathetic character, and he does not carry the same mask as Katniss does. Peeta is more genuine and shows his feelings openly.

Katniss and Peeta are taken by train to the Capitol to prepare for the games and in this context their roles are shifting. Katniss is forced to assume characteristics related to feminine beauty ideals, although she resists the focus on her appearance. In her preparations for the big entrée in the Capitol, her prep team and stylist exclaim after much work cleaning her up, “you almost look like a human being now” (62), which seems to be code for human female. This recalls Gay’s point that according to traditional gender roles the right way to be a woman is to be thin, to wear make up and to wear the right kind of clothes (88). To be successful in the games, Katniss must gain support from sponsors who can provide life-saving resources in the games, and to gain support she has to look beautiful and feminine. At the same time, paradoxically, she is forced to reject emotions that would mark her as weak in a traditionally feminine way. These necessities provide an example of the interactions between traditionally masculine and feminine traits in Katniss' character.
Another twist on weakness, femininity and masculinity is when Katniss struggles with just expressing herself as herself during an interview and says “we don't have much cause to look nice in District 12” (62). Here, Peeta reveals that he always has been in love with Katniss, and this makes him vulnerable. He like Katniss, is playing on his feminine side to become popular. As Connell points out, sometimes the development of gender identity results in intermediate identities, for which we use terms like ‘effeminate’ (6), and Peeta can in many ways be seen as a guy who is effeminate through his actions. The interviewer says “well, I don’t think any of us can blame you. It’d be hard not to fall for that young lady” (133). Katniss thinks that Peeta’s revelation makes her look weak, which is the worst trait before the games, but their mentor convinces her that it only makes her desirable. Katniss feels “but what was I really? A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress” (136). Katniss believes that showing feelings is something that makes you look vulnerable and weak, and she is not used to anyone showing feelings as openly as Peeta does. Once again Katniss feels that her poor performance during the interview is getting saved by Peeta’s statements in his interview. However she is concerned because “now Peeta has made me an object of love” (136), so she must put on an act and pretend for the Capitol and for the sake of the games. As Susan Tan puts in her article “Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in The Hunger Games”, Katniss is represented as both an innocent child and a sexualised adolescent for different purposes, first made to look desirable as “an object of love” in a quest for sponsors, and then made to look “very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless” as she faces the Capitol’s wrath (61).

As mentioned Katniss Everdeen lives in district 12, and she describes district 12 as a place “where you can starve to death in safety” (6). In each district there are peacekeepers who are supposed to guard and protect the people and also make sure that they do not go into the woods. To call these guardians peacekeepers is a way of
oppression from Panem, since they call them something that they are not, they stand for everything but peace. Katniss has always been critical of the district and the people who run Panem from the Capitol, and when she was younger she expressed her critique out loud and her mother was very concerned. She eventually understood that expressing these thoughts could bring more trouble. As she says, “I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into a different mask so that no one could ever read my thought” (6). This skill proves useful to Katniss later in the games (100).

In the games, Katniss forms an alliance with another tribute called Rue. When she does this, she forms a feminist archetype: an alliance of women who support each other in the face of oppression. Rue is a young, small girl and Katniss thinks that “she reminds me of Prim” (201). Katniss is taking the role as a caregiver and makes sure that Rue eats and drinks, and promises to protect her, doing what a superkid does. She feels that “Rue has decided to trust me wholeheartedly” (208). When Katniss and Rue are talking about Peeta and how he saved Katniss’ life, she says: “If he did, it was all probably just a part of his act. You know to make people think he’s in love with me (206). Katniss is just pretending in front of Rue because she actually knows that “Peeta did save me, I’m in his debt again. And this can’t be paid back” (206).

But Katniss actually does pay Peeta. When it is announced that “two tributes can win this year” (244), she immediately wants to find Peeta, and “before I can stop myself. I call out Peeta’s name” (244). Katniss eventually finds Peeta injured and she takes care of his injuries, providing them with food just as she did with her family at home and she also protects herself and Peeta from the other tributes. Katniss receives a parachute from their mentor with food, and she directly understands his message: “You’re supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy’s dying. Give me something I can work with!” (261). Here, Katniss’ knowledge of putting on a mask is useful as she pretends to be in love with Peeta in order to gain the supplies that can save him.
Another tribute kills Rue, and when Katniss discovers this she kills him. Normally, Katniss only kills for protection, but she feels that she has let Rue down, not having been able to protect her as she promised. This makes Katniss think of her sister Prim, and how important it is to win the games and come back home to her. Before they remove Rue, Katniss decorates her dead body with wildflowers, thinking of Peeta’s words that it is important to “think of a way to… to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games” (236). Katniss does this to shame the Capitol, and she wants them to understand that they are accountable for what happens in the games, that “there is a part of every tribute they can’t own” (237). As Gay states, a feminist novel often contains a political statement, and this is a clear political statement on human rights. Furthermore since this statement applies to the heart of The Hunger Games it criticises the whole political system in the novel, and it also reflects a discontent about world politics: “Thus, the system is constructed to turn children into agents of their family’s survival, childhood is stripped away as families and adults offer up their children as potential sacrifice” against their will (Tan 56).

When Katniss thinks about justice, she thinks of social class and political power, a characteristic of a marxist feminist. The games have to stop, and Panem must be a country for everybody, not only the ones who live in the Capitol. Panem is a world of routine violence to all, it is only violence toward children that must be brutally displayed. Thus, “the child’s form becomes the locus of government supremacy, the destruction of the child’s body integral to political dominance” (Tan 60). During the games Katniss tries to send small messages to the Capitol showing that she is tired of how the people are being used in the districts. At the end of the games when she refuses to win alone, she knows deep down that she is going to upset the game makers and the president of Panem but she still decides to go against the rules. This revolt is going to
have consequences and she understands this right after the games are over and they have won.

Katniss is used to opposing rules. She and her best friend Gale break the rule of not going into the woods on a daily basis which shows a lot of courage. Katniss must do this to feed her family, and she also does it because she likes to take risks. These qualities, acting like the head of a household and enjoying taking risks, are coded as masculine. To be able to survive in the games later Katniss needs to use both her traditionally masculine and feminine talents, and it is her skills in using these talents in combination with playing on her feminine side that makes her a survivor - and winner - of the games. This is a characteristic that Cronström-Beskow writes can be found among superkids, using all your developed abilities to survive and to beat the odds.

Gale is as Katniss describes it “the only person with whom I can be myself” (6). Gale is Katniss’ hunting partner, and has been her closest friend since she was twelve. They have helped each other ever since they understood that haggling over every trade was not in either’s favour. The friendship with Gale gives Katniss acceptance and some of the human warmth that she needs, and as Cronström-Beskow mentions these are factors that create good social abilities in children who have grown up in difficult circumstances (59).

Although Katniss becomes a survivor, she struggles with her emotions and this is connected to the experience of losing her father. At that time she was never allowed to grieve since her mother broke down completely without thinking of her children’s needs. When she thinks of her mother she says, “all I can see is the woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones. I try to forgive her for my father’s sake. But to be honest, I’m not the forgiving type” (8). As mentioned above, many superkids have depressed mothers, and Katniss’ mother may
symbolise the 8% of all mothers in the world who are depressed (Coyne and Downey 50).

Ever since she had to become the head of the family because of her mother’s depression, money has been a problem that Katniss struggles to overcome. In Panem, when you turn twelve and are allowed to be in the games, you can add your name for each one of the family members. Katniss does this every year, because in exchange she gets supplies for a year. Katniss is a child who grew up and overcame the odds even though she grow up under extreme circumstances (Meichenbaum 11), and as Cronström-Beskow points out, superkids are often driven by the responsibility that is put onto superkids, and that they have taken on since they saw no other option (40). Katniss insists many times that her family means everything to her, especially her little sister.

For example, when Prim’s name is drawn in the reaping, Katniss runs after her while she is walking towards the stage. “With one sweep of my arm, I push her beside me. I volunteer! I gasp. I volunteer as tribute!” (22). In Katniss’ district no one volunteers, and her way of acting again shows courage but also compassion and selflessness. Katniss shows parent qualities since she acts protectively and bravely, and this is because she had to step in as provider for her sister, when she was younger. Katniss does everything for her sister both because she wants to, but also because she did not have any other option than to step in as provider. Before Katniss leaves for the Games, she bestows the pin with a protective mockingjay to Prim, and as Rachel Dubrofsky and Emily Ryalls writes in “The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness” it cements the protective and maternal nature of her feelings toward her sister (406).

Katniss shows a mixture of traditionally feminine and masculine qualities throughout the book. She can be seen as traditionally feminine in the sense that she is selfless, humble, raising her sister and acting like a care-giver, has no intentions of
advancing professionally and only kills in self-defence. Her traditionally masculine characteristics include features like being physically strong, acting as the head of the family and being a brilliant hunter. They also include that she has no interest in romance, has a hard time connecting with people and expressing her feelings and caring more about her performance than her looks. Further, Katniss is an independent spirit who does not care about clothes, weight, popularity, drama or boys. This may demonstrate that these categories are unimportant, because Katniss’ traits of being a superkid take over. Even though she is given these qualities she is never boastful about them even when she becomes the female warrior that does not need getting saved since she rescues herself and others many times in the games. Katniss shows that surviving the games in order to come home and take care of Prim is the only thing that keeps her going in the games.

In the games, Katniss first takes care of Rue then Peeta, and this shows that she takes responsibility and her quality of selflessness shines through. As I have shown, her superkid traits make its appearance many times in the novel, and there is no doubt that Katniss can be identified as a superkid, who “works well, plays well, loves well and expects well” (Meichenbaum 13). Katniss is represented as a strong warrior with a good heart, she is independent and she shows that she does not need a man in order to survive. Katniss’ ability to find strength in other women and to support them in return, and her determination to fight for her rights makes the girl on fire a feminist.

Amber Simmons claims in “Class on Fire: Using the Hunger Games Trilogy to Encourage Social Action” that to use popular novels with real-world violence in teaching in fact helps “students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society” (25). This is where the fire metaphor that Collins employs so effectively throughout the trilogy can be appropriately transferred to the classroom via social-justice education and social-action projects. “By raising awareness and advocating for change, such projects
encourage students to assess their world and take action against the social problems they observe” (Simmons 25). According to Simmons, students will be “motivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in the world” (25). The superkids theme is also something that students can work with in school while reading the novel. As a teacher you can talk about depression and alcohol and create discussions around these subjects. An idea can be to invite an organisation who works with children’s rights, and work with a project that includes ethical questions and have the students to solve different cases.

**Analysis of Winter’s Bone**

In this analysis of *Winter’s Bone* I will attempt to identify Ree’s traditionally masculine and feminine traits in order to understand the gender order in this novel. Secondly I will look at traits in Ree that can be identified with traits from a superkid. I will also look at elements that may identify the novel as a feminist novel, such as sisterhood, gender roles and hierarchies. The analysis ends with a summary and a discussion about the novel in teaching.

*Winter’s Bone* is a novel celebrating the power of love, sacrifice, and resurrection through the selfless actions of the audacious heroine Ree Dolly. She has qualities that make it legitimate to analyse the book through a feminist lens according to Roxane Gay’s understanding of the term. The author does not spare the details of the harsh conditions nor the violence, and that is probably why this novel, set in the western world, is so popular since people enjoy reading about the hard and undeniable truth. Ree Dolly lives with her mentally ill mother and her two younger siblings Sonny and Harry. The family lives in the Ozarks in the U.S, and living there does not bring about any benefits. Ozarks is a very poor area, and in the town where they live everybody knows each other. To make a living in the Ozarks it is common to manufacture
methamphetamine, and this is what Ree’s father, Jessup, does. Ree has not seen him for a long time and the last thing he said before he left was “start lookin’ for me soon as you see my face. Til then, don’t even wonder” (4). Jessup avoids responsibility through his behaviour and he is described as “a broken-faced, furtive man given to uttering quick pleading promises that made it easier for him to walk out the door and be gone, or come back inside and be forgiven” (4). The other men in the novel behave in a similar way, they also seem to lack interest in taking responsibility.

Ree’s character echoes responsibility, has a mixture of traditionally feminine and masculine qualities, and she is a girl that has no fear in confronting problems that occur. One of Ree’s largest problems, besides putting food on the table, is that the sheriff one day tells her that if her father does not show up for his set court date they will lose the house, since it was put up as bail. When the sheriff comes Ree does not play the role of a polite young girl who wishes to please authorities. According to traditional gender roles, good women are supposed to “act charming, polite, and unobtrusive” (Gay 88), but Ree uses aggressive language and says things like “now why in hell would that be” (11), “so what” (14) and “maybe he sees you comin’ and ducks” (14). However, Ree realises that she has to comply with the law and says “I’ll find him” (15), and this is what we will follow in the book, her struggle searching for her father.

Like Katniss, Ree is acting as the primary caregiver to her mother and siblings who depend upon her for survival. Ree is determined to raise her siblings well and her “grand hope [is] that these boys would not be dead to wonder by age twelve, dulled to life, empty of kindness, boiling with mean. So many Dolly kids were that way, ruined before they had chin hair, groomed to live outside square law” (8). By that she means that she does not want her siblings to fall into the same category as her father and relatives. She teaches her siblings basic survival skills like cooking and hunting, “learn how I make it, then you both’ll know” (19). Since there are different masculine roles that
can be assumed, and Connell states that gender ambiguities are not rare (6). Ree wants her siblings to break the gender order and be able to have knowledge about surviving, regardless of whether the abilities are connected to traditionally feminine or masculine characteristics. Ree is self-taught since she had to grow up early, and she is determined to teach her siblings to become survivors and independent as well. Hunting in order to get food on the table, which is a traditionally masculine task, is built into a structure of helping and teaching, which are qualities traditionally marked as feminine. Traditionally masculine and feminine roles are mixed, and these roles are unimportant when it comes to survival. When survival is the highest priority, staying within the narrow confines of traditional gender roles is not an issue.

Ree’s mother has been ill since Ree was twelve. Ree explains that she once was a normal and a real mom, “long, dark and lovely she had been, in those days before her mind broke and the parts scattered and she let them go” (6), but these days “mom’s morning pills turned her into a cat, a breathing thing that sat near heat and occasionally made a sound” (6). One of all similarities between Katniss and Ree is that they both have to deal with depressed mothers. Coyne and Downey claim that depressed people tend to live in harmful conditions (51), and both Katniss and Ree are forced to live with their families in untenable conditions.

Ree realises that this life is her reality, and since no one else is taking responsibility, she has to. Both Ree’s parents have evaded reality, but she fakes it rather than escapes it, and Cronström-Beskow writes that superkids do this because they have no choice (39). Meichenbaum claims that superkids are able to monitor their own and others’ emotions, and this is exactly what Ree does consistently in the novel to be able to move forward in her searching (13). She monitors her own feelings and hides them since she will not let them prevail over her life, just as her mother’s feelings did when they swept over and started to restrict her whole life.
Ree’s search for her father starts with a visit at Uncle Teardrop’s place, “though Uncle Teardrop scared her” (20). Ree’s commitment to her siblings is the single motivating factor in her willingness to face danger, and as Leslie Richman puts it in her article “Winter’s Bone” this “love is a redeeming theme in both the story and the real life applications of the novel” (195). Ree asks for more clues, for example if Jessup is hanging around with some of his old friends, since Teardrop does not know where Jessup is. Teardrop warns her, “that’s a real good way to end up et by hogs, or wishin’ you was” (25). Ree continues searching anyway. Her quality of never giving up recurs throughout the book. Cronström-Beskow writes that while superkids can act strong, fearless and unaffected, the inside is often different (40). Ree’s determination to save her family prevails over her terrified inside, and she plays on her harsh outside even though her inside in reality screams for help.

Cronström-Beskow claims that superkids avoid asking for help, because this feels like a threat to the only life that they know (103). Ree’s neighbours offer to help her out by taking Sonny in and raise him in their home. Ree is very defensive and again aggressive in her answer. This is obvious by her choice of words: “Sonny’n Harold’ll die livin’ in a fuckin’ cave with me’n Mom before they’ll ever spend a single fuckin’ night with you” (77). It is clear that she does not like to be offered help, and she probably feels questioned about her role as a caregiver. However she sticks up for what she believes is her duty. According to Cronström-Beskow superkids continue to take responsibility even if they are questioned or seen with distrust, even though they have anxiety to fail with their duty, they still do their best (63).

In the end Sonny and Harold think that Ree is going to leave, pursuing her dream to join the military, but Ree answers “I’d get lost without the weight of you two on my back” (193), showing that Ree always does her best. Cronström-Beskow writes that the idea of the future for superkids both tempts and scares them (105).
selflessly only thinking of what is best for her family, even though joining the military has been one of her biggest dreams, she chooses to stay with her family. Richard Alleva argues in “Missing Fathers ‘Winter’s Bone’ & ‘The Kids Are All Right’” that Ree “would keep her nuclear family, and maybe they will escape all this, but meanwhile Ree is losing her youth” (21).

Even though she is losing her youth, she does not want to waste another second waiting for Jessup to turn up, so despite the warnings she still meets up with Jessup’s old friends. When Ree meets them, she understands that people over there are not going to talk, they are tied by codes of loyalty and secrecy, and they do everything to cover for each other. When the bondsman comes over and tells Ree that they only have the house for one more week, “there [is] a sound in Ree’s head like a world of zippers zipping shut, and a sudden tilt factor engaged every place she looked” (126). Ree understands that her only option is to go back to Jessup’s old friends, even though she was warned by the women in the neighbourhood. Gail also warns her to go back, but her stubbornness and willingness to find her father is not questionable. Rebecca Albright writes in “Winter’s Bone (2010)” that as Woodrell suggests through frequent iteration of the patriarchs’ names, “all Dolly men bear similar appellations—Milton, Arthur, Jessup—and are differentiated by sobriquets like ‘Blond’, ‘Little’, and ‘Thump’. These men, led by ‘big man’ Thump Milton monitor the Dolly meth operation, passing violent judgment on those who betray tribal law by appealing to traditional law outside the holler” (3). Despite Ree’s awareness of the danger in asking questions to facilitate her quest for Jessup, she disregards the risk and enters a passage through Dolly territory to prevent her family from becoming “dogs in the fields with Beelzebub scratchin’ out tunes” (15).

Gail’s help is the only help that Ree is accepting, though Teardrop is also trying to help her out by offering her money. What makes her turn to Gail for help is
because Gail’s husband has a car that she wants to borrow. Gail asks her husband about it but she is denied access to it, and Ree’s reaction to it is “it’s so sad, man, so fuckin’ sad to hear you say he won’t let you do somethin’, and then you don’t do it” (35). Ree questions why Gail is so subservient to her husband, since being subservient to men is a recurring issue among the women in the novel, and as mentioned before Ree’s hope is that this pattern is going to change. Therefore when Gail turns up with the keys to her husband’s car, Ree “leaned to kiss the crown of Gail’s head. She snorted, laughed, gave a joshing shove, and said, I knew you wouldn’t eat shit long” (81-82). This echoes Gay's definition of a feminist: “Women who don’t want to be treated like shit” (88).

It is always the women who come out to Ree to talk first and as a reader you understand that they are afraid of their men and they have to adjust to them. The first woman that Ree meets says “you one time smacked fire out the ass of Boshell boy who flicked a booger on your dress, didn’t you?” (51). This shows that Ree is recognised as someone who does not let anyone get away unpunished if they do something that makes her angry. It is the female community in the book that supports, advises and helps Ree, and although male characters threaten the women with violence, the only real violence is executed by women. The female community corresponds to what Gay calls sisterhood. The violence is executed in the name of protection, not in revenge or for personal survival. The women in the neighbourhood beat up Ree by immobilising her body, knocking out one of her teeth, and blacking one of her eyes to the point of partial blindness. This is done in order to protect the man, and because Ree is not supposed to look for trouble. When Teardrop finds Ree all beaten up, he says: “you took that beatin’ good as most men I’ve seen” (148). Once again you are reminded that gender hierarchies where men are the sex which symbolises power prevail. This shines through in Teardrop’s statement, meaning that it is coded as masculine to both give and take beating.
As mentioned before it is the female community in the book that helps Ree out and Gay claims that “good feminists don't fear the sisterhood because they know they are comporting themselves in sisterhood-approved ways” (94). All the women that beat up Ree later turn up on her doorstep, and Ree opens the door with a gun threatening them, also again with swearwords. The cursing seems to be Ree’s way of building up a facade of self-protection, not letting anybody come close to her. She goes against the girl-role and makes herself tough psychologically, because she has to. Ree realises that they are there to help her when they say: “come along, child – we’re goin’ to fix your problem for you” (179). The culture in *Winter’s Bone* seems to be that women are scared of their men, but somehow they stick together and help each other out when all is said and done. The women take her to the place where her dead father’s body lies, and Ree is forced to cut off his hands because she needs them as evidence that he is dead. Ree cuts off the first hand and then releases his body into the water again, whereupon one of the women screams “you’ll need both hands or sure as shit they’ll say he cut one off to keep from goin’ to prison” (186). Without hesitation Ree stretches down after the dead body again and cuts his other hand off as well. In this horrible scene in the book Ree seems unaffected and brittle, but deep down she knows that this is the only way to save her family from being homeless. As Gay writes, a feminist novel does not shy away from what makes its protagonists or its readers uncomfortable (46), and this is the case in this scene in the novel. Furthermore, Connell writes that “women always have been assigned the role as passive and become the object” (127), but when Ree has cut off her father’s hands, this can be seen as symbolising the fact that it is no longer the father who has the power. Instead it is Ree who is in charge of the action and can be assigned the role as active. Regarding Ree and Jessup the roles are now reversed, meaning that Jessup’s patriarchy no longer exists.
In the book Ree boldly confronts authorities and dangers in order to preserve the integrity of her immediate family. She sets herself up against insurmountable forces armed only with savviness, courage, stubbornness, and a determination to save her family from becoming homeless. According to Connell the gender order shows that parallels are drawn between the pair man-woman and superior-inferior (127) and the novel, by representing Ree as the brave, active provider, makes a statement showing that the gender order has to be questioned and opposed. Paradoxically protective violence is used by men traditionally, but in *Winter’s Bone* it is the women who accomplish violence, and that is yet another reason why *Winter’s Bone* is a novel where the treatment of gender roles largely escapes the standard model.

The book follows Gay’s model of the feminist novel, it is an adventure novel that explores what it means to be a woman, exploring “the questions of identity – the stories of who [women] are” (Gay 46). It has problems that need to be fixed and it thematises a female protagonist who overcomes those problems, in this case Ree whose highest priority is to protect her family no matter what. Being protective can be seen as both maternal and paternal and in terms of gender roles the novel can be seen as both conventional and unconventional. Gay claims that the term feminist is equivalent to resisting “being forced into a box that cannot quite accommodate a woman properly” (91), and this novel deals with not getting caught in this box because then you will not survive.

The novel highlights the situation of a strong teenage girl, with no benefits, living in a desperate situation with criminal men and women who make their own laws. *Winter’s Bone* can be seen as strongly feminist simply by the virtue of having such an interesting, complex and active female main character who drives the narrative action, supported by other female characters. It can also be seen as a survival story of a superkid, and frequently these themes coincide.
In teaching, *Winter’s Bone* can be used in several ways. For example the problem of finding enough food recurs in both *The Hunger Games* and *Winter’s Bone*. One way to process this theme is by looking at patterns of wastefulness in the United States for example, and then draw parallels to Sweden and our ways of treating food. According to Simmons students will be “motivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in the world, and will use multiple literacies in hopes of changing it” (26). For example, in the U.S. many overconsume food, which contributes to the country’s high obesity rate, but also waste vast quantities and at the same time families like Ree’s struggle with hunger. These facts force us to question how our standard of living affects others and the environment, and these facts can open up for some interesting discussions (Simmons 26). These discussions can further discharge in the superkids theme, where many children live in harsh conditions, some without having food on the table and others with other problems.

**Conclusion**

Roxanne Gay writes in “Bad Feminist” that her favourite definition of feminists is “women who don’t want to be treated like shit” (88). Both Katniss and Ree are female characters who refuse to be treated like shit. They show this throughout the novels by being fearless, strong and independent. With all characteristics considered, Katniss and Ree combine a variety of feminist features. This in itself is typical of third-wave feminism. They both come from poor backgrounds and both girls have overlapping traditionally feminine and masculine qualities, which fits the interpretation of gender in third-wave feminism. Further, Rose-Marie Tong writes in *Feminist Thought* about different types of feminists, and according to her definitions Katniss and Ree are examples of both liberal and marxist feminists. Both characters are connected to liberal
feminism since this type of feminism is based on human equal rights where liberal feminists “wish to free women from oppressive gender roles” (34). In both *The Hunger Games* and *Winter’s Bone* there are two underlying messages, and the first is linked to having equal rights in society.

The second underlying message in the novels can be linked to marxist feminism. In both books there are traces of political statements related to social class, and Tong writes that marxist feminist thought is established in the class society, and that economic forces and social relations imply that the oppression of one class, race or nation by another, also leads to the oppression of one sex by another (107). In both books the protagonists resist class- and sex related injustices. In other words there are strong feminist traits in these novels.

Katniss’ and Ree’s backgrounds are alike since they both have depressed mothers, and absent fathers, albeit for very different reasons. The consequence of this is that both girls had to grow up early in life and take responsibility for the households. Katniss and Ree also have siblings whom they take care of, because they did not see any other option than to step in as providers for their brothers and sisters. Cronström-Beskow writes that superkids have a certain driving force, and when it comes to family both Katniss and Ree take responsibility for whatever happens without hesitation (40). Katniss’ character is special in a way because she uses her talents that come from taking responsibility early differently than Ree does. Katniss often lets her guard down and plays on her feminine side, because she knows that it will benefit her, while Ree instead builds up a wall of protection with harsh language and a bad attitude. Something that you can see traces of in both characters is the driving force, they never give up and they do not let anyone come too close to their hearts except their siblings.

Gay writes that a feminist novel “illuminates some aspect of the female condition and/or offers some kind of imperative for change and/or makes a bold or
unapologetic political statement” (46). Gay also claims that a feminist novel “is a novel where the concerns of women and womanhood are the alpha and the omega of the narrative but [that] also deals explicitly with stories, with the lives of women” (45). The chosen novels can be seen as feminist novels according to Gay’s understanding of the term, since both novels deal with oppression in society where the lives of two young women, facing the trouble of life on their own, but sometimes supported by other female characters are presented as the novels’ dominant themes.

These novels can definitely be used in upper secondary teaching. The Swedish upper secondary curriculum has clear directions that schools should work actively with equal rights for women and men. Here, literature can be a good medium to work with and books as The Hunger Games and Winter’s Bone, which take up gender perspectives mixed with oppression in society are excellent to use in teaching. Tong claims that literature with “emotional impact of imaginative writing” can raise awareness of gender discrimination and help reduce it (7). The Hunger Games and Winter’s Bone are novels that affect readers with their strong main characters who drive the narrative action through difficulties and injustices, never giving up. The syllabus mentions that “literature and other fiction” (3) should be studied, and choosing literature which affects students and creates discussions probably also encourages future reading.

To sum up, The Hunger Games and Winter’s Bone are feminist novels, which take up the topic of two young women who can be called superkids, since they are brave children, who struggle successfully against very severe odds and grow up to be brave adults. In addition to the values that they convey they are also exciting books which make them excellent to use in teaching.
Works Cited


