

## **Shakespeare's Sister vs. Katniss Everdeen** **Suzy Domanico**

In a "Shakespeare's Sister" from *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf introduces the idea that a woman's attributes are not taken as seriously as a man's. If a woman were to be respected and admired for her talents, she would have had to disguise the fact that she was in fact a woman. Society views a woman in a certain way and in order for a woman to be recognized, she must be fit into an assigned role. In Suzanne Collin's novel, *The Hunger Games*, the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, must take on masculine characteristics in order to achieve success and win the hunger games and yet publically present herself as a stereotypical female in order to be

accepted by society. According to Woolf, in the sixteenth century, in order for a woman's talents as a writer to be taken seriously, she would have had to hide her gender, for if she had just openly displayed her work, critics and readers would have scrutinized it so greatly that the content and purpose would be distorted. Woolf says that a woman, "who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself" (601). A talented female poet at this time would have to face the idea that as herself she was not accepted.

In her extended essay, Woolf discusses what would have happened had Shakespeare had a sister with the same talents that he had. To sum it up, she would have ultimately been destroyed. Woolf explains this idea by saying, "it needs little psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (600). Woolf would have seen Katniss as a girl in a battle between what the society sees as acceptable, and the person that she truly is.

In Suzanne Collin's novel, the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is a strong, rebellious, brave, and clever young girl who is able to hunt, provide for her mother and sister, and make deals and trades for goods in the black market. These tougher attributes are often identified with a male character in conventional fiction.

Collins had to give her main character these typically masculine qualities in order for Katniss to achieve success and be taken seriously as a contender in the Hunger Games. While Katniss was still a child, her father passed away leaving her mother inconsolable and unable to provide for their family. Katniss, despite her youth, assumed the role as provider for both her mother and her younger sister, a role typically allotted to male children.

In the beginning of the story, Katniss' younger sister Primrose is originally chosen to participate in the Hunger Games. Prim's character is that of the stereotypical young girl. She is naïve, sweet, and prissy. Prim is sure to be killed if she enters the games. There is no way an innocent and naïve girl would ever win a physical competition, let alone a fight to the death. Therefore, Katniss makes the courageous decision to take her sister's place in the games to spare Prim her gender-determined fate. Before saying goodbye to her family, Katniss speaks to her mother about caring for Prim: "You can't tune out again... Not like when dad died. You're all she has. No matter what you feel, you be there for her, you understand. Don't cry. Don't Cry." Katniss shows great strength in this scene. This is something a father would typically say to his family, but Katniss has assumed that male role for her family now. This strength is also part of what enables her to succeed in the games, as well.

The people of the Capital, who are lavish, require Katniss to be more delicate and feminine before they will accept her. When first arriving in the Capital, an entire team of specialists is hired to makeover Katniss. Katniss has to be waxed, wear makeup and fancy dresses, and even pretend to have a love interest for a fellow competitor. When first meeting her prep team, Katniss says, “So you’re here to make me look pretty,” to which one responds, “I’m here to help you make an impression.” In order to be seen as a contender, she must be molded into what society wants to see.

Katniss is assigned a mentor that will guide her through a series of interviews. She is taught to say the proper things and act in a certain manner in order to gain favor from wealthy people who sponsor the Hunger Games. During her televised interview, Katniss is asked to stand up and twirl around in her dress for everyone to see. These stereotypical feminine qualities are what society wants to see from this young girl. The Capital would have Katniss reduced to a simple-minded girl who is to be judged based on her looks and love interest. However, Katniss uses her cleverness to put on the façade of the typical girl the audience wants to see, while still maintain the masculine qualities she needs to win.

Katniss’ skills of hunting and wielding a bow and arrow, along with her cleverness, are what allow her to persevere through the Hunger Games. Contrary to those of the young woman in “Shakespeare’s Sister,” Katniss’ skills are what allow her to stay alive. Shakespeare’s

sister's skills, by contrast, are what drive her to madness and even death. Woolf says, "To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her" (600). Katniss' skills, as well as Shakespeare's imaginary sister's skills, were not accepted in the world of which they were a part. However, Katniss' skills had the ability to save her, whereas the sister's skills were seen as a curse and a death wish.

Towards the end of the story and competition, Katniss runs into Peeta, her fellow competitor, who is wounded. She uses her knowledge to gather the specific plants that can help heal him. The traditional damsel in distress is not found in Collin's story; instead Katniss is the heroic figure that does the rescuing. Katniss finds Peeta, nurses him back to health, and even risks her own life to retrieve medicine for him. But in order for the sponsors to send the medicine, Katniss must put on a show and display her feminine side. Only after she snuggles up to Peeta and even gives him a kiss do the sponsors deem them worthy of receiving the medicine. Sent along with the medicine is a note from a sponsor that says, "You call that a kiss?" inferring that her kiss was not up to their standards. No matter how hard Katniss tries to resist the stereotypical qualities that the Capital requires of her, in the end they always seem to get what they want.

Her rebellious side shines through in one of the last scenes. The Capital only permits one victor, and Katniss and Peeta are left to decide who will be the one to win the games and return home. Peeta says to Katniss, asking her to kill him, “They have to have their victor” to which she replies, “No. They don’t. Why should they?” Katniss does not believe that the Capital should be given what they want. Ever since she entered the games, the Capital has managed to make Katniss conform to who they think she should be. This is the turning point in the story where Katniss has finally had enough. Just because society will only accept one winner, this does not mean that they should be granted that wish.

In “Shakespeare’s Sister,” Woolf suggests that in the sixteenth century in order for a woman to be taken seriously as a writer or poet by critics, she had to hide the fact that she was a woman. Woolf even goes on to say that, “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” (600). Rather than expose herself as a female writer, Woolf suggests that Anon would rather her work be taken seriously and not be given the credit she is due.

Woolf highlights the difference between the way society felt towards male and female writers. Woolf says, “The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with guffaw, Write? What’s the good of your writing?” (601) This is exactly the type of thinking the

Capital imposed on Katniss in *The Hunger Games*. The same rules that apply to males do not always apply to females, whether it is a fictional futuristic story, or sixteenth century London. In “Shakespeare’s Sister,” Woolf’s character has to acknowledge that a woman’s talents are not respected the way a man’s would have been. In Suzanne Collin’s novel, *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen must face that same reality. Whether women have to hide their identity to publish their poems, or put on a façade of the stereotypical girl, they are being forced to conform to what society considers as acceptable.