

VIRGINIA WOOLF

“SHAKESPEARE’S SISTER: FROM A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN”: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. According to Kaplan and Anderson, Woolf held “one fundamental point” about women and literature: “A woman must have **money** and a **room** of her **own** if she is to write fiction” (411)

2. In chapter 3 of A Room of One’s Own, titled “Shakespeare’s Sister,” what question does Woolf consider, according to Kaplan and Anderson? (411)

She “considers the question of why no women writers are represented in the canon of Elizabeth drama” (411).

3. To answer this question, whom does Woolf invent? (411) What educational, financial, psychological, and even theatrical barriers would Shakespeare’s sister have faced, which William Shakespeare himself did not have to encounter? (411-12)

(1) “To explore the issue, Woolf invents a mythical sister, Judith, for William Shakespeare and compares the barriers brother and sister would have encountered in achieving success as playwrights” (411).

(2) Woolf “despairs of Judith’s having possessed a genius equal to her brother’s, for her lack of education would have denied its flowering” (411).

(3) “As to the issue of ‘money of her own,’ only in 1882 were married women in England allowed to own property in their own right” (411).

(4) “Another insidious prejudice that Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister would have encountered [was] the belief that the female mind is always inferior to that of a male” (412).

(5) “Given these historical circumstances, Woolf spins a tale contrasting William’s theatrical adventures in London leading to his golden career with the possible careers of his ill-fated sister” (412).

NOTE: William Shakespeare was the third of eight children, but the first two died in infancy. Although Woolf does not list these, I am inserting a chronological list of Shakespeare's brothers and sisters:

- (1) Joan – Born in 1558, she survived only two months.
- (2) Margaret – Born in 1562, she died one year later.
- (3) William – Born in 1564, he died in 1616.
- (4) Gilbert – Born in 1566, he died in 1612,
- (5) Joan – She is the second sister with this name. Born in 1569, she outlived all of the other children by almost thirty years. She died in 1646.
- (6) Anne – Born in 1571, she died in 1579.
- (7) Richard – Born in 1574, he died in 1613.
- (8) Edmund – Born in 1580, he died in 1607.

4. During the Elizabethan time, according to Woolf, women pervaded “poetry from cover to cover,” but they are “all but absent from **history**” (414). In “real life [an Elizabethan woman] could hardly **read**, could scarcely spell, and was the **property** of her husband” (414).

“Occasionally” a royal or an upper-class woman, such as Queen Elizabeth I or Queen Mary, might achieve prominence. “But by no possible means could **middle**-class women with nothing but **brains** and character at their command” rise to historical greatness (414).

5. Woolf asks, what “would have happened had [William] Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called **Judith**, let us say”? (415) Woolf first summarizes Shakespeare's own life (415) and then this mythical sister (416). Contrast these siblings' lives.

(1) “Shakespeare himself went, very probably . . . to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin . . . and the elements of grammar and logic” (415). His wild nature seems to have led him to marry an older woman, “who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London” (415). There, since he seemed to have “a taste for the theatre,” he very soon “got work in the theatre, become a successful actor,” and soon was a successful playwright, “even getting access to the palace of the queen” (415).

(2) Judith “remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school” (416). If her parents saw her reading a book, they “told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (416).

“Perhaps she scribbled some pages . . . on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father” (416).

To keep from marrying someone she did not love, “She made up a small parcel of her belongings . . . and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. . . She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre” (416). In London, she said she wanted to act, but the stage manager laughed at her ambition.

“She could get no training in her craft,” but soon found “herself with child,” seduced by an actor-stage manager Nick Greene, “and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?—killed herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some cross-roads” in London by the Thames (416).

6. What female writers had to veil their sex by using the name of a man? (417)

Currer Bell (Charlotte Bronte), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), and George Sand (Amandine Dupin), “all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man” (417)

7. Woolf repeats the famous statement about Shakespeare and revision on page 418. What is it?

Shakespeare never commented on his writing or state of mind. “We only know casually and by chance that he ‘never blotted a line’” (418).

8. “The **indifference** of the world which [John] Keats and [the great French novelist, Gustave] Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in [a female writer’s] case not **indifference** but **hostility**. . . . The world said [to women writers] with a guffaw, Write? What’s the **good** of your writing?” (419)

One 19th-century critic—and Woolf presents his views as being typical of those toward women at that time—said that “the **best** woman was **intellectually** the **inferior** of the **worst** man” (419).