

# Shakespeare's Sister

Virginia Woolf

## BACKGROUND

Virginia Woolf's famous extended essay *A Room of One's Own* was first published in 1929. In this excerpt, Woolf responds to a claim made by a bishop who once wrote to a newspaper to say, "it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare."

**B**e that as it may, I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that the bishop was right at least in this; it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learned Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached<sup>1</sup> rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighborhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theater; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theater, became a successful actor, and lived at the

1. **poached** v. hunted illegally.

## UNLOCK WORD MEANINGS

The pronunciation and part of speech for each of the vocabulary words appear in the side notes. In your notebook, write the meaning of each word.

Use context clues or apply another strategy to help you determine the meanings of concept vocabulary.

taste (təyst) *n.*

Use context clues or apply another strategy to help you determine the meanings of concept vocabulary.

wits (wihts) *n.*

Use context clues or apply another strategy to help you determine the meanings of concept vocabulary.

fancy (FAN see) *n.*

hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, 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. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter—indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft 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 neighboring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theater. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act,<sup>2</sup> she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last—for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same gray eyes and rounded brows—at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman 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 where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

<sup>2</sup> That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius.

2. **she wanted to act** In Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to act on stage. Boys or young men, dressed as women, usually played female roles.

## Response

- 1. Personal Connections** What ideas in this essay do you find most interesting or surprising?

## Comprehension

- 2. Reading Check (a)** Who is Judith? **(b)** How is her education different from that of her brother? **(c)** What happens to Judith and her dreams when she arrives in London?
- 3. Strategy: Establish Purpose for Reading (a)** What purpose did you establish before reading? **(b)** How did the purpose you set affect the way in which you read?

## Analysis and Discussion

- 4. Analyze** Reread the bishop's statement in the Background section. In what way is Woolf's explanation both an agreement with and a refutation of the bishop's statement?
- 5. Draw Conclusions** What conclusions can you draw about the place of women in society during Shakespeare's time?
- 6. Speculate** Imagine that Shakespeare and his imagined sister, Judith, were alive today, living in England. How might their lives differ from the ones described in this essay? In what ways might their lives be the same?
- 7. Get Ready for Close Reading** Choose a passage from the text that you find especially interesting or important. You will discuss the passage with your group during Close-Read activities.

### NOTEBOOK

Work on your own to answer the questions in your notebook. Cite text evidence to explain and justify your reasoning.

### WORKING AS A GROUP

With your group, discuss your responses to the Analysis and Discussion questions.

- Listen actively to one another's ideas and be receptive to different views.
- If necessary, modify your speaking style; for example, rephrase comments the group finds unclear.

### EQ NOTES

### INTERACTIVITY

#### How valid are social roles?

What have you learned about social roles by reading this essay? Go to your Essential Question Notes and record your observations and thoughts about "Shakespeare's Sister."

### B.E.S.T.

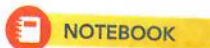
**K12.EE.1.1:** Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.

**K12.EE.2.1:** Read and comprehend grade-level complex texts proficiently.

**K12.EE.4.1:** Use appropriate collaborative techniques and active listening skills when engaging in discussions in a variety of situations.



INTERACTIVITY



NOTEBOOK

## Literary / Text Elements

**Argumentative Texts** An **argument** attempts to persuade readers to accept a position on a debatable or controversial issue. Arguments often follow a structure that is based on logical reasoning. In “Shakespeare’s Sister,” Virginia Woolf uses an artful form of argument structure that consists of a thought experiment. This thought experiment explores key life events of two siblings: William Shakespeare and Judith, Woolf’s name for Shakespeare’s imagined sister.

Woolf uses characteristics of argument—vivid details, historical facts, and logical reasoning—to connect this thought experiment to her main claim in the essay: that the bishop is correct, but not for the reasons he thinks. After developing this position throughout the essay, Woolf does not openly state her conclusion. Instead, she allows the reader to infer it based on the evidence she has presented.

To evaluate Woolf’s argument, the reader must analyze her claim, reasoning, supporting evidence, and the way in which she organizes her ideas. Then, the reader must decide whether Woolf’s premise is correct—that Shakespeare benefited from being male, and that his sister would not have been able to achieve the same success as a man simply because she was female.

■ **PRACTICE** Work on your own to complete the activity and answer the questions. Then, discuss your responses with your group.

**1. Make Inferences** Use a chart like the one shown to identify textual details that compare and contrast William and the imaginary Judith’s lives and experiences. Then, state Woolf’s conclusion, inferring her position from the details she presents.

|   | WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE | JUDITH SHAKESPEARE |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|
| Education   |                     |                    |
| Parental Expectations                                 |                     |                    |
| Career  |                     |                    |
| Result of Efforts                                     |                     |                    |
| Conclusion (Why was a female Shakespeare impossible?) |                     |                    |

- Analyze** Describe the premise and structure of Woolf’s argument. What strengths and weaknesses are apparent?
- Analyze** Identify the characteristic elements of argument that Woolf uses. What strengths and weaknesses are apparent?
- Evaluate** Is Woolf’s overall argument effective? Why, or why not?