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## Shakespeare's Sister - Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf is a prolific writer of the twentieth century. She was a famous novelist and essayist. Her novel 'A Room of One's Own' narrates women writers' cultural and literary history and the socio-political conditions in which these women have written. Virginia Woolf believed in woman empowerment and equality. She put forward her ideas and concerns about equality through her prominent and most discussed essay, Shakespeare's Sister. Woolf through her unique imaginative skills creates a fictional/imaginary sister for Shakespeare and names her Judith Shakespeare. She is deprived of access to cultural and intellectual spheres.

"Shakespeare's Sister" is an extract taken from "A Room of One's Own." In "Shakespeare's Sister", Virginia Woolf explores the plight of women in society in England during the 15th and 16th centuries. Through a subtle analysis, Woolf raises certain concerns regarding discrimination against women in a male-dominated society, such as denial of education to the girl-child, violence against women, the need for freedom of expression in women, and the right to human dignity and equality.

In the essay "Shakespeare's sister" Virginia Woolf asks and explores the basic question of "Why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age". Woolf sheds light on the reality of women's life during this time and illustrates the effects of social structures on the creative spirit of women. In the society they lived in, women were halted to explore and fulfilling their talents the same way men were able to, due to the gender role conventions that prevailed during this era. Through a theoretical setting in which it is imagined that William Shakespeare had a sister (Judith), Virginia Woolf personifies women during the sixteenth century to reflect the hardships they had to overcome as aspiring writers.

"Shakespeare's Sister" is a story about how women are treated and what types of opportunities they have compared to men. Virginia Woolf describes a story about Shakespeare and what if he had a sister. What kind of life would she have? What kind

of education would she be given? Would she be a playwright like her brother with the same kind of talent? During the time of Shakespeare, his sister would live in a different kind of world compared to her male brother. Men were allowed to wife-beat. Women had arranged marriages from the time they were born. If they refused to be married to their picked husband, their father would beat them. Women were made to feel like their thoughts were stupid and that their ideas were not valued.

If Shakespeare had a sister, she would be declined from many things. She would not be allowed to go to school and learn the things that he learned. She would not be allowed to act and learn on the stage. Because she is a woman, she is not allowed in the theatre. She also would not be allowed to read, learn, or write. She would be expected to do housework, follow the rules of her family, and do the activities expected of a “proper” woman. His sister would have no chance of learning the many things that Shakespeare learned. Therefore, if Shakespeare’s sister lived to grow up as he did, she would not be able to experience the same things because of her gender and would suffer.

Virginia Woolf described her story of Shakespeare’s sister and wrote that she would run away from her betrothed to be an actress and live a life that would be looked down upon by everyone. She would not live up to the greatness of her brother. Virginia Woolf encourages the readers of today to go out and accomplish things for the woman who was not granted simple freedoms. However, in the past times, women were forced to follow the same daily plans every day according to others’ wishes and do them without disagreement. Today women are allowed to have different opinions and ideas and act on their impulses. She went against the rules of a common woman and spoke what she thought was the truth.

Through an imaginative reconstruction, Woolf wonders what would have happened to a talented woman if she were born in the age of Shakespeare. Since facts about women were difficult to obtain, the writer reflects upon what would have happened if Shakespeare had a highly gifted sister. Woolf names the hypothetical

sister as Judith. Shakespeare, being a man had the privileges of education and entertainment. He went to seek his fortune in London. He worked in the theatre, became successful as an actor, and lived in the centre of activity in the famous city of London. In the meantime, his highly talented sister, one may suppose, stayed at home. Judith was as imaginative and adventurous as her famous brother, but being a girl, she was discriminated against and not educated. So, unlike Shakespeare, she did not have the privilege of studying grammar and logic or studying Latin. Being a gifted person, she was interested in reading books and used to sometimes pick up her brother's book perhaps. When her parents came to know of this, they told her to take care of "womanly" things such as cooking and stitching. Being talented, she probably wrote something, but knowing the strict restrictions imposed on women, probably hid her writings or set them on fire. Woolf's imaginative reconstruction of Judith's tale highlights the plight of a woman of genius born in Shakespeare's age. Social and cultural exigencies made it impossible for talented women to have existed and expressed themselves in Shakespeare's times. Yet, the writer continues to think that genius must have existed among women as well as amongst the working class, even though it could not come to light.

### **Questions-Answers-**

#### **What is the main concern of Virginia Woolf in the essay Shakespeare's sister?**

In the essay "Shakespeare's sister" Virginia Woolf asks and explores the basic question of "Why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age". Woolf sheds light on the reality of women's life during this time and illustrates the effects of social structures on the creative spirit of women.

#### **What is the significance of the title Shakespeare's sister?**

Background. The title refers to a section of Virginia Woolf's feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* in which she argues that if William Shakespeare had had a sister of equal genius, as a woman she would not have had the opportunity to make use of it.

#### **Why did Shakespeare's sister give up her life?**

To illustrate this, Woolf imagined a Judith Shakespeare, William's sister, heading to London to make her fortune as a playwright. Unfortunately, her male peers view her

primarily as a sex object, so rather than being taken seriously as a writer, she is lied to, seduced and impregnated, leading her to commit suicide.

**Why does Woolf create the character Judith?**

Woolf creates her to show how a woman with talent equal to Shakespeare would not, because of the structure of society, be able to achieve the same success.

**What causes the quarrel between Judith and her father?**

He wants her to be married to the son of a neighbouring wood-stapler but she doesn't want to get married. When she leaves home, what is Judith's ambition? To follow her dreams and become an actress.

**What fate does Woolf believe a gifted sixteenth-century woman would have suffered?**

Woolf writes: Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half-witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at

**What is Shakespeare's imaginary sister?**

But nonetheless, Judith Shakespeare is the imaginary sister of William who appears in the essay. She is a clever girl, with all the gifts of her brother but they come to naught: "She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was.

**What was the attitude Judith's parents took toward her education?**

Judith was "not sent to school." Her parents come in and stop her reading and make her do housework instead. Shakespeare, on the other hand, was sent to school.

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