

Review of virginia woolf's "shakespeare's sister"



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Review of Virginia Woolf's 'Shakespeare's Sister' By Gabriel Gyamfi University of Cape Coast Department of English INTRODUCTION Virginia Woolf's 'Shakespeare's Sister' is the third chapter from her literary essay *A Room of One's Own*. In this chapter, which is the essay on Shakespeare's Sister, she considers the question of why no women writers are represented in the canon of Elizabethan drama.

To explore the issue, Woolf invents a fictional and mythical sister, Judith, for William Shakespeare and compares the barriers brothers and sisters would have encountered in achieving success as playwright. Imaginatively, Woolf despairs of Judith's having possessed a genius equal to her brother's, for her lack of education would have denied its flowering. Therefore as a feminist text, Virginia Woolf argues for a literal space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy as she posits that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. This essay will do a literary criticism of Woolf's *Shakespeare's Sister* by presenting the biography of the author, the literary context within which the essay was written, the summary of the essay, an evaluation and a conclusion.

BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF Virginia Woolf, a British writer and a feminist, was born on 25th January, 1882 in London - England to Sir Leslie Stephen, an author and historian, and Madam Julia Prinsep Stephen, a nurse. While growing up, she and her sister, Vanessa, did not receive any formal education as her brothers did.

However, access to their father's library provided a source for their private learning. At the age of six, her step brother, George, molested and raped her and this resulted in Virginia Woolf becoming a lesbian; an act that might

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have contributed to her being a feminist writer. Coupled with the death of her mother in 1895, she started suffering from bi-polar disorder. This worsened when her half-sister, Stella also died two years later. In 1885, Virginia Woolf lost her mother and subsequently, her father in 1904.

After the death of her father, she moved to the Bloomsbury District of London. At Bloomsbury, Woolf was a member of a group now known as the Bloomsbury Group. Her membership and association with the group exposed her to a myriad of modern theories that deeply affected the development of her own ideas. Notable among these theories is the feminist theory. Virginia Woolf began writing as a young girl and published her first novel *The Voyage Out* in 1915. She became famous in the early 20th century with novels like *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs.*

Dalloway (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). Aside from fiction, she wrote several essays on literature, some of which include: *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Shakespeare's Sister* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). It is believed that the death of her mother was the catalyst for Woolf's first mental breakdown; this coupled with the effects of the bi-polar disorder she suffered. These effects caused Woolf protracted periods of convalescence, making her withdraw from her busy social life and distressed that she could not focus long enough to read or write.

In 1941, Woolf took her own life by drowning in River Ouse near her home in Sussex. LITERARY CONTENT OF THE ESSAY The essay, *Shakespeare's Sister*, is generally seen as a feminist text, and is noted in its argument for both a literal and figural space for women writers within a literary tradition

dominated by patriarchy. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women.

The term “ feminist theory” is an invention of the academic branch of the mid and late 20th century move and it refers to generating systematic ideas that define women’s place in society. The history of feminism consists of three waves, with each wave dealing with a specific aspect of the feminist movement. The first of these three waves took place during the late 19th and early 20th century and was mainly defined by the Suffrage Movement. Due to the fact that women were not allowed the vote, this wave sought to take action and win the vote for women.

One of the most famous suffrage unions which took course in this action was the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) which was founded in 1903 under the direction of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter, Christabel. Other notable feminists of this period include Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Lady Stranton. The second wave was evident in the mid-20th century; that is between the 1960s and 1970s. This wave, which has continued till date, sought to campaign for legal and social equality for women as it was associated with the ideas and actions of The Women’s Liberation Movement.

Adrienne Rich is a notable feminist of this period. The third wave extends from the 1990s to the present. This wave sought to alter aspects of Western society ranging from culture and concerns itself with issues such as a woman’s right of contract and property, a woman’s right to bodily integrity

and autonomy (especially on matters such as reproductive rights, including the right to abortion, access to contraception and quality prenatal care) for protection from domestic violence; against sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; and against other forms of discrimination. As far as the waves of feminism are concerned, four main types of feminists are identified - conservative, liberal, radical and socialist. Conservative feminists criticize the kind of feminism which adopts a male model of "careerism" and public achievement as female goals, thereby denying women's need for intimacy, family and children. Liberal feminists believe that the society needs not to be changed; rather, laws need to be changed for opportunities to be opened up to allow women to be equal with men in the society.

On the other hand, radical feminists call for a drastic change in the patriarchal nature of society in order to achieve genuine equality for women. Social feminist also believe that power needs to be redistributed throughout the society in order to give women the equal opportunity to rise to powerful positions in the society. As stated earlier, Woolf's essay, *Shakespeare's Sister*, can be classified as a feminist text. The essay examines whether women were capable of producing, and in fact free to produce work of the quality of William Shakespeare, addressing the limitations that past and present women writers face.

Woolf is of the view that only if a woman has money and a room of her own, she is independent enough to be able to develop to the full or else she will always be tied down by the conventions of her time and the society she is living in. Virginia Woolf was very concerned with feminism and the

differences between men and women, desiring for female independence and freedom. She investigated them at great length in *A Room of One's Own* when she discovered the reasons for the poverty of the female sex concerning great achievements and she urged women to develop their own style.

However, Woolf concedes that the kind of equality she craves for can never be reached as women simply differ too greatly from men, but that they should be equal in a sense that they have the same rights as men legally, but should not forget their difference. It can therefore be argued that Virginia Woolf was indeed a feminist writer. She criticized clearly the treatment of women before and during her own time, especially in *A Room of One's Own*, which can be called the core of her feminist writing. Her lesbianism certainly strengthened her drive for female independence and self-expression as it is closely linked to feminism. She stood up openly for women's right to vote when working for the Suffrage Movement something which, for some critics like Naomi Black, signaled her entry into a feminist organizational politics defined as 'social feminism'. SUMMARY OF THE ESSAY In 1928, Virginia Woolf delivered two lectures at Girton and Newnham Colleges of Cambridge University, expanding them for publication in 1929 as the six chapters of *A Room of One's Own*.

Invited to speak on "Women in Fiction," Woolf indicates in the first chapter that although she found the subject global and endless, she can state one fundamental point: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Instead of keeping to a narrow treatment of women writers, or the portrayal of women in fiction, Woolf's lectures examine the

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larger historical issues of why women do not have, and have not had, money of their own and rooms of their own.

In chapter three of this lecture is the literary text "Shakespeare's Sister" where Virginia Woolf considers the question of why no women writers are presented in the canon of Elizabethan drama. To explore this issue, she invents a mythical sister, Judith, for William Shakespeare and compares the barriers brothers and sisters would have encountered in achieving success as playwrights. The author starts by stating how disappointed she is not to have brought back some important statement which is why women are poorer than men.

Woolf therefore makes an enquiry or investigates women in the Elizabethan period in England. Upon reading a history book by Professor Trevelyan, she finds that women had no or few rights during that period even though they had strong personalities, especially in the works of art. Woolf goes on to state that "women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, Desdemona..." (p. 446). She goes on to ask herself why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age.

She claims she is not sure how they were educated or whether they were taught to write, "Whether they had sitting rooms to themselves". She therefore concludes that "it would have been extremely odd, even upon this showing, had one of them suddenly written the plays of Shakespeare..." (p. 448). Virginia Woolf remembered a comment made by a particular bishop. He declared that "it was impossible for any woman, past, present or future,

to have the genius of Shakespeare". However, with the power of imagination, Woolf created a mythical character named Judith who played the role of Shakespeare's sister.

Virginia Woolf outlines the possible course of Shakespeare's life from grammar school where he learnt Latin-Ovid, Horace and Virgil, his marriage, work at a theatre in London, acting, getting access to the queen's palace and so on. Judith, on the other hand, did not attend school and her family discouraged her from studying on her own. She is rather told to "mend the stockings and mind the stew and not moon about books and papers". She is later married to someone against her will. As a teenager, she flees to London. She planned to be an actress but the men at the theatre denied her the chance to work and learn the craft.

She is impregnated by Nick Greene. The sad part of Judith's life is that she commits suicide. Woolf believes this is how such a female genius could have fared in Shakespeare's time. However, she goes on to explain "It was unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people". In that age, women who were genius were regarded as witches and lunatics. Woolf therefore argues that writings which had the signature of "Anonymous" were likely to be that of a woman. Finally, Woolf questions what state of mind is responsible to creativity.

She finds out that creating a work of art is very difficult, privacy and money are scarce and the world is generally indifferent to whether or not someone writes. For women in the past, the conditions were very unfavourable

because they did not have any “ privacy or a private room” also, vacations were rare for them. Moreover, the world was only not interested in female writers but actively opposed their creativity. Overtime, the effect on a budding female writer was very detrimental as she explains “ It was a relic of the sense of chastity that dedicated anonymity to women even so late as the 19th Century.

Currer Bell, George Elliot, George Sand, are all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. In conclusion, the purpose of creating this imaginary character is to draw a parallel comparison between an Elizabethan male writer and an Elizabethan female writer. The former could enjoy all the facilities. Their fame and popularity was easier as compared to a female writer. Virginia Woolf has proved in *A Room of One's Own* that Shakespeare's sister could not be as popular as Shakespeare.

It would be severely impossible for her to be known by all throughout all ages and times. EVALUATION OF THE TEXT Invited to speak on “ Women in Fiction,” Woolf indicates in the first chapter that although she found the subject global and endless, she can state one fundamental point: “ A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. ” This view that Virginia Woolf holds is the plight she bemoans for the non-existence of women writers in the era of the Elizabethan period. In this light, it can be stated that Woolf's assertions are true.

Very characteristic of the 18th century or the Elizabethan era, women were objectivized as they were considered as objects of men, were not allowed to

go to school to be educated and were not allowed to go on stage or play any role in drama. Even when they were schooled, it was to train them to improve their domestic skills and the ability to serve as a husband's helpmate. Woolf asserts that women, during the Elizabethan era, were virtually denied of every right. Therefore in that era, as in Shakespeare's plays, women who were portrayed to have defied a male dominated society were at the end confined to the role of women in such a society.

This happens to be the fate suffered by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Antigone in *Antigone*, and Desdemona in *Othello*. Woolf's essay therefore points out that it would have been impossible for a woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare and also unthinkable that a woman would be of Shakespeare's genius given all the dire circumstances they are to encounter. From the above discussion, we agree to the assertion made by Virginia Woolf that it would have been impossible for any woman to have written the play of Shakespeare in his time.

She attributes this to the fact that if a woman should write a fiction of her own, she should have money and most important of all a room of her own. She supports this with the fact that women in the Elizabethan era lacked financial resources to support and embark on their own quest of writing any kind of fiction (*A Room of One's Own*). This was so because women in the Elizabethan era were regarded to be properties of the men and everything that they had were owned by the men.

Also, in saying a woman should have a room of her own if she is to write a fiction, it could metaphorically mean that the woman should be given the

personal freedom and the liberty to create art. However, this was not the case during the Elizabethan era as women in this age were subjected to hostility and indifference attitudes in the hands of men and in a male dominated society. These factors, coupled with other dictates of the society as far as the development of women was concerned, deem it right for Woolf to claim that there was no way a woman would have been able to write the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare.

An example Woolf sites in her essay is one Nick Greene who is reported to have said that " a woman acting put him in the mind of a dog dancing" (p. 453). This concern by Woolf is also supported by a group by name " Paper Makers" which agrees with Virginia Woolf that women were very much second class citizens as they were not given the chance to be educated and also, were not taken seriously by a male dominated society. Therefore a woman who possesses such genius as Shakespeare could not have developed her talents in the age of Shakespeare.

This assertion is irrefutable. However, Alice Walker disagrees with Woolf on the basis that Phyllis Wheatley, the first AfricanAmerican poet and the first African American woman to publish a book was sold into slavery at the age of 7 or 8 and was transported to North America, yet she was able to write and publish. She was purchased by the Wheatley family. She owned not herself? Walker recognizes that Wheatley is in the position far different from the narrator of Woolf's essay, in that she does not even own herself, much less a room of her own.

Wheatley and other women existed outside of this room and space Woolf sets aside for women writers. Though she calls attention to the limits in Woolf's essay, Walker, in uniting womanist prose, pays homage to Woolf's similar endeavour of seeking space and "room" for women writers.

CONCLUSION In conclusion, it must be noted that Woolf's Shakespeare's Sister is a feminist essay as she bemoans the plight of the Elizabethan woman who is dominated and "objectivized" by a male dominated society.

Woolf disproves the ideology that men are more intelligent than women and that when given the equal rights women, with a room of their own, would have matched the genius of Shakespeare in his writings. Woolf therefore believes that gender identity is a social construct and thus, even if nothing can be done to empower women to height achieved by men, gender identity can be challenged and transformed in order to give women rooms of their own for them to write fiction or anything of art.

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