

# from A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Based on the essay by Virginia Woolf

## A HERE'S HOW

### Literary Focus

Based on lines 1–8, I would say that this **essay** will be about the unequal treatment of women and men in the Elizabethan age. My teacher says that the Elizabethan age was when Queen Elizabeth I ruled in England.

## B HERE'S HOW

### Language Coach

I know that the adjectival **suffix -ous** means “full of” or “characterized by.” Woolf describes Judith as being *adventurous*. I think Woolf is saying that Judith was full of adventure, or at least the desire for adventure.

## C QUICK CHECK

In lines 11–13, Woolf says, “It would have been completely impossible for any woman to have written Shakespeare’s plays in the age of Shakespeare.” Read lines 21–26, and then give one reason why this statement may be true.

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I find myself wondering why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan<sup>1</sup> age. I am not sure how they were educated or whether they even knew how to write or if they had a place where they could write. They had no money, apparently, and most probably had children before they were twenty-one.

According to Professor Trevelyan, who wrote a history including the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they married at fifteen or sixteen. **A**

Someone (I think it was a bishop who is now dead) declared  
10 it was impossible for any woman ever to have Shakespeare’s  
genius.<sup>2</sup> He was right in at least one respect. It would have  
been completely impossible for any woman to have written  
Shakespeare’s plays in the age of Shakespeare.

Imagine, for instance, that Shakespeare had a wonderfully  
gifted sister named Judith. Will, her brother, went to grammar  
school,<sup>3</sup> where he learned Latin, Greek, and logic.<sup>4</sup> He married  
and had a child. Then off he went to London, where he quickly  
became a successful actor. He lived at the hub of the universe.  
He met everyone, practiced his art onstage, and even went to the  
20 queen’s palace.

Meanwhile, his extremely talented sister remained at home.  
She had no opportunity to learn grammar and logic or to read  
the Latin poets. She was just as adventurous and imaginative as  
her brother and wanted to see the world as much as he did. **B**  
But whenever she tried to read, her parents told her to mend the  
stockings or mind the stew and to forget about books. **C**

1. **Elizabethan** (IH LIHZ UH BEE THUHN)
2. **Genius** (JEEN YUHS) is a very great natural ability of some special kind.
3. Here, **grammar school** is a school where Latin is taught.
4. **Logic** refers to the principles of reasoning.

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Virginia Woolf in a Deck Chair by Vanessa Bell/Permission of Angelica Garnett/  
Sotheby's Transparency Library, London

Maybe she wrote secretly but was careful to hide her writing. When Judith was sixteen, her parents arranged a marriage for her—even though she protested that she didn't want to marry. Her father beat her severely and then begged her not to shame him. **D** Although she felt she could not disobey him, one summer night she took a few belongings and ran away to London.

Judith was as gifted with words as her brother. Like him, she stood at the stage door of a theater and told the manager that she desired to act, but he laughed in her face. No woman, he said, could possibly be an actress—in those days none were. So she had no way to get any training in acting.

But she was young and pretty, so the actor-manager took pity on her. The result was that she found herself pregnant by him. One winter's night Judith killed herself and, as was common with suicides, was buried at some London crossroads.

That's how the story might go for a woman who, in Shakespeare's day, had the same genius that he had. But I think the bishop is right to say that no woman could possibly have had Shakespeare's genius then. For such a genius is not born among

**D** HERE'S HOW

**Vocabulary**

I see the word *severely* in line 30. Based on the context of this sentence, I think that Judith's father beat her very badly. I checked my dictionary, and *severely* means "harshly" or "violently," so I was right.

**A** HERE'S HOW

**Reading Focus**

At first I was surprised when Woolf said, "But I think the bishop is right to say that no woman could possibly have had Shakespeare's genius then." But I think it was Woolf's **belief** that women could write if they were not held back by society's expectations.

**B** HERE'S HOW

**Vocabulary**

My teacher says that *crooning* means "humming" or "singing softly." That seems to make sense here.

**C** YOUR TURN

**Literary Focus**

Describe the tone of this **essay** so far. Is this an **informal** essay?

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**D** YOUR TURN

**Vocabulary**

Use context clues to write a definition for the word *deformed*.

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uneducated servants, and that is what most women, in essence, were. Women could not be geniuses because their work began almost before they left the nursery, and law and custom forced them to keep on working. **A** Only rarely do writers like Emily Brontë or Robert Burns appear from among the working classes.

Whenever you read of a witch or a woman possessed by devils, or a wise woman selling herbs, or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, I think we are really on the track of a woman who wanted to be a novelist or poet but couldn't. It is women, I think, who wrote many of the poems attributed to Anon (Anonymous). Edward Fitzgerald, an English translator and poet, suggests women created the ballads and folk songs, crooning them to children. **B**

No one can say whether he is right. But I am positive that any extraordinarily gifted woman in the sixteenth century would have gone crazy or shot herself or ended up in a lonely cottage as half witch and half wizard. She would have been so mocked and so frustrated that she surely would have lost both her health and her sanity. **C**

No girl could have walked to London and forced her way before actors and managers without a great deal of anguish.<sup>5</sup> For women were supposed to be chaste,<sup>6</sup> or pure. A sixteenth-century woman living a free life in London and trying to write would have been under great stress that might have killed her. If she survived, whatever she wrote would have been twisted and deformed—the product of a guilt-ridden mind. **D**

And if she managed to publish her work, it would have gone unsigned. She would have published anonymously or used a man's name, as did Charlotte Brontë, whose pen name was Currer Bell. Throughout history, women have been made to feel that they should remain anonymous.

A woman born with writing talent in the sixteenth century would have been terribly unhappy and would have had

5. **Anguish** means "great suffering."

6. **chaste** (CHAYST)

80 considerable inner conflict. Her life and her own instincts were hostile to the creative process.

But what mental state is most favorable for creativity?

Not until the eighteenth century did writers begin to record what went on in their minds as they wrote. From their autobiographies, we learn that writing a work of genius is almost always unbelievably difficult. Everything—barking dogs, interruptions, money problems, poor health—conspires against having a work transfer easily from the writer’s mind onto paper.

90 In addition, the world is incredibly uncaring toward writers. No one asks them to create novels, poems, or histories, for the world doesn’t need them. Nor will people pay for what they do not want. So young writers must cope with every kind of discouragement.

Women who wanted to write faced much greater obstacles than men did. To start with, no woman could have a room of her own unless her parents were very rich or noble. She had no money except what little she was given for clothes. So she couldn’t go on a walking tour or a little journey to France, as Keats, Tennyson, and Carlyle, all poor men and writers,

100 managed to do. **E**

Even worse, the world was not just to women’s writing as they were to men’s. The world laughed at women who tried to write, saying, Write? What’s the good of your writing? **F**



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**E** YOUR TURN

**Reading Focus**

Woolf **believes** that women who wanted to write faced greater obstacles than men did. Read lines 94–100, and identify the special obstacles Woolf believed that women faced.

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**F** LITERARY ANALYSIS

What is Woolf’s message to her readers? How does this essay contribute to that message?

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