‘Shakespeare’s Sister’ by Virginia Woolf

The Speech

- Watch the speech delivered by Fiona Shaw

  Duration: 13 minutes

  https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/shakespeares-sister

- Discuss students’ initial responses.

Context

Virginia Woolf, born Adeline Virginia Stephen, was a 20th Century writer who embraced the modernist style and pioneered the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative device. She is best known for her novels *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* and was also a prolific writer of essays, diaries, letters and biographies.

In 1929 Woolf published *A Room of One’s Own* – an extended essay based on two lectures given by Woolf to women’s colleges at Cambridge University in 1928.

This speech forms part of the essay entitled *Shakespeare’s Sister*.

- Discuss with students whether they have heard of Virginia Woolf? What do they know about her? Ask them to research the key details of her life.

- Suggest students read one of her novels focusing on how the ideas touched on in this speech are explored. Ask students to make note of the ways in which she demonstrates the need for change.

- Ask students to research developments within the women’s rights movement during Virginia Woolf’s lifetime 1882 – 1941 and create a timeline. They can use the sources listed at the end of this document.

Content

- Watch the speech again.

- Assign students one of the following cards to respond to.

- Lead a group discussion drawing on the students’ responses.

Follow the steps in the hypothetical argument. • How would Shakespeare's sister's life have differed to his?	What evidence is there that Virginia Woolf, and hence women, are as witty and capable as their male contemporaries? • What is inventive about the central comparison? • How is the style lively, witty and persuasive? • How is the argument persuasive, moving on from the central comparison to incorporate other examples of inequality between male and female writers? • How does she use humour in her logic?
What evidence is there in this speech that she advocates a new approach to discourse or style as well as gender equality? • How does the register break with convention? • What other aspects of the speech appear to be unorthodox?	Describe the tone of the speech, and the extent to which it changes. • Which aspects of the speech are ironic? Are they predominantly entertaining or bitter? • Does the speaker sound measured or angry; amused or frustrated? Give examples.

<u>Language and Structure</u>

➢ Ask students to read a copy of the speech and highlight all the subordinate clauses. These are either placed in brackets or between dashes or commas. **A transcript of the speech is included at the end of this document.**

➢ Ask them to describe the effect of these.

➢ Provide students with the chart below.

➢ This exercise could be done individually with each student completing the full table or by splitting the class in to groups and allocating three lines of the table to each group and asking them to feedback on one.

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Language/ Structural Device	Example	Effect
Figurative Language e.g. metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism		
Themes and Key Words		
Types of repetition - e.g. repetition of a single word or repetition of a phrase or repetition of an idea		
Ethos – a demonstration of the speaker's credibility or strength of character		
Pathos – the emotional appeal of the speech		
Logos – appealing to the audience with reason and using facts and figures		
Contrasts		
Anecdotes		
Pronouns and modes of addressing audience		
Expert language and statistics		
Register e.g. formal or informal		

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Discussion

- Watch the discussion between Fiona Shaw and women writers at Clean Break.

  Duration: 4 minutes

  https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/reaction/shakespeares-sister

- Ask students to choose one point from the discussion group that they agree with and one that they disagree with. Discuss their reasons why.

  Examples from the discussion:

- Female liberation comes through freedom of thought rather than having a physical space of one's own. **00:06**
- Virginia Woolf presents motherhood as a loss of opportunity. This feels like a denial of women's choice to be mothers and therefore distances women from her argument. **00:53**
- Women have to be aggressive and take on traditionally masculine personality traits to be leaders and assert their rights. **01:37**
- Women are the masters of their own destiny and capable of anything if they put their mind to it. **03:09**

Extension Tasks

- Ask students to read one or more poem from Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* collection. Consider and discuss the ways in which the world and key events in history would be different if more women had been in positions of power.

- Ask students to write a speech outlining modern examples of inequality, inventing a sister of a famous male as the central focus of the speech.

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Useful Links

Websites

Virginia Woolf – A brief biography

A Room of One's Own – An Introduction to the full text

The Suffragette Movement – A timeline

The Suffragette Movement – Key dates

Equality for Women – Timeline from 1903 – 2003

The Role and Status of Women – The V&A Museum

The inter-war years – Women and work

Women in the 1930s – The Guardian

Women at War – BBC History

Shakespeare's Childhood and Education - The British Library

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SHAKESPEARE'S SISTER

Virginia Woolf | 24 October 1929

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney, a few more about Jane Austen, a tribute to the Brontes and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow, and one would have done. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple.

The title 'Women and Fiction' might mean; women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write, or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback: I should never be able to come to a conclusion.

All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point: a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.

But in order to make some amends, I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them.

Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought.

Thought – to call it by a prouder name than it deserved – had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass, how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating.

But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind – put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a beadle, I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the fellows and scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. Such thoughts were the work of a moment. As I regained the path, the arms of the beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the fellows and scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that, in protection of their turf, they had sent my little fish into hiding.

But curiosity remained.

For it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet. What were the conditions in which women lived? I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four comers. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by

incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.

I went, therefore, to the shelf where the histories stand. I looked up 'Women', found 'position of ' and turned to the pages indicated. 'Wife-beating,' I read, 'was a recognised right of man, and was practised without shame by high as well as low. Similarly,' the historian goes on, 'the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion.'

I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that 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 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 learnt Latin – Ovid, Virgil and Horace – and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, married a woman in the neighbourhood, 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 theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising 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.

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 neighbouring 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 17. 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. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, 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.

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 grey eyes – at last the 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 crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

Here I would stop, but the pressure of convention decrees that every speech must end with a peroration. When I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.

How can I further encourage you to go about the business of life? Young women, I would say – and please attend, for the peroration is beginning – my suggestion is a little fantastic; I prefer, therefore, to put it in the form of fiction. I told you that Shakespeare had a sister. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives, for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh.

This opportunity is now coming within your power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so – I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals – and have each of us rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; if we face that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, she will be born.

As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile.