

Shakespeare's Sister Summary

Writer: Virginia Woolf | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

Women's Glory in Literature vs. Their Degradation in Reality: In this part, Virginia Woolf says that it is very difficult to find the real truth about women in history. Everyone gives opinions, but no one records the actual facts. So, she decides to consult historians' books to know how women lived during the Elizabethan Age (Shakespeare's time). She reads Professor Trevelyan's History of England, where she learns that men had the legal right to beat their wives. If a daughter refused to marry her parents' choice, she was locked up or beaten. Marriages were not made for love but for family profit, and even children were betrothed very young.

Even later, in the Stuart period, women still could not choose their own husbands. The husband was the sole master of the family. Yet, in Shakespeare's plays, women like Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, and Desdemona appear brave, wise, and powerful. Thus, in literature, women seem glorified, but in reality, their situation was the opposite: confined, beaten, and voiceless. Woolf points out this irony: in literature, women are heroines who change kings' lives, but in real life, they cannot control their own lives. In poems and plays, they are wise and beautiful, but in reality, they were uneducated, oppressed, and treated as property. Woolf says that although women were idealized in literature, they were humiliated and neglected in actual life.

Women's Absence from the Pages of History: Woolf further explains that history and literature show two different images of women. In literature, she is powerful; in history, she is invisible. These two images do not match. They create a strange contradiction: "a worm winged like an eagle." She says that to know the true life of women, one must see both fact and imagination together. A woman might be a housewife in reality, but within her lies creativity and thought.

However, the problem is that historians like Professor Trevelyan wrote only about wars, politics, universities, and religion, not about women's daily lives. Only the names of queens or noblewomen appear occasionally. We know nothing about middle-class women at what age they married, how many children they had, what their homes were like, whether they had a room of their own, or if they could read.

Woolf suggests that someone should collect these facts and write the real history of women. That would make history complete. She laments that before the eighteenth century, almost nothing was written about women's lives. We do not know how Elizabethan women spent their days, studied, or whether they had any freedom. At that time, girls were married off very young; they had neither education nor money. So, a woman writing plays like Shakespeare would have been almost impossible. Finally, Woolf mocks a clergyman who said, "Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare." Through this sarcasm, Woolf shows how men used ignorance to deny women's intellect and creativity.

Shakespeare's Imaginary Sister Judith - A Symbol of Lost Genius: In this part, Virginia Woolf imagines what would have happened if Shakespeare had a talented sister named Judith. She explains that while Shakespeare went to school and studied Latin and literature, Judith would have been kept at home. Her duties would have been cooking, mending stockings, and obeying her father. If she ever tried to read books, her parents would scold her. Her father planned to marry her to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler, but Judith refused because she wanted to write literature. Her father, though tearful, begged her not to shame him. Yet, Judith ran away from home to London. In London, she wanted to become an actress, but men laughed at her. The theater manager, Nick Greene, insulted and later deceived her. Judith became pregnant and, out of shame and despair, took her own life.

The Tragic Fate of the Sixteenth-Century Woman Poet and the Barriers of Society: Woolf argues that no woman in Shakespeare's time could have been as great as he was. Women were uneducated, confined, and suppressed. Every law, custom, and religious norm worked against them. Yet, Woolf believes that many women did have genius, but they could not express it. Some may have written under the name "Anon" (Anonymous) or composed folk songs, but history forgot them. She says those lost women were perhaps the real poets silenced by society's scorn and suffering.

Woolf adds that a woman born with poetic talent in the sixteenth century would have had a tragic life. Society would have stopped her, and her own inner conflicts would have destroyed her. She might have gone mad, killed herself, or lived alone in the countryside, labeled a witch or sorceress. No woman of that time could have freely gone to London and worked in a theater, because chastity was treated as a sacred duty. If a woman tried to live freely, society would have insulted her. That constant pressure would have ruined her creativity and distorted her art.

Even if such a woman had written something, she would not have signed her name. She would have published anonymously because society believed, "The chief glory of a woman is not to

be talked of.” That is why later writers like George Eliot, Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë), and George Sand used male pseudonyms to hide their identity from a judgmental society. Woolf mocks the male ego. She says that men always want to carve their names everywhere on trees, stones, or land, claiming, This is his. Women, however, are not like that; they are less eager for fame or self-display.

Woolf concludes that even if a woman possessed genius in the sixteenth century, the entire society worked against her. She had no environment to express her thoughts. Finally, Woolf says that an artist needs a free and balanced mind for creation. Shakespeare achieved that state, which is why his works are immortal. But women were denied that freedom, as society, religion, and tradition all stood against their creative power.

The Struggle of Women Artists and Society’s Disdain: In this part, Virginia Woolf shows how difficult it was for women to work in the world of art and literature. She explains that creating a work of genius is never easy. A writer needs peace, money, health, and mental stability. But in reality, these are often missing. Life’s struggles, society’s indifference, and financial hardship all disrupt a writer’s mind. Yet, while male writers like Keats, Flaubert, and Carlyle wrote even amid suffering, the obstacles were far greater for women.

Women did not have a room of their own. Even before the nineteenth century, they could not write in a private space of their own. They had no freedom and were dependent on their parents for even small allowances. Apart from economic difficulties, women faced society’s harsh contempt and hostility. Men were told, If he wants to write, then write. But women were mocked. Why should a woman bother to write? Woolf says that psychologists should measure how deeply such mockery and scorn damage a woman’s mind.

She then cites Oscar Browning, who once said, “The best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man.” Such comments crushed women’s confidence. Woolf adds that these views were not isolated. Newspapers, critics, and thinkers of that time all denied women’s intellectual power. Mr. Greg, for example, wrote, The purpose of a woman’s life is to serve men.

Hearing such things, women began to doubt their own talent. Their mental strength and creativity slowly decayed. Woolf reminds readers that even in 1928, this attitude had not fully disappeared. She recalls how Nick Greene once said, “A woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing.” Similarly, in the music world of her time, people said about female composers, “A woman’s composing is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs.” Woolf sharply concludes that history keeps repeating itself in the same pattern of prejudice.

Suppression of Women's Genius, the Artist's Mental State, and Shakespeare's Free

Mind: In this part, Virginia Woolf explains that even in the nineteenth century, women were not encouraged to enter the world of art or literature. Instead, they were surrounded by contempt, humiliation, and constant moral instruction. Society repeatedly suppressed their talents. Women had to constantly prove that they were not inferior, and this struggle weakened their mental strength and creativity. Woolf says that men carried within them a deep-seated desire to feel superior. They did not want women to be their equals; they wanted to maintain their dominance.

As an example, she mentions Lady Bessborough, who loved politics but wrote, "No woman has any business to meddle with that or any other serious business." Although she thought like men, she still placed herself below them. Woolf comments that the history of men's opposition to women's freedom is itself a fascinating subject; if someone collected all such examples and wrote a book, it would be remarkable. She then observes that modern women have the privilege of studying in colleges and writing in their own rooms, but the women of earlier generations did not have this freedom. They felt humiliation deeply, they cried and suffered silently. Florence Nightingale, for instance, expressed her agony and frustration in her writings.

Woolf rejects the idea that genius rises above criticism. In reality, she says, artists are the most sensitive to others' opinions. She recalls how the poet Keats was deeply hurt by criticism and even mentioned it on his tombstone. Finally, Woolf concludes that a true artist's mind must be "incandescent," clear, glowing, free, and without obstruction. Shakespeare's mind was exactly like that. He never allowed personal anger, revenge, or complaint to enter his art. His poetry flowed purely and freely, and that is why Shakespeare's genius remains immortal.