

## HERSTORY

## The shame of being a female writer



Jane Austen is considered one of the pioneers of female writing. This concept is highlighted by the famous English writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a text in which Woolf describes the emergence of women writers in the past. She mentions the extraordinary and miraculous case of Jane Austen, an author whose talent and genius Woolf believes can be compared only to William Shakespeare's. Woolf praises Austen not only for her incredible writing abilities but also – and mainly – for being able to overcome the obstacles imposed upon women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, turning her limitations into an opportunity for achieving excellence.



Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper<sup>1</sup>. Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class Woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels [...]. Without boasting or giving pain to the opposite sex, one may say that *Pride and Prejudice* is a good book. At any rate, one would not have been ashamed to have been caught in the act of writing *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet Jane Austen was glad that a hinge creaked<sup>2</sup>, so that she might hide her manuscript before anyone came in. To Jane Austen there was something **discreditable** in writing *Pride and Prejudice*. And, I wondered, would *Pride and Prejudice* have been a better novel if Jane Austen had not thought it necessary to hide her manuscript from visitors? I read a page or two to see; but I could not find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest. That, perhaps, was the chief miracle about it. Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at *Antony and Cleopatra*; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare. If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon<sup>3</sup> in a shop by herself. But perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely. ”

1 blotting-paper: carta assorbente

2 a hinge creaked: un cardine cigolò

3 luncheon: (= lunch, formale) pranzo

## COMPREHENSION

## 1 Answer the following questions.

1. Where did Jane Austen write her novels? Why?
2. Did 19<sup>th</sup>-century women receive any sort of formal training?
3. What kind of 'unique' training did they receive? How did this training affect their writing style and the choice of their themes?
4. Why did Jane Austen consider it 'discreditable' (l. 8) to write novels?
5. Virginia Woolf compares Jane Austen with William Shakespeare. What arguments does she use to build this comparison?
6. Focus on Woolf's sentence: 'It was impossible for a woman to go about alone' (ll.17-18). Explain how women could transform this impediment into a creative opportunity.

## ORACY Lab

2 Woolf states that Austen was able to turn the limitations imposed upon her into opportunities. Do you believe that constraints and challenges make us more skilled and better at what we do? Share your opinion with the rest of the class, if possible making reference to a personal experience that made you reflect on this.