## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

**Discuss all the questions in your reading group and write your answers into your book-project folder. Number your answers clearly so you can quickly find them or cut up this sheet and glue the questions into your reading diary.. Your project folder will be assessed for completeness, clarity of organization and content.**

### Before Reading the Novel:

1. Look at the painting for several minutes. What is your impression of the girl? Who is she? What is she thinking right now? Write an inner monologue following the girl's thoughts. Write at least one A4 page.

### While Reading the Novel:

2. Read slowly and carefully and watch out for passages where Griet describes Vermeer's paintings. What makes them so fascinating? (Note page numbers for later reference)
3. Do you think Griet was typical of other girls her age? In what ways? How did she differ? Find at least 5 adjectives that describe her character.
4. Fill in a character profile for Griet (use the character profile sheet).

5. In many ways, the primary relationship in this novel appears to be between Griet and Vermeer. Do you think this is true? How do you feel about Vermeer's relationship with his wife? How does that come into play?

6. Draw a sociogram for Vermeer. Which of the characters are very close to him? Which of them understand his art, which don't?
7. Do you think Griet made the right choice when she married the butcher's son? Did she have other options?

8. Though **Girl with a Pearl Earring** appears to be about one man and woman, there are several relationships at work. Which is the most difficult relationship? Which is the most promising? Fill in the grid below.

| | Griet | Maria Thins | Vermeer | Catharina | Tanneke |
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| Griet | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marie Thins | | | | | |
| Vermeer | | | | | |
| Catharina | | | | | |
| Tanneke | | | | | |

### Explaining the Symbolism in the Novel:

9. The issue of “seeing” is central in the novel. Griet tries form much of the novel to manipulate all that she sees into a sort of harmony, beginning with the soup vegetables she so carefully arranges so that they will not “fight when they are side by side.” Likewise, Vermeer’s art relies upon his ability to see the universal in even the most prosaic settings. Griet’s father cannot see at all, and not coincidentally, he is perhaps the novel’s most tragic and impotent figure. What does “seeing” mean to the novel’s other characters? Which of the characters “see” a lot? What do they “see”?
10. Explain the significance of the camera obscura in the novel? Reread the passages where Vermeer explains how he uses his new invention. In what way does Chevalier’s novel achieve a similar effect.
11. Explain the significance of the 8-pointed star in the Market place.
12. Griet always covers her hair carefully with her cap. She doesn’t want anyone to see her wild hair, not even Pieter or Vermeer. What is she hiding? What changes in her life when Vermeer accidentally sees her hair?
13. What is the significance of the pearl in the novel and in the painting? Would the girl be the same without the pearl earring? Try to cover it up in the painting and look.

### The Painting and the Novel:

14. Find out more about Vermeer and the painting that inspired the novel. Search the internet.
15. Look again at Vermeer’s painting, “Girl with a Pearl Earring”. In what ways has your perception of the painting changed as a result of reading the novel? Are you more likely to attach particular emotions to the girl’s ambiguous expression? Does the girl look more explicitly melancholy now? More amorous? Explain.

### The Role of Women:

16. Read the short extract from *A Room of One’s Own* where Virginia Woolf writes about Shakespeare’s imaginary sister Judith. Discuss the role of women at that time. What were their options? What was expected of them? How has the situation changed? **Write a 5§ essay** comparing the lives and times of Griet, Judith and young women in the 21st century.

## An Excerpt from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s* Own,

# Chapter 3

Be that as it may, I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that the bishop was right at least in this; 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, since facts are so hard to come by, 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, to marry 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. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter—indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly but was careful to hide them or set do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of fire to them.

Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring woolstapler. 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 seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. 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, looselipped 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. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? 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 and rounded brows—at last Nick Greene the actormanager 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 cross–roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was—it is

unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born to–day among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without singing them, was often a woman. It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald, I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk–songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. No girl could have walked to London and stood at a stage door and forced her way into the presence of actor–managers without doing herself a violence and suffering an anguish which may have been irrational—for chastity may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons—but were none the less inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest.

To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned. That refuge she would have sought certainly. It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much–talked–of man) that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood.