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The Professional Woman's Journey

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“The Professional Woman’s Journey”

by Casey Morrone

Instructor’s Notes

In this essay, Casey Morrone responds to Virginia Woolf’s essay, *Professions for Women*. Casey effectively achieves her purpose for this essay by writing a thesis that applies Woolf’s message to a current context. What do you think works well in this essay? What could be improved upon and how?

Writer’s Biography

Casey Morrone, a native New Yorker, is a Molecular and Cellular Biology major pursuing a career in medicine. She has a penchant for exploring new places and daydreaming about different cities she’d like to live in one day. Casey finds enjoyment in a broad range of activities including her current job as a resident assistant, watching football, and appreciating art of all sorts--spanning from literature to fashion.

The Professional Woman’s Journey

In today’s modern era, the conversation about women’s rights and feminism is in vogue. Like the latest must-have item in fashion, feminism is the garment that everyone is eager to slip into. Feminism and women’s rights are currently being applied to a wealth of different situations. The topic of women in the workplace, however, can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century, if not further. In fact, Virginia Woolf spoke of the barriers that women faced in their newfound professions, such as writing, back in 1931. In her speech from which the essay *Professions for Women* is derived, Woolf addressed both specific and abstract challenges that women faced in the professional environment, especially the environment of writing. In the modern day, some of these challenges have been conquered, some still remain obstacles, and others still have not yet been identified but oppose professional women all the same.

When Virginia Woolf gave her speech, women had only begun to choose occupations for themselves outside the home. It is no secret that, prior to this time, a woman's place was viewed to be in the home rather than in the workplace with a career. She was supposed to put everyone else's needs above her own. Although times were changing, this image of women pervaded. This explains the existence of the first obstacle that Woolf exposed: "The Angel in the House" (Woolf, 2005, P. 349)¹. She described the Angel in the House as a "phantom" who was "intensely sympathetic," "immensely charming," and "utterly unselfish." She "excelled in the difficult arts of family life" and "sacrificed herself daily." Furthermore, she "preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" rather than have "a mind or wish of her own" and—most importantly—was "pure" (P. 349-350). The Angel in the House appears to be none other than the ideal, turn-of-the-century housewife. This phantom of outdated values "bothered" and "tormented" Woolf to such a great extent that she "turned upon her and caught her by the throat" (P. 350). "Had I not killed her she would have killed me," Woolf reasoned in "self-defense" (P. 350). Through vivid and dramatic descriptions, Woolf made it clear that the Angel in the House was no longer an obstacle that women in her day need face. The idea of what a woman should be and should do was shifting, and the phantom was being trampled in the process. Whereas the women in Woolf's day battled with the phantom, women in the modern age have undoubtedly never experienced such a phantom. Nowadays women are encouraged to develop dreams and goals for their lives and to take the necessary steps to accomplish them. It can be argued that the modern woman is the antithesis of the Angel in the House. Clearly, professional women today do not face the challenge of the Angel in the House.

The second challenge that Woolf addressed was one that was more specific to women in the profession of writing than to women in other professions, but the barrier it created was significant nonetheless. According to Woolf, female writers had to overcome the challenge of "telling the truth about [their] own experience[s] as [bodies]" (P. 352). In Woolf's day, it was "unfitting for her as

¹ The rest of the citations in this essay refer to Virginia Woolf's speech-turned-essay, *Professions for Women*, which was edited by Jane E. Aaron and published in *40 Model Essays: A Portable Anthology* in 2005.

a woman” to speak or write “about the body, about the passions” as men did (P. 352). Woolf expressed that “men sensibly [allowed] themselves great freedom in these respects” but “[condemned] such freedom in women” (P. 352). Unlike the last obstacle Woolf addressed in her speech, she did not feel as though she, nor any female writer, had conquered this one, but that was eighty years ago. Today, this obstacle has indeed crumbled at the feet of female writers. The stigma that existed for women in Woolf’s day is nowhere to be found. It has become acceptable for women to write about whatever they choose. However, while this barrier is no longer in place for female writers, women still fight a losing battle with the passions. This is evident in the attitudes towards promiscuity, adultery, and the like. A woman found guilty of one of these things is typically judged more harshly and viewed more critically than a man would be in the same circumstance. This trend does not exclude the workplace, which potentially leaves professional women susceptible to unequal treatment when compared to male colleagues. This is one example of how the barrier mentioned by Woolf has morphed and continues to torment women in their professions.

Woolf considered writing to be “the freest of all professions for women,” yet she still encountered obstacles in her professional experiences (P. 352). Acknowledging this, she addressed the “ghosts” and “prejudices” that women faced in “the new professions which [they] are now for the first time entering” (P. 352). She suggested that “the obstacles against [professional women] are still immensely powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define” (P. 352). This is one assertion that holds just as true today as it did in Woolf’s day.

In the decades since Woolf gave her speech, women have infiltrated just about every occupation. Women can be found prosecuting in court, serving in Congress, fighting in the military, performing surgery in the operating room, selling stocks on Wall Street, announcing sporting events on live television, researching cures for terminal diseases in the laboratory, or sitting behind a fancy desk at a large corporation—and not always as a secretary or assistant, either. Modern day women have no problem gaining access to whichever field of work they desire to pursue. This does not mean, however, that women have eliminated all of the obstacles opposing them in their professional endeavors. In more than a few cases, women still earn less than men do. Pay gaps have not

decreased as expected over the years, especially in the medical field. On average, a physician makes around fifty thousand dollars more per year if birthed with a Y chromosome instead of a second X. As for the women behind the desk, they often feel the presence of a glass ceiling that prevents them from being promoted to executive positions in their companies. Despite all the women in the workforce, the reality is that the upper echelons of the corporate world are filled almost exclusively with men. One must ask the question, what exactly is the underlying obstacle—or perhaps, obstacles—that prevent women from equal standing with their male counterparts in the professional world? Like Woolf claimed eighty years ago, “they are very difficult to define” (P. 352). She believed that “Even when the path is nominally open—when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant—there are many phantoms and obstacles...looming her way” (P. 352-353). It is incredible how correct she was.

Speaking of the “phantoms and obstacles” still hindering women, Woolf stated that “To discuss and define them is...of great value and importance; for thus only can the labour be shared, the difficulties be solved” (P. 353). She raised an excellent point. Society should be participating in an active conversation that tries to define these obstacles. One of the first topics that should be addressed in such a discussion is this: perhaps a phantom still torments women. Yes, the Angel in the House died at the hand of professional women almost a century ago, but a new, modern day phantom seems to have taken her place. Birthed by a society that tells women that they can have it all, this phantom is the woman who has everything. She works a full time job, raises her children, has a good relationship with her husband, is involved in her community, and still manages to shop, clean, cook, and put dinner on the table for her family at six o’clock every night. This phantom eagerly accuses professional women everywhere. A woman who takes time off from work to raise her children is accused of not giving her full potential to her career; however, a woman who hires a nanny to raise her children while working full time is accused of neglecting her family by ranking her career as a higher priority. This creates an environment in which women are branded as inferior if they cannot measure up to the nearly impossible standard set by society. This modern day phantom is suffocating women and she must not be allowed to continue in her

devastating efforts. It is time for this phantom to be “caught... by the throat” and killed by women everywhere (P. 350).

But how does one go about killing this phantom? Women must pause and ask themselves why they as individuals are fighting to have everything. It doesn't come as a surprise that Woolf suggested this in her speech. After she charged women to “discuss and define” the barriers that hinder them in their professions, she continued by saying, “But besides this, it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with the formidable obstacles. Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined” (P. 353). Therefore, in the name of evaluating ends and aims, it is not only time for the modern day phantom to reach her demise, but it is also time to reevaluate the proposition that women can have it all. Perhaps this claim is simply not true for some women, or maybe even for all women. Each woman needs to determine this for herself, however, as she decides what she—and not society—wants her life to look like. Women will ultimately be happier and more fulfilled if they are honest with themselves and form their goals accordingly because behind every female professional is a woman—a valuable human being who does not need to be defined by society's overwhelming expectations any more than women in Woolf's day needed to be defined by the Angel in the House.

Defining the obstacles, examining goals, and determining solutions will neither be easy nor come quickly. It certainly didn't for Virginia Woolf and her female peers. It is all worth it, however, if it means that women can be satisfied and unhindered in whatever path in life they choose.

Works Cited

- Woolf, V. (2005). Professions for Women. In J. E. Aaron, 40 Model Essays: A Portable Anthology (pp. 348-353). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.