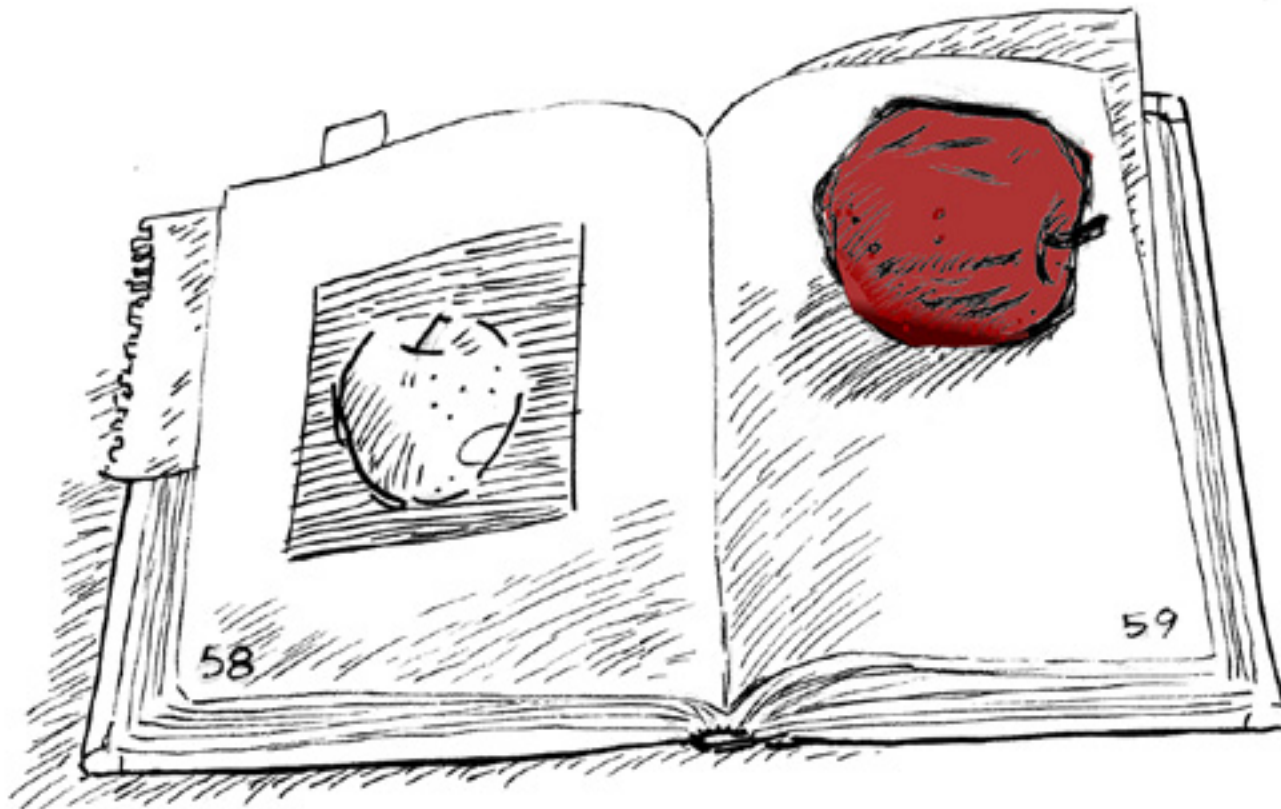


Virginia Woolf



Professions for Women

This essay was originally presented as a speech in 1931

- Historically, at this time in our culture a woman who wanted to be considered a serious writer would have difficulty gaining a publisher and an audience.
- Expectations for a woman's role in literature existed; women were limited to specific categories of more "casual" or formula prose, such as the genres of romance or mystery.
- Despite the restrictions, at this point in her career as a writer, Virginia Woolf was considered an established writer in the public's eye.

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- Her tone is partly serious, partly comedic. The opening paragraph for instance confirms that: “It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed” (235). She then proceeds to list women-authors who are among the members of the established Literary Canon studied in most colleges today, *plus* the ranks of the anonymous female authors over-looked and forgotten.
- Her tone often shifts from comic sarcasm to serious overtones of academic contemplation.
- Her main objectives in this piece are to complain against the clichéd image which men of the time held regarding women: the dutiful housewife, over-protective mother, ever-present nurse, self-sacrificing “angel of the house.”

Professions for Women

- The phrase “Angel in the House” is a Victorian concept; it is meant to compliment as well as define positive expectations for women.
- It was derived from a long narrative poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854. The work is set in a standard rhyme and strict meter, utilizes typical Victorian literary concepts— it exists as a strong example of what the Modernist movement protested against in later years after World War I.
- Patmore’s work idealizes his wife by dramatizing their courtship and ultimate marriage; he often portrays her as the perfect woman, not unlike past poets such as the celebrated Francesco Petrarch who created an archetypical, goddess-like figure named Laura.

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A sampling of the full text: “Prologue”

1

‘Mine is no horse with wings, to gain
The region of the spheral chime;
He does but drag a rumbling wain,
Cheer’d by the coupled bells of rhyme;
And if at Fame’s bewitching note
My homely Pegasus pricks an ear,
The world’s cart-collar hugs his throat,
And he’s too wise to prance or rear.’

2

Thus ever answer’d Vaughan his Wife,
Who, more than he, desired his fame;
But, in his heart, his thoughts were rife
How for her sake to earn a name.
With bays poetic three times crown’d,
And other college honours won,
He, if he chose, might be renown’d,
He had but little doubt, she none;

And in a loftier phrase he talk’d
With her, upon their Wedding-Day,
(The eighth), while through the fields they walk’d,
Their children shouting by the way.
‘Not careless of the gift of song,
Nor out of love with noble fame,
I, meditating much and long
What I should sing, how win a name,
Considering well what theme unsung,
What reason worth the cost of rhyme,
Remains to loose the poet’s tongue
In these last days, the dregs of time,
Learn that to me, though born so late,
There does, beyond desert, befall
(May my great fortune make me great!)
The first of themes, sung last of all.
In green and undiscover’d ground,
Yet near where many others sing,
I have the very well-head found
Whence gushes the Pierian Spring.’

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4

Then she: 'What is it, Dear? The Life
Of Arthur, or Jerusalem's Fall?'
'Neither: your gentle self, my Wife,
And love, that grows from one to all.
And if I faithfully proclaim
Of these the exceeding worthiness,
Surely the sweetest wreath of Fame
Shall, to your hope, my brows caress;
And if, by virtue of my choice
Of this, the most heart-touching theme
That ever tuned a poet's voice,
I live, as I am bold to dream,
To be delight to many days,
And into silence only cease
When those are still, who shared their bays
With Laura and with Beatrice,
Imagine, Love, how learned men
Will deep-conceiv'd devices find,
Beyond my purpose and my ken,
An ancient bard of simple mind.
You, Sweet, his Mistress, Wife, and Muse,

Were you for mortal woman meant?
Your praises give a hundred clues
To mythological intent!
And, severing thus the truth from trope,
In you the Commentators see
Outlines occult of abstract scope,
A future for philosophy!
Your arm's on mine! these are the meads
In which we pass our living days;
There Avon runs, now hid with reeds,
Now brightly brimming pebbly bays;
Those are our children's songs that come
With bells and bleatings of the sheep;
And there, in yonder English home,
We thrive on mortal food and sleep!
She laugh'd. How proud she always was
To feel how proud he was of her!
But he had grown distraught, because
The Muse's mood began to stir.

Professions for Women

- Ultimately, despite Patmore's good intentions, what results is the work *confirms* the typical male perception of the female's role in a household.
- Women were thus *further* regulated to domestic duties:
 - > organization of the household in perfect running order
 - > submission to husband's desires
 - > placement of herself second to the husband's demands
 - > wanting a career outside of the house for a woman was considered outrageous or unnatural.
- What Patmore creates is an idealistic image unattainable by anyone other than someone like the modern Martha Stewart or a Stepford wife.

Professions for Women

Notice how Woolf herself characterizes the iconic figure:

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic.

She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wish of others.

Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days [...] every house had its Angel. (236)

Professions for Women

- Woolf, as a woman-writer does not want to be compared to this unattainable status of an ideal woman. In order to survive in the world as an author Woolf must symbolically kill the image of perfection. Erase the phantom. “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me” (236).
- It must be pointed out that Woolf’s experiences are strong exceptions to the average woman’s experience. Woolf was a member of the upperclass.
- Likewise, her father Leslie Stephen actually encouraged his daughters to excel in art and reading.

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In another essay to appear in 1932, “My Father: Leslie Stephen,” she states: [...] today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. But my father allowed it [...] To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant—that was his only lesson in the art of writing. All the rest must be learned for oneself. (140)

- In his later years however, he did demand much of her and her sister to help maintain the house once her mother died. In this regard he followed the expectations of the Victorian era.

Professions for Women

Woolf is considered a Modernist.

This movement resulted out of the consequences of World War I and later confirmed by World War II.

- Authors in this category include:

William Faulkner Ernst Hemingway

T.S. Eliot James Joyce

- Their work tends to be more pessimistic than previous generations of writers; they view the world with a bitter tone and critical eye.

Professions for Women

- They aim to explore aspects of psychology influenced by the findings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung:
 - > Personality is influenced by outside elements and hidden desires of the individual.
 - > Psychoanalytic theories often deal with extraordinary sexual experiences — exploring these concepts in a *scientific* manner rather than a *moral* manner.
- Examination and defining the roles of author/creator, text, reader/co-creator.
In other words, they examined how an author can create a text and how the reader re-invents the situations in his/her head.

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Romantic / Victorian Periods versus Modernism

early 1700s to late 1800s

rational order to Universe

faith in church and state

morals / strong values

sense of placement / identity

static division between classes

optimistic

conservative, narrow minded

Twentieth Century (1900s)

chaotic system

lack of faith

collapse of morality / loss of values

loss of identity:

national / gender / sexuality

fluid division between classes

pessimistic

open minded, free thinking

Industrial Revolution / Darwin's theories / World War I

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- Likewise, Woolf also wants to establish an agenda focused on a woman's perspective in a male dominated world, without being forced to follow the regulations of the "Angel of the House."
- Critics argue whether Woolf succeeds in freeing herself completely from this, despite her views expressed in this essay.