

Those who are shackled

Throughout the short story, *A Society* by Virginia Woolf, we are presented with an array of women who come to a mutual agreement on their state in society. There is an agreement that they have been lessened through the practices men convey in their writings and their daily actions. They agree to visit this “man's world”, each choosing a different aspect to visit, either that be at oxbridge, a british museum, a royal academy, or a king's navy. What they make of their personal and distinct experiences leads them to choose a diverting path which once seemed to be a straightforward one. While some choose to break free from the repeated cycle of belittlement and mistreatment, others settle for the comfort this cycle of life brought to them.

As we see once World War 1 passed, only two members remained meeting in the room once filled with passionate members of the society of the future. Individuals who once went out of their way to venture out of their comfort zone, and explore this “ men's world” that they had never taken a comprehensive look into. While some choose to explore universities and the navy, they all shared a common goal, that being asking questions on how men got to these positions and more importantly, how they operated in these areas. Their approach, while done passionately, was misguided, leaving them to abandon their cause as sudden as it had begun.

Before the outbreak of the war, an abrupt meeting is held when Castalia enters the room unannounced, and pregnant. While the members take turns bickering amongst their ideals and how some view Castalia as having turned her back to the society, there is an important characterization of the members. Rather than hear Castalia reasoning out, they take a childlike approach, violently disputing one another, rather than taking a more-civilized approach to the manner. The argument continues through a series of interruptions from each member, until

chants are heard outside of "War! War! War! Declaration of War!"(A Society, Woolf). This leaves them asking only one thing, "Why," we cried, "do men go to war?"(A Society, Woolf). If they had taken it into their hands to enlighten themselves of this "man's world", what prevented them from knowing of an oncoming war, and moreover why men go to war. Nothing prevented them, rather they realized they hadn't sent anyone to the House of Commons.

This is a fundamental issue presented through the narration of the women's efforts. From the start of their stance, their actions are put in a comedic, light hearted manner, in which these women disguise themselves as men to infiltrate the navy, or wear wigs to court hearings. The notes they take on these different worlds are of men being "wooden figures" and "unreal", that are met interest, yet when Helen, a member of the society, talks of her experience of the Royal Academy and beings to recite from a volume from the academy, she is met with annoyance, members telling her they want no more poetry. When everyone was thrown into disarray at the announcement of war, they looked at Poll, another member, for wisdom on why the war had commenced. As she begins to explain why the previous war had broken out, they abruptly cut her off, stating that was then, only caring for the now.

As detailed in the above events, most members of the society choose ignorance when faced with knowledge. They choose to do aside with meaningful history detailing events that could shine a light on current events. They choose to make playful of their journeys rather than take in any meaningful information, and when someone does come back with information prevalent to where they came from, they are met with an abrupt end to their eagerness to help build onto the answer that was thought to be trying to be answered by all members. The absence of equal opportunities and rights faced by women of the time, an issue that decades later is still an anchor on the lives of many let alone the 20th century, at the time was met with playful

ventures, rather than a serious undertaking that yielded conclusions. After the war's end, only three members of the society are left continuing their meetings. What is made of the other members is left unknown, but much can be inferred when the role of women is put into context under World War 1.

During World War 1, women employment doubled, going from twenty three percent, to forty seven percent. Women produced eighty percent of weapons used by the British army, and married women made up forty percent of female workers (Striking Women, Anitha and Pearson). During this four year period, women became integral to war efforts, alongside an increasing presence in the workforce, a space once dominated by men. Wages, albeit being half of what men earned in the same working conditions, were being earned, and an expression of freedom unheard of before was being exerted. Though at the end of the war, many women were fired and subsequently replaced by the returning warmen, female presence remained ever growing in a post war America. Although change was being made, there was an illusion of progress that perpetuated the mal treatment of women throughout the oncoming decades.

It can be assumed that during the war, many of the society's members joined the workforce, believing it to be a direct answer to the questions one seeked out. They not only viewed the role men played in society, but undertook that same role, and directly contributed to war efforts. Others might have abandoned their efforts seeing it as futile as nothing had come from their previous efforts. The “why” is never explored, “why did these women abandon their efforts?”, but the answer, as explained through the analysis of the text in the previous paragraphs, was laid out before the question could even have been thought of. Their beliefs, like a glass statue, seemingly poised and composed, shattering under the frequencies of war cries. The

culmination of a misguided approach that led them to build their beliefs on an unstable foundation. This, stemming from the miseducation of a society.

The women who made up the society, brought up in a world where education was not an equal opportunity. People raised in unequal conditions, being taught only what was told, unable to make of the world what they wanted to. Women didn't have the opportunity to build their own belief systems, build up their own view of the world as they viewed it, but rather were forced to view it under the guise of what a man wanted. Woolf presents a comprehensive look at the disposition of women, rooted in their inability to simply read, preventing them from having any proper form of education and knowance of world affairs. The women, who after the war perpetuated the cycle of mistreatment and displacement in society, were all painted one shade, with men choosing the palette. The two who remained in the society post war, even them passing down the role of president, effectively even themselves abandoning their cause. A cycle, virtually made invincible when those under its effect know nothing but.