

The Misguided Approach to Knowledge

In Virginia Woolf's "A Society" a group of women search London to learn the motives and values of men in an effort to decide whether or not they should bring children into the world. By the end, this bold approach is what happens to be their first mistake. The women go to different circles of men to try to investigate their nature, going to business meetings, courtrooms, schools, and just about anywhere. One of their biggest mistakes though was forgetting to send someone to question the House of Commons and the war. Because they overlooked this, the men continued to wage war without ever being asked why by the women. This represents a grander picture of ignorance and how it perpetuates the cycle of war and hate.

Regardless of the war, the women still revert back to traditional gender roles by the end of the story and almost abandon their mission, leaving it for the next generation of women to attempt. The women recognize the knowledge they now have, yet they see it as a burden, feeling powerless to do anything with the information they learned about the world. Castalia points out the burden that reading has brought them all as they discover that while men are not intellectually superior they still dominate every institution, "we might still have been bearing children in ignorance and that I believe was the happiest life after all" (Woolf). Their approach to gaining knowledge about the world is what may have been their mistake. Their qualifications for bringing children into the world were if men created good books and good people, however, this may have been a bit reductive towards the individual man and too broad of a philosophy on life. While they focus on what they value and are good at bringing into this world as women, for only a split second they explore the "why" or what motivates men. When the women ran into the mystery of men's motivations, they stopped short when the men got uncomfortable answering

questions of morals, religion, and motivation. They concluded that men's writings are not up to standard, but were stumped on why they work so hard, getting vague answers such as for their wives, their family, or simply giving no answer at all. Investigating the why of men further would have been the key to fully understanding them, but perhaps it was the fact that they are women that the men refused to fully confide in them.

In the society's point of view, what someone puts out into the world is a direct reflection of who they are. The men seem to have a less romantic view of the world, using their actions as more of a means to an end. We see an inherent division between men and women in the story because of this fundamental difference in thinking and use of knowledge, making them unknowable to each other. The women ultimately accept this division and decide that the only way forward is to teach their daughters to believe in themselves rather than needing men's approval. However, they seemed to regret their pursuit and wonder why they started, as it only brought them more questions and mental hardship that they could not unlearn, even considering sheltering their daughters from the troubles that knowledge brings.