

## The Angel in the House

Melissa Mott

In Virginia Woolf's essay "Professions for Women," Woolf describes having a conflict with "the Angel in the House." She describes this "angel" as a figure that is pure and once whispered in her ear while she was writing a review of a male author's book saying, "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender... Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own" (Woolf 245). To Woolf, it was important to defeat the Angel of the House and for women to regain their own mind. Adrienne Rich's essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as a Re-Vision," reflects on some of Woolf's main points. Rich believes that man's power and terror is what drives the angel, resulting in women writers conforming to society, being afraid to write what is really on their mind, for a man may judge it. Woolf's description of the angel does apply to all women at all times throughout history. Rich gives an example of her own life and how she desired and achieved living a "'full' woman's life" until she realized she was still listening to the angel (Rich 988). Woolf also says that it is "necessary... to discuss the end and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles" (Woolf 247). According to both Woolf and Rich, it is important to not only ignore, but also challenge the angel and go against the patriarchal society that women have grown up in, in order for them to think with a clear mind for the first time.

According to Virginia Woolf, the Angel of the House affects every single piece of work she writes. She says, "...you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex" and that

angel was always in her ear, telling her what to say and to come off as “sympathetic” in her work and to “use all the arts and wiles of [the female] sex” (Woolf 245). Adrienne Rich mentions the works of famous poets like Sylvia Plath and Diane Wakoski. She says that in their work, men come off as “a terror; and that the source of the fascination and terror is, simply, Man’s power—to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman” (Rich 984). In this case, women writers quite frequently write about men and, subconsciously, give those men a sense of power and strength. This is sometimes frightening to women because in this patriarchal society in which they live, the norms are that men are strong and powerful, while women are fragile and meek. Even those women that attempt to get rid of the angel try to sound angry in their writing to show that men don’t impact their own writing. Ironically enough, if ones reads between the lines, they actually still have the angel present.

Adrienne Rich then throws herself into her essay as an example, which many women taking on this topic have not dared about doing. Rich speaks of feeling the need to not only please her father with her writing, but also not to displease him, which is almost just as important. She says how this is very common because, from a young age, girls are taught the societal norms in a patriarchy, where men dominate, and to please their parents. Since Rich’s father is the one who encourages her so often to read and write, she always looks for his approval when writing. In turn, this sets her up to seek a male figure’s approval later on in life. She then fast-forwards in her own life to where she re-reads the poems she writes as a college student and realizes her split-style between “the girl who...defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (Rich 987). Here, Rich is saying that she writes to express herself, but when re-reading her poetry years later, she realizes that she actually writes about her feelings while in relationships with men. At an even later age, Rich then brings

up how she wants to live the life that every other woman does; she wants to get married and have children. Only when it is too late, Rich has no idea that she is still conforming to the angel in a patriarchal society. She realizes that she “plunged” into marriage before she even knows what she is doing (Wolf 988). It is when she is older that she realizes that she just wants to focus on her writing and career and not to live the traditional way that “requires holding back” (Rich 989). The angel is telling her every move to make in life, and she needs to get that angel out of her head.

Rich references Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and describes how the tone of Woolf’s work is that of a female who tries to kill the Angel of the House, but does not succeed. Woolf’s voice still comes off as that of a woman who wishes to be heard loudly and in touch with her anger. However, Rich actually calls Woolf “acutely conscious” that women are listening, as well as men. This is a quite common thing to have happen, especially when Rich references back to her own poem, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”. While writing this piece, Rich wants Aunt Jennifer to come off as a strong and powerful woman, but what she doesn’t even realize is that she still has the angel sitting on her shoulder, as well. If Adrienne Rich was completely conscious of her own mind, she would write that poem in the first person because she is not afraid of men seeing her as a fearless and hard-working woman who is “proud and unafraid” (Rich 965). Rich agrees with Woolf in that this angel sits on the shoulder of every single woman, “even those who don’t know it yet” because she is so deceiving (Rich 983). Even those who attempt to kill her are sometimes still misled.

Both Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich believe that killing the Angel of the House is extremely important for a woman to be able to think for herself. Woolf believes that if she did not get rid of angel, she would have “killed” Woolf because she takes “the heart out” of

everything she writes (Woolf 245). Literature has formed the basis of stereotypes in the patriarchal society, so it is important to take a step back and recognize why and how this is happening so that women will not keep falling into the trap of the angel. Rich says that it is “exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness” although it sometimes may “be confusing, disorienting, and painful” because, as said before, many women don’t even realize that it’s going on. Woolf explains that she defeats the angel because she receives an inheritance from relatives that passed on. Because of this, she doesn’t have to rely “on charm” to make money from her work. If the work she writes from her clearly conscious mind doesn’t get published or sold, it will not be the end of the world because she has money to fall back on (Woolf 245). Having economic security allows Woolf to be able to write with her own mind. Adrienne Rich says that defeating the angel “is not like the crossing of a frontier” (Rich 993). Getting rid of her will not happen overnight, and it will not only take one step. Rich gives the examples of earlier poetry written by women that was “a cry of pain” and “victimization”. Nowadays, it is “charged with anger.” Rich says in order to kill the angel that ruins women, women must channel their anger and “betray our own reality” to be able to break away from this patriarchy and think objectively (Rich 993). Adrienne Rich has the word “re-vision” in the title of this essay because she wants women to look back at the past “not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us” to begin to form the future of women’s writing (Rich 983).

The angel that sits on a woman’s shoulder desires her to be feminine and meek, forcing that woman to sound submissive, but at the same time, embracing man’s dominance. The angel wants all women to abide by the patriarchal society in that women are below men in the hierarchy. Both Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich believe this to be true, and Rich also agrees that this angel affects all women throughout history and that she must be killed for women to

think freely with their own mind. Woolf is one of the lucky ones that has the economic security backing her so that she is able to write freely, without the concern of having a stable life. Rich, on the other hand, believes that women should have to look back at the history women have been through so far and realize what is going on. Only after that should they use their anger that's inside them to break away from patriarchy and think objectively. The Angel in the House is very deceiving and sometimes invisible, but she is always there until women are made aware of her presence by looking back on literature of which she affects.

Works Cited

Rich, Adrienne. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." Gilbert and Gubar 965.

---. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision (1971)." Gilbert and Gubar 982-94.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. "Professions for Women." Gilbert and Gubar 244-47.