“Professions for Women” is an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service on January 21, 1931. The essay concentrates on that Victorian phantom known as the Angel in the House—that selfless, sacrificial woman in the nineteenth century whose sole purpose in life was to soothe, to flatter, and to comfort the male half of the world’s population. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the rhetorical choices Woolf makes to convey her contrary position and reconsideration of a woman’s role in society.

From “Professions for Women”

When your secretary invited me to come here, she told me that your Society is concerned with the employment of women and she suggested that I might tell you something about my own professional experiences. It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed; but what professional experiences have I had? It is difficult to say. My profession is literature; and in that profession there are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage—fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women. For the road was cut many years ago—by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot—many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps. Thus, when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way. Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse. For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare—if one has a mind that way. Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer. The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions.

But to tell you my story—it is a simple one. You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right—from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what is simple and cheap enough after all—to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month—a very glorious day it was for me—by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence. But to show you how little I deserve to be called a professional woman, how little I know of the struggles and difficulties of such lives, I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat—a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbours.

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her— you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. 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 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 wishes 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—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I
heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to
review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a
young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be
tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have
a mind of your own. Above all, be pure." And she made as if to guide my pen. I now record the
one act for which I take some credit to myself, though the credit rightly belongs to some excellent
ancestors of mine who left me a certain sum of money--shall we say five hundred pounds a year?--
so that it was not necessary for me to depend solely on charm for my living. I turned upon her and
cought 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-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She
would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, 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 all these questions, according to the
Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they
must conciliate, they must--to put it bluntly--tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt
the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it
at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a
phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her.
Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that
had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of
adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women
writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

But to continue my story. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what
remained was a simple and common object--a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other
words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but
what is "herself"? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you
know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and
professions open to human skill. That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here out of
respect for you, who are in process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are
in process of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of
information.