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A Stand for Equality

**Introduction:** “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, it is to unlearn.” (Gloria Steinem.) From the wicked witches of Salem to the women who stood up against all odds, women throughout history have always been watched with one eye open. In many perspectives, witches are evil and go against human morals. The term witches places a negative connotation on people, especially on women. We picture something evil that leaves many people uneasy. And then there were women who had often stood up for what they believed was right and were put down for the simple fact they were women. In Gloria Steinem’s speech, “Scholars, Witches, and Other Freedom Fighters,” she brings attention to several stories throughout history to explain it in a different perspective. In order to fully understand history, we must look at it in a different perspective, unlearn all that we learned in the past and view from a women’s perspective. Gloria Steinem created an overall narrative that met Fisher’s guidelines for trustworthiness. She easily uses identification to divide the audience from their old ideas and throughout her speech, she is scapegoating men for the problems that women have been facing without actually saying so.

**Context:**

Gloria Steinem was born March 25, 1934. At a young age, her parents divorced and she ended up caring for her mother who suffered from mental illness. She grew up without a father figure for six years and was force to take on the responsibility of caring for another at such a young age. Her mother was ill due to depression. She was once a journalist and had her career going along until she became pregnant with Gloria and had to give it all up. She then went to Smith College where she studied government. Which at that time, was an untraditional choice for women to take. After completing her education, she moved to New York where she became a freelance writer. During her career with the company, she noticed she was not being treated equally among her male peers. Around the 1960s, she became a part of the “second-wave feminism.” She first made national attention after publishing a segment on *Show* magazine where she went undercover and became a Playboy bunny. This article exploited the way women were treated with disrespect. She also revealed the way they were dressed as and treated as sex objects and how she and the other bunnies were overworked and underpaid. Steinem was proud of this piece but found a rough career path afterwards. She found it hard to take political news seriously because she was a woman. She continued to work hard until 1968 when she became an editor at *New York* magazine. Throughout her career path she became not only a journalist, but also a socialist activist, lecturer, and editor. Steinem strongly believed in equality for women and time after time, she continued to fight for equal rights for all women, for all races. Steinem encountered many obstacles that many women could relate to, but because of her past, she was able to look past her issues and became a strong independent woman from it.

**Description:**

In March of 1993, Feminist Gloria Steinem presented a speech at Salem State College called “Scholars, Witches and other Freedom Fighters.” She started her speech by bringing into term “hierarchy” and how it is based on patriarchy which does not work anywhere anymore. She encourages her audience to help give answers rather than ask questions about overthrowing or humanizing the hierarchical structure. She then goes on explain how there are more activist young women than there were in past years. Steinem explains how women are much more valued and powerful at the ages of 18-20 than women at the age of 50. Women at a young age have more power in a patriarchy because they are seen as sex objects, child bearers, and energetic workers. On the other hand, this is the opposite for men. Men are much more powerful at an older age and men become more conservative with age. Even on an educational note, the empowerment of a woman is not the same as a man. As stated, “Women’s self –esteem goes down with every additional year of higher education.” (Steinem.) Also, there are fewer women honored in authority.

Steinem then goes on and talks about how it would be if we looked at the world as if everyone mattered. She mentions the Native American cultures and how the history we learned about them is not entirely the truth. She established that the source of our knowledge of democracy really came from the Natives American culture. The structure of our government was influenced by the way Native Americans ruled their tribes. She then emphasizes the importance of freedom fighters and that not enough scholars are willing enough to go back and look at the real history and discover the richness of a culture.

Steinem next points out the connection between the bruises and the original sources. “It is only when we go back and look at the origins of the bruises, which are events in current life that may be hitting, that we understand the events in life that are not the total cause of what we are experiencing.” She uses two U.S. leaders, Reagan and Clinton. Both were abused by an alcoholic father. Reagan was known as the one who denied everything and did not face the problem. Whose perspective made an impact on the way he led the country. On the other hand, Clinton faced the problem and used it for a better future. He was one of the first two post-therapy leaders.

Towards the end of the speech, Steinem brings to mind the accomplishment of many women that were unrecognized throughout history. She provides the example of the space program. Many believed Sally Ride was the first female astronaut when in fact there were 12 female astronauts in the first class along with John Glenn. She then talks about the discovery of paternity and how it was once seen in a bad way. She explains how it was between the 13th-15th centuries where women were being prosecuted for the assumption of being witches when in reality these women were just “freedom riders.” She ends her speech by saying we can learn from scholars who look at the world as a whole and by understanding that witches were not as bad as history made them up to be, we can learn to appreciate the fact they were healers and freedom fighters.

**Analysis:**

In Gloria Steinem’s speech, “Scholars, Witches and Other Freedom Fighters,” we discover there is more meaning behind what was said. Once broken down into parts, we can discover how the narrative paradigm is involved during the analysis of the speech. According to Chapter 11, the narrative paradigm breaks down the speech into a narrator, characters, the setting, context, situation and plot. The narrative paradigm is a way to interpret the speech in a narrative format in order to determine if the speech is reliable and trustworthy. In this speech, Steinem is the narrator. The narrator in the paradigm plays an important role. The voice of this person is what matters and what the audience focuses on. She is speaking from a second rave feminist perspective to a new generation. She uses her personal experiences to play a persuasive role.

The characters of the narratives are series of different type of women. Those women include educated women, astronauts and witches. Each of those women represented a role of a freedom fighter. The minor characters are the men who were mentioned throughout the series of stories. Although they may not be the focus, the actions they chose are what made a different in society.

The setting would be taking place at Salem State College during their 300th Anniversary of March 1993. This college began as a women’s college. This means only women were able to attend in the beginning. Based on the narrative the plot, is the historical timeline Steinem uses to discuss. She began her speech by identifying with the audience that she is one of them and not the one they assume her to be. As a narrator Steinem is telling stories of the different women who were treated unfairly. She spoke of the ones that were not recognized and where the light was shined brighter on males in the same position of honor. The stories she is telling reveal the dark side of woman history. It is the side that was buried away. As she continued her story she began to reveal information that revolved around the stories. Steinem used series of mini stories as examples to tell a story of her own. She tells a story of misconception and hidden truth of the American history. She believed the marginalized history has been suppressed and that we should be aware of it to fight inequality.

In this speech, we also discover the elements of Burke’s concept. Steinem identified that men basically wrote history and we have been suppressed by it. Steinem uses identification to help divide the audience. She believes history has been misleading and because she identifies with the audience she wants them to feel the same way too. She makes claims stating that history has not been entirely truthful. She uses examples of the Native American cultures. She states, “The source of our knowledge of democracy really came from the Native American cultures that were already here.” This is one piece of history that was not taught to us in classroom. “We have penalized ourselves, in fact, by not having scholars who were freedom fighters and not enough scholars who were willing to go back and look at the real history and uncover the richness of culture…” (Steinem). History has been told by a male’s perspective throughout time. She continues to use these examples to persuade the audience that they have been misled with what we believe that this country’s history is.

Another concept of Burke that was used was hierarchy. She put men on top of a pedestal. History has often given men the power and honor that most women were not given the privilege to have. Women were not given the rights that most men were able to have. She emphasizes the discovery of paternity. “There seems to have come over a millennia the desire to establish the ownership of children by particular men and thus to restrict the freedom of women long enough to make sure who the father of the child is." Steinem believes this restricted women’s freedom to determine paternity.

The idea of victimage is also emphasized in the text. This puts guilt among women because they want to make a change. And when women want to make a change for the better, it is something that has been looked upon negatively. In her speech, it is clear who the victims are. Women are portrayed as the victims from start to end. She is blaming the men and how history had often project women in a negative way, scapegoating. Steinem strongly believes that women have been treated and continue to be treated unequally when compared to men.

**Interpretation:**

Gloria Steinem is an individual with high expectations. To have in mind what she went through from a young age, it is obvious where she stands throughout the course of the speech. She used series of mini stories to grasp the audience’s attention and tell a larger narrative. The stories were ones that were told in a man’s perspective. She showed them in a woman’s perspective and provided the audience with information that was not evident unless you looked deep in the situation. By providing these stories, she had the audience question American history. It stimulates the audience’s mind in a way that has them wanting to know the hidden truth. There is a lot that goes into the events we learn in history because it was mainly written in a man’s perspective. In order to understand history fully, one must see it through a woman’s perspective as well. Steinem believed there were many influential women throughout history but were failed to be noticed just for the simple fact they were women.

According to Fisher, there are two important concepts that help examine the text as a rationale for action. “Narrative probability refers to formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thought and/or action in life or literature.” (Stoner, 190). The narrative probability is consistent and shows a cause and effect. Based on the description of the narrative, it is suggested that there is probability involved. This speech was composed of small stories that were hidden within history. The overall story was based on the unfair treatment of women. Each story reflects how women were treated in society. Steinem showed how negatively women are seen even though their purpose was meant to place a positive impact in society. Steinem strongly believes women have been suffering from oppression since the beginning of “witch” times and proves it through her consistent storytelling. The second concept used is narrative fidelity. “Narrative fidelity concerns the ‘truth qualities’ of the story, the degree to which it accord with the logic of good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values” (Stoner,190). Steinem’s reasoning for using this series of stories is to relate them to the fact given that both women and men are still not equal. Her narrative is relevant to the issue and helps support her values of equality. It has been a man’s world for a long time and she wants to change that. Steinem claims women have been overlooked and creates a number of examples as evidence that rely on clear warrants. For example, her story of Sally Ride whom believed was the first female astronaut when in fact, there were twelve other female astronauts who passed the test and were first class along with John Glenn. This story proves how the accomplishments of many women are overlooked due to the fact of their gender. She created an overall narrative that met Fisher’s guidelines for trustworthiness.

Burke’s concept plays a big part in understanding the speech given by Steinem. In this speech Steinem uses identification. She identifies with the audience, telling them she is just like many of them. This is a common technique used by many who are trying to persuade their audience to think outside the box. It most likely had the audience thinking differently from what they came in thinking. Steinem emphasize the power men hold and the little power women were given. She easily uses identification to divide the audience from their old ideas. Steinem believed society relies on history to find meaning in the present. However, one cannot fully understand the reason for today without being aware of the different perspective of history. History has often defined what this country is. We were always taught the value and the good things men have done in the past. On the other hand, when describing some of the things women have gone through, such as the Salem witch trials, women were seen in a negative way. Steinem wanted to persuade her audience to see the ongoing problem through her eyes rather then what they are used to.

The last tool that was used to describe this speech was also one of Burke’s concepts. Steinem uses hierarchy to define the inequality between men and women. This is one of the important topics of this speech. It also has been a controversy for women to fight for their rights. By associating guilt and women, it gives the impression that women have not been given the power most men were given. Having guilt is an uneasy feeling and can be something one want to get rid of as soon as possible. By acknowledging the past, one can make a different in the future. Throughout her speech she is scapegoating men for the problems women have been facing without actually saying so. By examining her choices of words, we are able to determine the negative connotations used. She does not say it bluntly in most cases, but it obvious within all the stories she uses and how she uses them to convey the message.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, Gloria Steinem is a woman who has a strong belief of equality between both women and men. She is guided by her past experiences to express her values and what she believes needs to be said in order for something to change. She uses smaller stories to make a bigger picture for a strong understanding of what is meant with equality. In this essay, the context was analyzed through the use of narrative paradigm, Burke’s concept of identification and division, hierarchy and scapegoating. Overall, Steinem wanted to prove that women who were scholars and witches were just among the many freedom fighters that were frowned upon due to their gender.

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