An Analysis On
*The Speech the Graduates Didn’t Hear* by Jacob Neusner

“So, go. Unlearn the lies we have taught you” (41).

*The Speech the Graduates Didn’t* was a piece that Mr. Neusner prepared while teaching at Brown University. The piece is directed towards his graduate students and is written as if he is speaking to them. The speech was intended to be delivered at the students graduation ceremony, but instead went unspoken and instead published in Brown’s *Daily Herald* in 1983. It has since then been reprinted in *Readings for Writers*.

The intent of Neusner’s speech, to tear down any hope for the future that his graduates might have, is made clear within the first paragraph. Here he states, “We the faculty take no pride in our educational achievements with you” (39). He supports this point by saying that the professors only gave out good grades because they simply didn’t want to deal with the students. By saying his he gives of the impression of an uncaring and calloused professor. Mr. Neusner moves on to say that the students are undisciplined and naive to the world they are about to enter. “We have prepared for you a world that does not exist, indeed, cannot exist... But starting now, in the world to which you go, failure marks you” (39,40). Neusner makes a point to patronize his students throughout the speech. He addresses their good grades that they earned by saying, “For four years we created an altogether forgiving world in which whatever slight effort you made was all that was demanded... So, here grades can have meant little in distinguishing the excellent
from the extraordinary” (40). So, in other words, he means to take away the accomplishments of everyone, even the best students. He does an especially good job at this throughout the rest of the essay. Certainly taking away any “Special Snowflake” syndrome the students might have.

Neusner combines all of these points in a pretentious way by quoting someone he assumes the graduates have never heard of.

College has spoiled you by reading papers that don’t deserve to be read, listening to comments that don’t deserve hearing, paying attention to the lazy, ill-informed and rude. We had to do it, for the sake of education. But nobody will ever do it again. College has deprived you of adequate preparation for the last fifty years. It has failed you for being easy, free, forgiving, attentive, comfortable, interesting, unchallenging fun. Good luck tomorrow.

-Professor Cater A. Daniel, Rutger University (40)

It is here, when Professor Neusner ties this piece in, that it becomes clear as to where he got his inspiration to write this speech. Although a much longer piece, many of Neusner’s points are the same that Carter had written a few years prior. Although they are both directed toward groups of students, the main difference is still the audience because they are from completely different universities. This raises the question of who’s to blame for their incompetence, the teachers or the students?

As Mr. Neusner nears the end of this unspoken speech he reiterates that he and the faculty have nothing to take pride in from the students and that he believes that they all act childishly. He concludes his piece by telling the students that they should expect to be punished if they treat their coworkers and bosses the same way that they were treated by them. “...When they give you what you want but have not earned, don’t abuse them...This too we have tolerated” (41). It is also here where he subtly makes a point that it is the facility who was the victim of the
students and not the other way around. To give himself the last laugh and finish his un-motivational speech off he renstates the point that the graduates have no idea what the real world is like by saying, “So go, unlearn the lies we have taught you. To life!” (41). Neusner placed this point last to echo intimidating thoughts in the graduates minds long after the ceremony. Although it wasn’t exactly motivational, it was well placed for the point he was trying to make.

All in all, the speech didn’t persuade me into thinking that this was what those students deserved to hear. Clearly it didn’t persuade the ceremony directors either and so it was left unspoken, and I think that was for the better. I don’t believe that it was the faculty who were the victim of massively uneducated and incompetent students. No, if anything it is the students who deserve an apology from the professors who chose not to spend their time helping them. In some ways, the author makes very valid points. To the graduates, failure is a bad grade on a test. Once they received their poor results, they could easily drop the class and even get their money back. They had never before carried the true burden of failure, and that bad grade could never tarnish their reputation once they left. In some ways professor Neusner was right when he wrote his speech about his spoiled graduates. A lack of passion is common on college campuses and runs through most students veins. It is all that they know because it was all they were ever taught.

“Despite your fantasies, it’s not even that we wanted to be liked by you. It was that we didn’t want to be bothered, and the easy way out was pretense: smiles and easy Bs.”

Hypocrisy is twisted tightly into this speech. Luckily, the students never had to have their accomplishments snatched away and unvalidated by one of their calloused and resentful professors. That is, as long as they didn’t read the school’s daily newspaper.