from Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Nonfiction by Margaret Fuller

NOTABLE QUOTE

"We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to woman as freely as to man."

FYI

Did you know that Margaret Fuller . . .

- learned to read when she was 3 years old?
- suffered from nightmares in which she dreamed horses were galloping across her head?
- inspired Edgar Allan Poe to quip, "There are three species: men, women, and Margaret Fuller"?

Author Online

For more on Margaret Fuller, visit the **Literature Center** at **ClassZone.com.**

Officers of the National Council of Women, late 19th century

Margaret Fuller

1810–1850

Margaret Fuller spent much of her life fighting to make women equal members of society. At a time when a woman's only place was thought to be the small sphere of the home, Fuller became a respected author, a commanding public speaker, a popular journalist, and a key figure in the transcendentalist movement. One literary historian observed that Fuller "transcended virtually every stereotype American women had to endure in the first half of the 19th century."

A Demanding Childhood Sarah Margaret Fuller was born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts. Her father, a stern and formidable man, had high expectations for her. When she was only 10 years old, he counseled that excelling "in all things should be your constant aim." As a teenager, Fuller typically started her studies at five in the morning and sometimes did not finish until eleven at night.

Coming into Her Own Fuller's father died suddenly when she was 25, and she became a teacher to help support her family. Through a mutual acquaintance, she met Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was much impressed by her intelligence and wit. She began attending meetings of the Transcendental Club. In 1840, Fuller became the editor of *The Dial*, a short-lived but highly influential literary magazine. Fuller solicited poems, essays, and fiction from leading transcendentalists and wrote much of the content herself.

An Influential Voice In 1844, Fuller started writing the literary column for the *New York Tribune*, perhaps the most widely read newspaper of its day. In addition to reviewing literary works, she addressed social issues such as poverty and slavery. In 1845, Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a revolutionary feminist work that paid tribute to women's intellectual and creative abilities and declared that women must be accepted as equal to men. The first edition sold out in two weeks.

Romance and Tragedy In 1846, the *New York Tribune* sent Fuller to cover civil unrest in Europe. She settled in Rome, where she fell in love with and married Italian aristocrat Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. When revolution broke out in Rome in 1848, Fuller supported the cause by volunteering at a hospital while her husband fought for the republic. The revolution failed, and Fuller, Ossoli, and their young son sailed to the United States in 1850. With New York City almost in sight, their ship hit a sandbar and sank. Fuller, Ossoli, and their son drowned.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century

MARGARET FULLER

BACKGROUND From 1839 to 1844, Fuller led a series of seminars for women called "Conversations." She lectured on topics ranging from ethics to art and then asked her listeners to discuss each topic, thus helping the women to recognize their own intellectual abilities. The sessions led Fuller to write *Woman in the Nineteenth Century,* in which she insists society accept women and men as equals. Here, Fuller presents her views as a dialogue between herself and the fictional "Miranda," a woman who, like Fuller, had from childhood been encouraged to exercise her mind.

I was talking on this subject with Miranda, a woman, who, if any in the world could, might speak without heat and bitterness of the position of her sex. Her father was a man who cherished no sentimental reverence for woman, but a firm belief in the equality of the sexes. She was his eldest child, and came to him at an age when he needed a companion. From the time she could speak and go alone, he addressed her not as a plaything, but as a living mind. Among the few verses he ever wrote was a copy addressed to this child, when the first locks were cut from her head, and the reverence expressed on this occasion for that cherished head, he never belied. It was to him the temple of immortal intellect. He respected his child, however, too much to be an indulgent parent. He called on her for clear judgment, for courage, for honor and fidelity; in short, for such virtues as he knew. In so far as he possessed the keys to the wonders of this universe, he allowed free use of them to her, and by the incentive of a high expectation, he forbade, as far as possible, that she should let the privilege lie idle. A

Thus this child was early led to feel herself a child of the spirit. She took her place easily, not only in the world of organized being, but in the world of mind. A dignified sense of self-dependence was given as all her portion,[1] and she found it a

ANALYZE VISUALS
In your opinion, what **traits** does the subject of this portrait project? After you've read the selection, revisit your answer. Tell whether you think the woman in the portrait might share any of Miranda's qualities.

A PARAPHRASE MAIN IDEAS
Paraphrase lines 2–4. What were Miranda's father's views on gender equality?

1. **all her portion:** something that she had a right to expect.

Portrait of Ann Cochrells (1848), David Parr. Oil on canvas, 9″ × 11″. © Christie's Images Ltd.

sure anchor. Herself securely anchored, her relations with others were established with equal security. She was fortunate in a total absence of those charms which might have drawn to her bewildering flatteries, and in a strong electric nature, which repelled those who did not belong to her; and attracted those who did. With men and women her relations were noble,—affectionate without passion, intellectual without coldness. The world was free to her, and she lived freely in it. Outward adversity came, and inward conflict, but that faith and self-respect had early been awakened which must always lead at last, to an outward serenity and an inward peace. B

Of Miranda I had always thought as an example, that the restraints upon the sex were insuperable[2] only to those who think them so, or who noisily strive to break them. She had taken a course of her own, and no man stood in her way. Many of her acts had been unusual, but excited no uproar. Few helped, but none checked her, and the many men, who knew her mind and her life, showed to her confidence, as to a brother, gentleness as to a sister. And not only refined, but very coarse men approved and aided one in whom they saw resolution and clearness of design. Her mind was often the leading one, always effective. C

When I talked with her upon these matters, and had said very much what I have written, she smilingly replied: "and yet we must admit that I have been fortunate, and this should not be. My good father's early trust gave the first bias, and the rest followed of course. It is true that I have had less outward aid, in after years, than most women, but that is of little consequence. Religion was early awakened in my soul, a sense that what the soul is capable to ask it must attain, and that, though I might be aided and instructed by others, I must depend on myself as the only constant friend. This self dependence, which was honored in me, is deprecated as a fault in most women. They are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within. D

"This is the fault of man, who is still vain, and wishes to be more important to woman than, by right, he should be."

"Men have not shown this disposition toward you," I said.

"No! because the position I early was enabled to take was one of self-reliance. And were all women as sure of their wants as I was, the result would be the same. But they are so overloaded with precepts by guardians, who think that nothing is so much to be dreaded for a woman as originality of thought or character, that their minds are impeded by doubts till they lose their chance of fair free proportions. The difficulty is to get them to the point from which they shall naturally develop self-respect, and learn self-help. E

"Once I thought that men would help to forward this state of things more than I do now. I saw so many of them wretched in the connections they had formed in weakness and vanity. They seemed so glad to esteem women whenever they could.

"'The soft arms of affection,' said one of the most discerning spirits, 'will not suffice for me, unless on them I see the steel bracelets of strength.'"

B AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE
Consider Fuller's tone in lines 15–26. What can you **infer** about the traits Fuller found admirable?

C PARAPHRASE MAIN IDEAS
Paraphrase the main idea Fuller states in lines 27–29. Of what does Fuller see Miranda as an "example"?

D PARAPHRASE MAIN IDEAS
Paraphrase lines 42–44. How is Miranda different from most women of her time?

E AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE
Consider the **details** Fuller chooses to focus on. By contrasting Miranda's upbringing with that of most 19th-century women, what type of upbringing is Fuller advocating?

2. **Insuperable:** incapable of being overcome.

But early I perceived that men never, in any extreme of despair, wished to be women. On the contrary they were ever ready to taunt one another at any sign of weakness, with,

Art thou not like the women, who—

The passage ends various ways, according to the occasion and rhetoric of the speaker. When they admired any woman they were inclined to speak of her as "above her sex." Silently I observed this, and feared it argued a rooted scepticism, which for ages had been fastening on the heart, and which only an age of miracles could eradicate. Ever I have been treated with great sincerity; and I look upon it as a signal instance of this, that an intimate friend of the other sex said, in a fervent moment, that I "deserved in some star to be a man." He was much surprised when I disclosed my view of my position and hopes, when I declared my faith that the feminine side, the side of love, of beauty, of holiness, was now to have its full chance, and that, if either were better, it was better now to be a woman, for even the slightest achievement of good was furthering an especial work of our time. He smiled incredulously. "She makes the best she can of it," thought he. "Let Jews believe the pride of Jewry, but I am of the better sort, and know better."[3] F

Another used as highest praise, in speaking of a character in literature, the words "a manly woman."

"So in the noble passage of Ben Jonson:

'I meant the day-star should not brighter ride,
Nor shed like influence from its lucent seat;
I meant she should be courteous, facile, sweet,
Free from that solemn vice of greatness, pride;
I meant each softest virtue there should meet,
Fit in that softer bosom to abide,
Only a learned and a manly *soul,*
I purposed her, that should with even powers,
The rock, the spindle, and the shears control
Of destiny, and spin her own free hours.'"[4]

"Methinks," said I, "you are too fastidious in objecting to this. Jonson in using the word 'manly' only meant to heighten the picture of this, the true, the intelligent fate, with one of the deeper colors."

"And yet," said she, "so invariable is the use of this word where a heroic quality is to be described, and I feel so sure that persistence and courage are the most womanly no less than the most manly qualities, that I would exchange these words for others of a larger sense at the risk of marring the fine tissue of the verse. Read 'A heavenward and instructed soul,' and I should be satisfied. Let it not be said, wherever there is energy or creative genius, 'She has a masculine mind.'" ∾

F **PARAPHRASE MAIN IDEAS** Paraphrase lines 65–68 in your chart. What way of thinking does Miranda describe, and how easy does she think it will be to reverse?

3. **'She makes . . . know better'**: Miranda's male friend uses a religious slur to discount women.

4. **'I meant . . . free hours'**: These lines are taken from the poem "On Lucy, Countess of Bedford." Their author, Ben Jonson (1573?–1637), was an English playwright and poet.