Meet the Author

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.

DID YOU KNOW?
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.”

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Differences of opinion in politics, art, or any subject are often debated formally and informally in speech and writing. When people engage in a debate, they exchange their opinions on an issue, often approaching the discussion with a unique set of ideas and experiences. Author’s perspective refers to the distinct combination of opinions, values, and beliefs that influence the way a writer looks at a topic. Margaret Fuller takes a unique approach to revealing her perspective in a debate with a fictional character. As you read, play close attention to rhetorical techniques—the methods an author employs to influence readers and convey ideas. These techniques vary from writer to writer, but they always provide clues to a writer’s view. To identify Margaret Fuller’s perspective, examine the following rhetorical elements:

- the writer’s tone, or attitude toward the subject
- details the writer chooses to include or emphasize
- rhetorical devices and logical fallacies
- how the writer portrays specific individuals

As you read this excerpt, use these elements to help you analyze the author’s perspective.

What does society EXPECT of us?

In the 19th century, society expected women to be loving wives, adoring mothers, and expert housekeepers. Women were not expected to be great thinkers; they were to leave the thinking to men. Some women, including Margaret Fuller, rejected these limiting expectations.

SURVEY Does society still have different expectations for men and women? Complete the following survey, marking which jobs you think would most likely be held by men, which would mostly likely be held by women, and which would have roughly equal numbers of each. Then write a paragraph discussing what your results might indicate about how gender influences societal expectations.

Survey: Gender and Jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Mostly Male</th>
<th>Mostly Female</th>
<th>Equal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Kindergarten teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Carpenter</td>
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<td>3. Hairstylist</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Surgeon</td>
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<td>5. Firefighter</td>
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<td>6. College professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Personal shopper</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Architect</td>
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Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
From 1839 to 1844 in the context of the great debate about the equality of men and women, 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 debate 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.

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, and she found it a

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

Of Miranda I had always thought as an example, that the restraints upon the sex were insuperable 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.  

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.

“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.  

“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.’”

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.”

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.’”

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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.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** What did Miranda’s father believe in regard to the equality of the sexes?

2. **Clarify** What do the men Miranda describes mean when they comment that a woman they admire is “above her sex”?

Literary Analysis

3. **Analyze Main Ideas** Examine the main ideas you *paraphrased* as you read. Then reread the selection’s last two paragraphs. What is Fuller’s main point about “heroic” qualities such as persistence, confidence, and creativity? Use your paraphrases and specific lines from the text to support your answer.

4. **Examine Author’s Perspective** Recall that Fuller was in the Transcendental Club, and think about the ideals that this group embraced. Through her description of Miranda, what was Fuller saying about the traits a woman needed to transcend society’s expectations? Restate Fuller’s perspective in one or two sentences. Consider the following in your answer:
   - Miranda’s statement that women “are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within.” (lines 43–44)
   - The contrast between Miranda’s upbringing and that of women “so overloaded with precepts by guardians . . . that their minds are impeded by doubts.” (lines 50–52)

5. **Draw Conclusions About Author’s Perspective** Why might Fuller have chosen to present her views as a dialogue between herself and the fictional Miranda, instead of simply stating her beliefs outright? Explain the rhetorical impact of the dialogue—how it influences readers and conveys ideas. Cite at least one example from the text to support your analysis.

6. **Compare Texts** Compare Fuller’s main ideas with the beliefs Ralph Waldo Emerson sets forth in “Self-Reliance” (page 370). What common elements do the two texts share? In what ways does their focus differ? Cite examples.

Literary Criticism

7. **Historical Context** A friend of Fuller’s once described her as possessing “what in woman is generally called a masculine mind; that is, its action was determined by ideas rather than sentiments.” Do contemporary Americans still believe that men are governed by reason while women are driven by emotion? Explain your answer.

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What does society EXPECT of us?

Margaret Fuller felt that society expected too little of women. What expectations do people, such as parents, teachers, mentors, and society, have of you?
The Transcendental Spirit

In the 19th century, transcendentalism emerged as a fresh intellectual framework for addressing social, economic, political, and cultural changes in America’s increasingly complex society. Many of the issues writers of the day struggled with continue to be relevant today. Get into a “transcendental” frame of mind by taking the following quiz.

**How TRANSCENDENTAL Are You?**

- Do you ever take a walk with no destination in mind?  ○ yes ○ no
- Do you express your opinions even when they aren’t popular?  ○ yes ○ no
- Would you accept very low pay for a job that you loved?  ○ yes ○ no
- Do you think there are too many gadgets and gizmos in modern life and that we should all aim to simplify?  ○ yes ○ no
- Would you go to jail rather than conform to a law that goes against your conscience?  ○ yes ○ no

**Writing to Analyze**

Select one of the questions above and respond to it in a focused, well-developed paragraph. Give at least one example from your life to support your answer. Then write one more paragraph analyzing how one of the transcendental writers whose work you’ve just read might have responded to the same question.

**Consider**

- which question resonated with you the most
- what example(s) from your life might best reveal your beliefs to your audience
- how particular sentences or passages in the readings relate to the question you chose

**Extension Online**

**INQUIRY & RESEARCH**  Search the Internet for evidence of Henry David Thoreau’s legacy. Use the key words *Thoreau* and *Walden* to find several different types of memorials for one of transcendentalism’s greatest thinkers. You will find many nonprofit organizations, projects, schools, and centers dedicated to promoting or remembering Thoreau’s ideas. Choose three of the most interesting to report back to the class on.