Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and Women

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MARGARET FULLER, TRANSCENDENTALISM, AND WOMEN

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it?”

How many people would ask this kind of question during their lives? Margaret Fuller, a woman who lived an unusual and passionate life in the early nineteenth century in America, wrote this philosophical and psychological as well as spiritual question. This question indicates that Fuller was a solitary soul seeking after the true meaning of her life.

Margaret Fuller (May 23, 1810–July 19, 1850) is one of remarkable and influential figures in American history. She was an eminent nonfiction writer, Goethe scholar, feminist, and the most noticeable woman leading figure of the New England Transcendentalist movement in the nineteenth century. Fuller’s influence and strong personality were probably felt for the first time in connection with the Transcendentalists circle—the Transcendentalists’ focus recalled attention to the nature and capacity of the soul itself. The members of this group were well-known young thinkers, most of whom were related with the Unitarian circle, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson, F. H. Hedge, George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, W. H. Channing, J. F. Clarke, Elizabeth P. Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau.

Fuller was an active member of the club from the very beginning, and a recognized leader and guiding spirit. With the support of her fellow Transcendentalists, she also organized the famous Boston Conversations and later became the first editor of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist magazine. To free spirits and voices of the oppressed women in her era, she also published “The Great Lawsuit: Man Versus Men; Woman Versus Women”\(^2\) and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*\(^3\).

Her life was not sweet and easy, not even during her childhood and, she lived in several different places during her years - including Europe. She was known by many titles such as author, Goethe scholar, feminist, mystic, and art critic. Nevertheless, the essential Transcendental belief was her central concern and the vital force clearly indicated through her writings, feminist activity, and her life itself.

The Transcendentalists found indication everywhere of the greatness of the soul. According to them, the soul itself contained the seeds of truth, “all ready to expand in bloom and beauty, as it felt the light and heat of the upper world.” The soul, when thus awakened, says “oracles” of insight, “sings, prophesies,” testifies majestically to God and heavenly things, and “rises to heights of heroism and saintliness.”\(^4\)

They shared a belief that God was intimately related to humans and nature, and a sense that the unfolding of human consciousness, or soul, must be to some degree divinely assisted from within. Turning from the way to search for God through


scriptural revelation, they looked to nature and humanity. In the view of Transcendentalists, everyone has a soul that allows *self-culture*.

However, the Transcendentalist men, to varying degrees, failed to fully follow this premise, the spiritual equivalent of the democratic ideal that all human beings are created equal in an era when women’s voices were oppressed and their life was shackled by narrow domestic boundaries. Fuller, however, was able to deeply grasp the Transcendentalism premise and carry it through in her work and life as a woman who shared the same conflicts with women of her time.

Fuller, at times, refused to refer to God as “Father.” She gradually used more gender-neutral and impersonal terms for God, placing emphasis on God *within* rather than God *without*. The Father of revelation was gradually transformed in her work into “a spirit uncontainable and uncontained,” the creative energy within both men and women who makes the person the source of divine power.

This Transcendentalist notion of God is the foundational concept of Fuller’s feminist arguments in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. As many critics have noted, she based her claims for the equality of men and women on their equality as souls, not as citizens, and called for women’s equal freedom to develop their God-given capacities, not first of all for equal rights. While talking about the legal, social, and cultural disadvantages of women, she claimed that they were the consequence of misunderstanding of woman’s nature—that she is “made for man, to be ruled and

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5 *Self-Culture* is the term the Transcendentalist used and it can be understood as self-cultivation.

formed by him, rather than possessing, like him, an immortal soul."

The whole human race, men as well as women, will benefit, Fuller claimed, if the “idea of Woman” is more fully brought out. Changes in woman’s temporal condition will follow from acknowledgment of this fundamental truth. 

Fuller possessed great power in bringing out that which was the best and highest in every person. She empowered women in the early-middle nineteenth century to find their true voices as independent human beings. This paper will explore Margaret Fuller’s life and work, as well as the figures who were important to her and who had influenced on her: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Ellery Channing. Asserted in these pages is the argument that Margaret Fuller, in her application of Transcendentalism to both genders of humankind, was perhaps the truest of all Transcendentalists.

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7 Margaret Fuller, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, 260-1 & 268.

8 Ibid., 252, 258, & 260.
CHAPTER TWO
WHO IS MARGARET FULLER: FULLER’S LIFE

Gifted Child but Unhappy Childhood

On 23 May 1810, the first child of Timothy Fuller and Margarett Crane Fuller’s nine children, Sara Margaret Fuller “burst like Athena” into the Timothy’s house on Cherry Street in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts. Timothy Fuller was the fourth son of Rev. Timothy Fuller, a Congregational church minister, and was an intellectually gifted and strict Boston lawyer. Margarett Crane Fuller was a school teacher and the second of four children of Elizabeth Jones Weiser and Peter Crane, a gunsmith and a friend of Paul Revere. Timothy Fuller and Margarett Crane Fuller gave their first daughter her grandmother’s name Sara and mother’s name Margarett.

Timothy Fuller was an austere Unitarian who regularly took his family to church on Sundays. A Harvard graduate, Timothy Fuller was also a willful and independent-minded man, who inherited eighteenth-century Enlightenment values. He supported female education and self-governing of the mind, but he wanted to rule over women including his wife and daughters. When Margaret Fuller was three years old, this

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2 Ibid., 11.

“rigidly principled” father determined to teach his first child himself. Timothy Fuller loved Margaret Fuller. Nevertheless, his personality was extremely controlling and strict so that his treatment of her and his teaching could have been stressful for her and could have negatively affected her personality and heart that remained throughout her life. His letter to his wife can give a hint of this fact: “My dear love to my dear Sarah Margaret. She must be good natured & learn to read, &loving when desired.” Margaret Fuller thus came early to relate her father’s love with “superior intellectual” success and passionate obedience with his wish.

Her father’s love became even more vital to Margaret Fuller as her mother became grieved because of the death of the “lovely” thirteen-month-old Julia Adelaide, Margaret’s younger sister, in October of 1813. Margaret later expressed how this event “traumatized” her; she was three and a half years old when she lost a good playmate in her sister and felt deserted by her sorrowful mother, “who became self-absorbed and depressed” because of “the loss of her treasured” second daughter.

Her father’s meticulous attention focused on her so early in her life had, as Fuller herself later said, an immense influence on her. He controlled the precision of her speech and the intelligibility of her ideas. Intolerant of flaws, Timothy, according to Margaret, expected her “to understand the mechanism of the language thoroughly, and in translating to give the thoughts in as few well-arranged words as possible, and


5 Murray, Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim, 13.

6 Ibid., 13-14.
without breaks or hesitation.” When she made mistakes, which she often did, Timothy expressed his great disappointment. When Margaret Fuller turned nine, Timothy wrote her a note, in which he clearly described his expectations: “To excel in all things should be your constant aim; mediocrity is obscurity.”

Following her father’s strict teaching and desire, she did excel. For instance, earlier in her life, at the age of seven, she read books like Richard Valpy’s Poetical Chronology of Ancient and English History, wrote her father about the warrior kings Charles XII of Sweden (1682-1718) and Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) and, in letters, gave her opinion on the heavy topic of slavery.

However, there are hints in Fuller’s writings that there were serious problems in the Fuller house when Margaret Fuller was a child. While she was visiting her Uncle Henry in Boston, in October 1833, she wrote James Clarke a letter telling how her attention had been “recalled to some painful domestic circumstances.” She also asked him to pray for her because “the part” in her life she “has had to act” is much more difficult than “you (James Clarke) ever knew” and “is like to become” a lot harder. Margaret Fuller asked him to pray to God that “any talents” she had been “endowed” with will not be “wasted in fruitless struggles with difficulties” that she “cannot overcome.” “I think,” she wrote in this letter, “I am less happy in many respects than you.” She also told him that he would “need the skill of Champollion to decipher” her

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7 Murray, Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim, 15; Fuller, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 17-18.

8 Murray, Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim, 17.

9 Ibid.; Fuller, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 18-19; Fuller, Letters of Margaret Fuller, 81.
letter because “It is not possible for me to be so profoundly frank with any earthly friend” whereas he could speak “freely” to her of all his “circumstances and feelings.” “Thus my heart,” she continued, “has no proper home.”

In spite of this strictly controlling parental power, not all was depressing and painful for Margaret Fuller. The social historian Linda Gordon notes: “The barb on this domestic hook in the flesh of the girl was that there were often emotional rewards for her.” Margaret Fuller felt treasured by her commanding father as “special.” This relation negatively influenced her even when she became an adult. In fact, Margaret respected and “idealized” this “distant” father and further felt an odd joy “in being the recipient of intense albeit inappropriate affection.” Then, as she grew up, she found herself “feeling conflicted over how to deal with” this confusing condition. Meg McGavran Murray argues that it represented the ultimate accomplishment of a little-girl’s wish to be the center of her father’s attention (as Margaret as a child desired to be) and the eventual betrayal of her trust. Because of this experience, Fuller could not love naturally as an adult (Margaret, age twenty-three, noted about her childhood self: “a

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10 Fuller, *Letters of Margaret Fuller*, IV: 87; Ibid., VI: 221, 223, and 231, quoted in Murray, *Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim*, 266.


13 Ibid.
natural human—I know I was not"). However, when she grew up she found creative ways to rebel. For instance Fuller, in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, emphasized male cruelty and hypocrisy, and she also participated in the 1849 revolution of the Italian against their betraying “father,” Pope Pius IX, and the armies of invading and occupying tyrants.

Fuller’s defiant anger is understandable when we recall how aggressive, grave, “unkind” and controlling her bad-tempered father had been in relating not just to her but also to her mother. He insulted his wife even in letters; once accusing her of, she said, “stupidity.” Timothy’s pattern of conduct with women was to demand that they do as he commanded even when he was not behaving respectably toward them, then self-righteously lecturing and threatening them if they defied him. This tension between her father and mother may have contributed to Margaret’s sense as a young woman that (she felt) she had no “proper home”; causing her emotional distress. This unhappy domestic experience also may have led Margaret to seek transcendental experience outside church and to raise her voice for women’s rights.

In her 1840 autobiographical romance, Margaret Fuller wrote that Timothy Fuller was a “tyrant in his home,” an intrusive, controlling presence in his wife’s and


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 269-270.
daughter’s lives. Fuller further says that the “peculiarity” of her early education deprived her of her childhood. Though seldom allowed to play with the neighborhood children in the marshland surrounding her house, she occasionally joined them in their games. But even then, she recollected, she preferred “violent bodily exercise” to their less-demanding play. Fuller also recalled that the girls did not hate her. However, they did not want her to join them. She tells how her father decided “I needed change of scene.” He blamed himself for keeping her at home because in teaching her he gained, as he said, “such pleasure.” Thus Margaret’s more formal schooling away from home began; first at a school in downtown Boston and then at a finishing school in Groton.20

**Time of Transition**

In 1837 she became a teacher at Hiram Fuller’s (no relation) new Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island. Fuller had accepted the Providence job because it gave her financial security. The teaching position at first was an uplifting experience for her, but the pressure of dealing with unmanageable students made Fuller’s head ache. She also failed to notice that her Greene Street students were having troubles with her rigorousness. During her early days as a teacher, she was very upset by “the great ignorance” of the girls. Her strict criticisms forced the students to study hard, learn a lot, and respect—but also fear—her. One student wrote home how Fuller “is very critical, and sometimes cuts us to bits.” It seems she was almost as severely demanding of the girls in her classes as Timothy Fuller had been in demanding from her meticulousness

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in writing and reciting. Although some of the students grew to be grateful for her teachings, and to admire her from afar, they never entirely overcame their fear of her.  

As a Transcendentalist & Editor of the Dial

Known by many as a frontrunner for the women’s rights movement, she was also a self-confessed mystic. For instance, in October 1838, she wrote a letter to a friend describing the “heavenliest day of communion [in which], free to be alone [in] the meditative woods [then] all the films seemed to drop from my existence.”  

That evening, when she was standing by herself outside a church and looking up at the crescent moon beyond the pointed spire, “a vision came upon my [Margaret Fuller’s] soul.” Fuller clearly expressed the extra-ecclesial character of her intensifying experience of that moment; “May my life be a church, full of devout thoughts.”  

To her the true church was the inner life of solitary enlightenment, not the construction, a relic of the exterior.

For years, Fuller was immersed in this spiritual aspiration. Two years later, she declared herself “more and more what they will call a mystic.” She even proclaimed that she was prepared now to preach “mysticism.”  

In her famous work, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845), Fuller expected such religious exaltation as a vital medium

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21 Charles Capper, Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, the Private Years, 211; Fuller, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 228.

22 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, I: 347-48.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., II: 172.
for the development and elevation of women, a primal source of “spiritual dignity.”

“Mysticism, which may be defined as the brooding soul of the world,” she claimed, “cannot fail of its oracular promises as to woman.” Like most Transcendentalists, Fuller’s concept of mysticism was distanced from both its Catholic and its Enlightenment incarnations. Her mysticism was an innate spiritual search for originality, transcendence, and liberation.

“Democratic individuality” can be found as the core of this Fuller’s romantic spirituality. Highlighting the democratic individuality was, for Fuller, crucial especially for women, who, in Fuller’s contemporary era, were subordinate to males. With mystical and religious aspirations, it made sense that Margaret Fuller passionately joined the Transcendental Club.

In the fall of 1839, Emerson offered her the editorship of The Dial, the Transcendentalists’ new literary journal, and she accepted the position. Emerson and Fuller shared their ideas and lives through letters, and Emerson enjoyed getting letters from her. He also liked the idea of having a Transcendental journal, The Dial, and credited “her radiant genius & fiery heart” as being “perhaps the real centre that drew so

25 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, II: 172.
26 Ibid., 173.
28 Ibid.
many & so various individuals” to agree to write for the journal. Emerson thought that with Fuller as the editor of the journal, *The Dial* would have a bright future.29

All members of the Transcendental Club agreed that *The Dial* was a good idea. Nevertheless, only a few had the time to write for the journal. Thus, Fuller, from the beginning, had trouble finding contributors. The aims of *The Dial* also were so indistinct that its writers were not able to make harmony. Alcott complained that it was “too worldly” for his “Orphic Sayings.”30 The social activist Theodore Parker argued that it lacked essence. Another critic, the Unitarian scholar and charter member of the Transcendental Club, George Ripley, thought *The Dial* “not prononce enough.” Still, the journal might have been a success had Fuller been able to get more competently skilled writers to present their articles on time.31

**New York Tribune**

In November 1844, Fuller moved to New York City to work for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Daily Tribune*. Her center of attention was her public career in the city. Through writing for the newspaper as a literary critic and a social commentator, she hoped that she could “soar and sing in a way she had not been able to before.”32

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Fuller grew and matured as a writer. As she observed and confronted upsetting parts of urban lives—poor and miserable human living condition—, her writing style sharpened. Her newspaper articles’ major topics dealt with; reform plans to improve the conditions of hospitals and prisons; François Marie Charles Fourier’s Fourierist methods\textsuperscript{33} to solve the disturbing urban problems of poverty and inequality; and actresses and theater productions. As she poured great efforts into writing about these heavy subjects, Fuller became a “social activist and celebrity.”\textsuperscript{34}

She lived in New York for twenty months. In the city, she stayed in various places such as Greeley’s old house on the East River in Manhattan, two different boardinghouses, and several friends’ homes. Fuller, during this period, published numerous works. These included the famous book \textit{Women in the Nineteenth Century} (February 1845), her essay collection \textit{Papers on Literature and Art} (1846), 250 reviews, essays, and translations from foreign papers in the \textit{New-York Daily Tribune}. Additionally, Emerson commented that Fuller’s writing was “never dull,” and thus it attracted readers.\textsuperscript{35}

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\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{33} In the early 19th century, a French socialist writer, Charles Fourier, proposed that society be built into small self-sustaining communal groups.

\textsuperscript{34} Murray, \textit{Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim}, 228.

\textsuperscript{35} Fuller, \textit{Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli}, II: 153, quoted in Murray, \textit{Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim}, 229.
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Life in Europe

In 1846, Margaret Fuller was sent to Europe by the *New York Tribune*. She was the first female foreign correspondent of the *New York Tribune*. However, besides being a reporter, Margaret went to Europe as an ordinary tourist and a literary pilgrim.  

In Europe, Margaret met Harriet Martineau, Joseph Mazzini, the Howitts, George Sand, Adam Mickiewicz, Pierre Hean de Beranger, and Felicite de Lamennais. These people had drawn their philosophical ideas from the earlier time of Romantics, and several of them would take a significant political role in the history of Europe during later years. The styles of *Tribune* letters were incoherent and lacking seriousness. However, the letters basically had a common concept; “to be a romantic in 1846 was to be more than half a revolutionary.”

In Manchester and Liverpool in England, She visited new public libraries and attended free concerts, which were provided to improve living conditions for the working classes of the cities. She also had a chance to visit the Mechanics’ Institutes in both cities that deeply impressed her. The institutes were the places where workers could have the chance to study “fine arts” and “mechanical drawing” beside the basic skills in the evening time. After observing the schools, as a Transcendentalist, Margaret described that the institutes showed the evidence of “excellent spirit, the desire for growth in wisdom and enlightened benevolence.”

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36 Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution*, 245.

37 Ibid., 246.

38 Ibid., 248.
Giuseppe Mazzini, who Fuller met in 1846 in England, had been in exile from Italy since 1837 and was a skilled political leader. Nonetheless, he was not interested in joining any political party even though it possessed significant power that would unite Italy. He, therefore, was ignored by political realists in Europe. Fuller, with the American Transcendentalist lens, however, highly valued him as a dignified person with a reasonable idealism.

In her last few weeks in London Margaret built a close friendship with Mazzini. Then, she met Giovanni Ossoli, who was the Italian revolutionary and a supporter of Mazzini. Ossoli, in the beginning, did not know Fuller was an intellectual. But then, he came to appreciate her mind. Perhaps, because it was closely linked with her foreignness, her bright and sharp mind never threatened him. She was in fact less aggressive with him than with Americans although Fuller was essentially “the same person she had always been.”

Her previous “consecration” to a single life was a kind of a way of defense against a society that pushed her to choose one between being a woman (daughter, wife, and mother) and being a thinking and creative individual. It was the Italian acceptance of gender, an idea different from the “Latin notion of mother and wife,” that led her to

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40 Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution*, 257.

41 Ibid.

42 Donna Dickenson, *Margaret Fuller: Writing a Woman’s Life*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 188.

unite with Ossoli. In fact, she had not dreamed of becoming a wife, and motherhood was the last status she wanted at that occasion.⁴⁴

Eventually, Fuller and Ossoli gave birth to their son, Angelo Eugene Philip Ossoli in September 1848.⁴⁵ It is not clear if they were married or not when they had the child, but according to contents of letters from Margaret Fuller and her mother during this period, it can be assumed that they may not have been officially married yet. For instance, Margaret wrote her mother in 1849, “but it has become necessary, on account of the child, for us to live publicly and permanently together.”⁴⁶ According to Margaret’s family and early biographers, she and Ossoli were married in December 1847, but almost all sources which might have verified the date have been destroyed.

In time the couple became big supporters of Mazzini, the revolutionary. When he fought for the establishment of a Roman Republic in 1849, Ossoli fought for the revolution and Fuller worked in a hospital as a volunteer.⁴⁷

Then, in 1850 when Margaret Fuller and two other members of her family traveled back from Italy to the United States by ship, the vessel accidentally hit a sandbar near Fire Island in New York. This occurred on July 19, around 3:30 AM. Fuller and her family perished. After this fateful event, Fuller’s friends, including Thoreau traveled to New York to search the shore to recover the bodies of the Ossoli

⁴⁴ Blanchard, Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution, 276.


⁴⁷ Mehren, Minerva and the Muse, 301-302.
family but they were never recovered except for the body of Angelo Eugene Philip Ossoli. 48
CHAPTER THREE

SELF-CULTURE: KEY CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, the new Romanticism arrived in England. Coleridge was one among the people who led the new Romanticism, and his lively poetry was filled with “faith in a benevolent, immanent God.”¹ People in England and America could enter the world of German Philosophy through Coleridge’s writings that were soaked in that philosophy. The “poetic imagination” and “passionate belief in an innate and indestructible core of consciousness in everyone” in his writings attracted many young people of his time.²

The new literature landed in America. The English and German poets led the young people of Cambridge, Massachusetts to find the new world of “emotional richness”³ that their own Unitarian faith noticeably lacked. Simultaneously, the new literature and its philosophy strengthened their newfound belief in “the dignity and significance of all forms of life.”⁴

The mediator who introduced the word “Transcendental” in English language was Coleridge. He adopted German philosopher Kant’s Vernunft and Verstandt to distinguish “Reason” and “Understanding” and defined the term “Transcendental” as

¹ Blanchard, Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution, 68.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
“pertaining to the intuitive part of human consciousness.” To Coleridge, this was the source of “poetic imagination” and “moral sensitivity.” It was also mimicked, though on a limited degree, “creative power of God.” Philosophical and religious position of the Transcendentalists of America had been developed from Coleridge’s praise of the divine component in “human consciousness” and from Channing’s negations of Calvin while each individual Transcendentalist’ perspective was quite different from each other’s stances. There were groups of Unitarians who stayed on the Channingite side of the Church whereas others, like Emerson and Alcott, considered the church as outdated and saw human and nature as a sole, “glorious,” external “expression of an all-pervasive Deity.”

The significance and importance the Transcendentalists laid on the “suprarational” and creative element in “consciousness” and faith, which could lead a human to recognize his or her uppermost divine part and could in fact develop into “godlikeness,” brought these Transcendentalists together.

The membership of the Transcendental Club was not quite fixed and Margaret Fuller belonged to the club. Like other Transcendentalists, Margaret Fuller had her

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5 Blanchard, Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution, 124.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 125.
distinctive color of belief and also shared the essential concept of Transcendentalism, *self-culture*.

Margaret had neither complex nor radical religious beliefs. She had faith in affectionate and “anthropomorphic God”\(^\text{11}\) who, Margaret thought, did not interfere in personal lives. She firmly thought that each person’s spiritual regeneration could contribute to the development of the society, but she did not believe the possibility that one day society would reach the stage of perfection.\(^\text{12}\)

There were people who contributed to shaping Margaret Fuller’s Transcendentalism through personal relationships and speeches as well as literature. In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine *self-culture*, the essence of Transcendentalism, and Margaret Fuller’s relation to the three people who greatly influenced her Transcendentalism: Emerson, Channing, and Goethe.

**Emerson and Channing, and Self-Culture**

William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson were close friends of Fuller and also important sources of inspiration for her. In Fuller’s era, W E Channing was one of the most significant and influential voices in New England. Transcendentalists admired him as his preaching and his writing as well as his life, reflecting moral aspiration, greatly contributed to the birth of the Transcendentalism movement. The key concept of his teaching was *self-culture*, standing against dogmatic


\(^{12}\) Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution*, 126.
Calvinism. Election and corruption among Calvinist doctrines were “morally repulsive and untrue to human nature” from the viewpoint of Channing. Against these Calvinist dogmas, Channing presented self-culture. Self-culture is about human perfectibility that is possible through cultivation of the soul that is an active organism. Channing believed that each individual has a soul, so that like “a plant [or] an animal,” the “nobler” character of any person is capable of growth. If this person “does what he can to unfold all his powers and capacities, especially his nobler ones…[he] practices self-culture.”

This doctrine of self-culture significantly stirred early nineteenth-century America and the Transcendentalists took up the doctrine as a placard presenting the movement. Channing’s most significant follower was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson, a Unitarian minister, preached about “Self-Culture” and gave a lecture series entitled “Human Culture.” Emerson, like Channing, emphasized the essential of self-culture as cultivation and growth, “the principle of expansion resisting the tendency to consolidation and rest.” And, in his Essays, he consequently dealt with this self-culture theme.

Fuller was immensely inspired by Channing and Emerson, especially by their rich preaching about self-culture. After listening to Channing’s preaching, she wrote her

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14 Ibid.
desire for “more pervading faith in the divinity of my own nature.”  

She also recorded how powerful the influence of Emerson’s sermon was to her as “from him I first learned what is meant by an inward life” and his preaching “has been more beneficial to me than that of any American.”  

These notes imply Fuller’s deep aspiration for “self-assurance” and insight for ceaseless self-growth. Thus, she strongly responded to the two great Transcendental preachers’ messages on self-culture. James Freeman Clarke, a Transcendentalist and Fuller’s close friend, claimed that her great “aim, from first to last, was SELF-CULTURE.” Regarding this assertion, he quoted her own words about her development: “Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow. I was often false to this knowledge, in idolatries of particular objects, or impatient longings for happiness, but I have never lost sight of it, have always been controlled by it, and this first gift of thought has never been superseded by a later love.”  

From this passage, we see her aspiration for harmonious self-growth as the Transcendentalists dreamt about and in which they believed. For many of the young generation of Fuller’s time in New England welcomed the idea of self–culture, which was developed by Channing and Emerson, and because it satisfied what the Christianity of the day that they knew obviously lacked: an emotional desire.

The formless emotional power of Transcendentalism, which attracted Fuller’s generation, had a metaphysical foundation: a philosophy chiefly focusing on the self.

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18 Ibid., 194-95.

19 Ibid., 133.
Nevertheless, Transcendentalists believed and sought the growth of self neither simply for its own benefit nor only for convenience. They believed and desired the self-development in order to satisfy the divine essence of identity that transcended the self and dwelled in the individual. It is crucial that emphasis is on the “selfless” quality of the soul; the right development of the selfless quality of the soul can prevent one, seeking *self-culture* into possibly becoming narcissistic and asocial. In “Self-reliance” (1841), Emerson laid out step by step, that reliance on the self has to be reliance on God like self turns into “the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded.”

John Very is a good example of this paradox. His ultimate goal in life was to live in a way that totally rejected the self and fulfilled divine will through practice of “will-less existence”; although it is undeniable that Very’s noticeably messianic illusion hints the risk of the divine self taken to extremes. From the Transcendentalists’ viewpoint, although, in general, each individual’s realization was not perfect, every individual was potentially able to develop God’s will or godlike self. This was the ultimate aim of *self-culture*.

The conception of the ethical and spiritual existence required imaginative incarnation. Emerson’s concept the “Genuine Man” or “Universal Man” corresponded to this demand. Emerson hypothesized that every human, within him/herself, had a fully developed and perfect man. The great historical persons and heroes are in dept of their


achievements to a more absolute awareness of the prospective that this “Universal Man” symbolizes. During the middle 1830s, he gave sermons presenting this concept and delivered lectures dealing with more developed ideas, and in “The American Scholar” (1837) he made the impressive remark; “One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty.”\(^{22}\) In this example, he offered the notion of a social emphasis, stressing that “you must take the whole society to find the whole man”\(^{23}\) His attitude here reflects both his growing social consciousness and his need to place “Man Thinking” in a social context.

*Self-culture* was not only welcomed in New England but also criticized at the same time as a dogma that was not capable of carrying out necessary social change. However, the Christian socialism of William Henry Channing and Fourierist utopianism of other Transcendentalists presented definite political and social interpretation of the doctrine of *self-culture*.\(^{24}\) Fuller herself carefully thought about participating in the Brook Farm experiment, but she eventually refused to join it (as did Emerson). As she wrote, she found herself “in the amusing position of [being] a conservative” at the Brook Farm.\(^{25}\) In various ways, Margaret Fuller was probably, like Emerson, a supporter of the more purely individualistic side of the Transcendental movement. However, the *self-culture* concept became an effective political and social tool for Margaret Fuller when she applied it to the circumstance of women in America. What


\(^{23}\) Ibid.


\(^{25}\) Emerson, Channing, and Clarke, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, II: 77.
had been denied to women was the opportunity for development; to pursue that opportunity now meant to eliminate the social sources of the denial: “It is not woman, but the law of right, the law of growth, that speaks in us, and demands the perfection of each being in its kind, apple as apple, woman as woman….What concerns me now is, that my life be a beautiful, powerful, in a word, a complete life in its kind.”

**Goethe (1749-1832) and Self-Culture**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s influence on Margaret Fuller was greater than all her other inspirations. Goethe, specifically his ideas found in his literature, was the guiding light on the whole of her successive works and Goethe led her into a new world of notion and sense. In his examination of Margaret Fuller’s character and larger inner life, Emerson wrote: “She had that symptom which appears in all students of Goethe….The effect on Margaret was complete. She was perfectly timed to it. She found her moods met, her topics treated, the liberty of thought she loved, the same climate of mind. Of course, this book [i.e., Goethe’s works] superseded all others, for the time, and tinged deeply all her thoughts.”

Emerson pointed out that many aspects—her theory of character-building, practice, life, and intellectual and spiritual growth—of Margaret Fuller showed that she was a devoted student as well as an admirer of Goethe. In order to soak into

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26 Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: Essays on American Life and Letters*, 207.


28 Braun, *Margaret Fuller and Goethe*, 55-56.
Transcendental mysticism or soar into the heights of spirituality, Fuller had absorbed very deeply from Goethe’s poetry and thoughts. Frederick Augustus Braun pointed out that “it was on this fundamental Goethean principle (self-reliant intellect) that she differed from all the transcendentalists.”

Fuller, Henry Pochmann asserted, was the most influential Germanic interpreter among most Transcendentalists as she led the rise of German studies in nineteenth-century America. Her eager study on and introduction of German culture had a private reason— with fervent passion, she embraced the new ideas originating from Germany; particularly that of Goethe whose thought satisfied her important want. “Nowhere,” Emerson said, “did Goethe find a braver, more intelligent, or more sympathetic reader,”

To understand the depth of Fuller’s commitment to Goethe, it is helpful to see her restlessness and longing for culture and the correspondingly thin social opportunities that New England offered to one in her position; Emerson described her frankly as “a woman, without beauty, without money.” In his writings, Goethe spoke directly to her in a way that lessened the harshness of what William Henry Channing called: the “obstruction to the development of her genius, and loneliness of heart.”

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29 Braun, *Margaret Fuller and Goethe*, 82.


32 Ibid., 298.

33 Ibid., II: 108.
Goethe’s example of “self-reliant intellect” answered her own sense of potential but thwarted genius, a sense that often resulted in accusations of egotism by those who knew her only partially. There was one more important thing that she discovered in Goethe—the discovery of a battle between emotion and intellect and a corresponding attempt to transform that conflict into a harmonious balance of life. Fuller, however, who insisted that self-culture is not entirely a thing of intellect, felt that Goethe focused too much to pure intellect.

Goethe’s influence was in various ways quite “non-Emersonian” and the influence contrasted with Emerson’s in Fuller’s development. Margaret Vanderhaar Allen pointed out that Fuller’s development “was largely a process of struggle” between Emerson’s influence and “Goethe’s humanist view.” Fuller “accepted parts of both, and the tension between them animated her thought.”

Pochmann makes a much stronger case for the significance of Goethe over that of Emerson. He argued that Goethe supplied “the orientation and illumination” that “became the mainspring of [Fuller’s] genius and power.” For Pochmann, “the central doctrine that Margaret learned from Goethe (not Emerson) was self-reliance, self-culture.”

The important point is that Goethe supplied an element that was missing in the New England atmosphere. However, Goethe’s thought reinforced the aim of self-culture although it was from a different perspective than Emerson’s. Even if Fuller had to lead the Transcendentalists in defense of Goethe, almost every member of the group shared

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34 Margaret Vanderhaar Allen, The Achievement of Margaret Fuller, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 50.

35 Pochmann, German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences 1600-1900, 444.
her enthusiasm to some extent. And, perhaps, her need for Goethe’s larger humanism reflected the hunger of the entire Transcendental movement for a greater view than New England offered.

Fuller described her early attraction to Goethe suggesting that his work was part of the call for progressive *self-culture* that was rising in New England. Her German studies began in 1832, largely at the instigation of Frederic Henry Hedge, and in 1833 she wrote to James Freeman Clarke, her collaborator in these studies, with fresh impressions from her reading: “I shut the book each time with an earnest desire to live as he [Goethe] did,--always to have some engrossing object of pursuit. I sympathize deeply with a mind in that state….I am dejected and uneasy when I see no results from my daily existence, but I am suffocated and lost when I have not the bright feeling of progression.”36 This “bright feeling of progression,” perhaps, led Fuller in two different directions: toward the Goethean example of increasing intellectual and emotional mastery of the world and toward Channing and Emerson’s ideals of spiritual development and moral improvement.

Fuller’s translation of Goethe’s play *Torquato Tasso* (1790), her first extended project in Goethean studies, was completed in 1834 but unpublished until after her death (except for excerpts in the *Dial*). Commentators remarked on the correctness of her attraction to the abandoned and misunderstood artist Tasso, yet her own comments on him, though sympathetic, were critical. He represented to her those “natures who must always act and feel before they can know” and who spontaneously follow the explosions of their “Flame-like” souls, only to find that the soul “sinks as suddenly as it

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rose.” Such a nature is inferior to the “nobler, wider,…better balanced” soul who is a slave neither to passion nor to cold mind. \(^{37}\) This concern for balance typifies Fuller’s attitude. “I wished,” Fuller says, that “he might adore, not fever for, the bright phantoms of his mind’s creation.”\(^{38}\) This distinction between “adoration” and “fever” is crucial to understand Fuller because she recognized her own potential for romantic fever and fought to control it so as not to fall into chaotic dissipation.\(^{39}\)

Goethe was central to this struggle in Fuller because she recognized in him much the same problem. It was unquestionably his emotional appeal that drew her to him, but she also saw in him a battle against emotion, resulting in a tendency to subordinate emotion to intellect. It was Goethe’s emotional quality, often linked with sexual passion, and his questionable examples in his private life that gave him an impression of moral danger. Because of this moral danger, Perry Miller called Fuller’s defense of him an act of great courage.\(^{40}\) Margaret Fuller wrote: “I do not know our Goethe yet. I have changed my opinion about his religious views many times. Sometimes I am tempted to think that it is only his wonderful knowledge of human nature which has excited in me such reverence for his philosophy, and that no worthy


\(^{38}\) Emerson, Channing, and Clarke, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, I: 69.

\(^{39}\) Miller, Margaret Fuller: American Romantic, 28.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 77-79.
fabric has been elevated on this broad foundation.”

This hints the clash between Goethe’s “humanism” and a version of religious idealism. And, Fuller concluded that, “though [her] enthusiasm for Goethean philosophy is checked, [her] admiration for the genius of Goethe is in nowise lessened” and added that she was “ready to try his philosophy, and, if needs must, play the Eclectic.”

Her readiness to “play the Eclectic” implies moral hesitation about Goethe, traceable to a remaining commitment to Transcendentalism.

Fuller considered the serious problem of his formalism. She first indicated this problem in the preface to her translation of Eckermann’s Conversations with Goethe, where she acknowledged that Goethe did not subordinate “the intellectual to the spiritual.” In some ways, this weakness in Goethe can be strength, for it led him to make a “religion” of his determination “that all his powers must be unfolded.” And, Fuller, despite her admiration, warned that “those who cannot draw the moral for themselves had best leave his book alone.”

Fuller’s defense of Goethe in the preface to the book was a general justification for her translation. Then, she found an occasion for a much more specific defense the next year, when George Ripley brought out Cornelius Conway Felton’s translation of Wolfgang Menzel’s history of German literature. Menzel attacked Goethe directly and

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41 Emerson, Channing, and Clarke, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, I: 167.
42 Ibid., 176.
43 Ibid.
44 Margaret Fuller, The Writings of Margaret Fuller, ed. Mason Wade (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 235.
45 Ibid.
harshly on the moral and political grounds, and Fuller feared that this attack would worsen the already present moral hostility toward Goethe in America. In her first *Dial* article on Goethe, she countered Menzel’s “Philistine,” “superficial,” and “narrow” view, by quoting Bettina Brentano; “‘The others criticize thy works;--I only know that they lead us on and on (fort and fort) till we live in them.’”46 The emphasis again is on “progress” and “growth,” and Fuller found Goethe’s greatest importance in the way his works communicated; “an unbroken series of efforts to develop the higher elements of our being.”47 These comments are a justification of Goethe on transcendental grounds. Fuller, however, did not miss that “he has failed of the highest fulfillment of his high vocation,”48 and she closed the article; “a too determined action of the intellect [which] limited and blinded him for the rest of his life.”49

Emerson later praised the article by saying that it was “on many accounts, her best paper.”50 It was also in some respects Fuller’s declaration of independence from Goethe. In “Goethe,” Fuller also directly pointed that the German author was naturally “of a deep mind and shallow heart,” but she also felt a need to apologize for this deficiency.51


47 Ibid., 345.

48 Ibid., 346.

49 Ibid., 347.

50 Emerson, Channing, and Clarke, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, I: 244.

What did Fuller mean by Goethe’s “shallow heart”? In one sense, “heart” has moral connotations for her. Defining Goethe as one whose “intellect is too much developed in proportion to the moral nature,” she noted that “flame-like natures, which he undervalues, give us more peace and hope through their restless aspirations, than he with his hearth-enclosed fires of steady fulfillment.” Fuller also connected Goethe’s overdevelopment of intellect with a cold artistic formalism shown in his preference for a “skillful use of means” over “the clear manifestation of ends.”

In spite of her candid admission that Goethe did at times ignite her sensibility, Fuller did not quit objecting his coldness. Although Goethe could achieve the synthesis that Fuller wanted, he could not sustain it. Fuller saw Goethe’s cold formalism as his limitation and what she missed in him was probably a vibrant sense of reality and living affection.


53 Ibid., 3.
CHAPTER FOUR

VOICE FOR THE WOMEN IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The understanding of gender roles prevalent in the nineteenth century was found in the cult of True Womanhood. But it had its roots in a much longer tradition based on essential gender differences. This tradition in western culture identified women chiefly with the body and men with the mind. It produced a worldview in which a women’s nature was considered inferior to men’s and women’s role to be subordinate to men; since the body is controlled by the mind.

In the nineteenth century, as industrialism increasingly divided men’s and women’s work, a woman’s sphere of influence became more and more tied to the domestic sphere, while men were concerned with open, public sphere. Then, society came to believe that a woman’s nature fitted her precisely for the domestic role. A woman’s bodily functions as wife and mother rendered her submissive to the more powerful will of her husband and, thus, she became identified with the innate virtues of sympathy, altruism, selflessness, and spirituality. Further, Coventry Patmore’s long poem, *The Angel in the House*, written as an elegy to his wife, widely spread the image of woman as the cultural icon of the selfless wife and mother. Consequently, women in

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the nineteenth-century were relegated to domestic sphere, and a private, passive, and selfless role were believed to be their nature.\(^2\)

According to a historian Betty Deberg’s argument, this “gender dualism” emerged from the eighteenth century, the beginning stage of the period of industrialization, when men were presented in distinct role: “patriarch; landowner or skilled laborer; and warrior.”\(^3\) This definition of “manhood” was challenged by the industrializing society which made men leave farms and work in a city. This change brought about a new idea of manhood, which kept men’s higher place over women yet was more in tune with the shifting economic structure. Away from home, men were to be “economic worriers,” in a world of commerce depicted “as an unsavory and strenuous world in which ruthlessness and aggression were prized.”\(^4\) Stable wages, a middle-class home, and a moral wife and good children became “the markers of successful manhood.” The home was supposed to be “the refuge” from the nasty field of business. Additionally, by staying inside the domestic circle, women did not challenge men power.\(^5\) DeBerg noted that the ideal of woman as “the moral exemplar” was newly prevailing current in the nineteenth century.\(^6\)

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2 Jamie S. Crouse, “‘If They Have a Moral Power’: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the Question of Women’s Moral Nature.” \textit{ATQ} 19, no. 4 (Dec. 2005): 261.


4 Ibid., 18.


In this period, Margaret Fuller, with her fellow Transcendentalists’ support, bravely stood against the oppressive gender role for women during that era and encouraged women to find their own voices.

As America’s “greatest contemporary scholar and champion of Goethe,” Margaret Fuller became the first editor of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist club magazine. In order to carry her mission “to help other women find their voices,” she also hosted an “intellectual discussion group” for women known as the “Conversations.” In addition, “as one of America’s first professional women journalists, [Fuller became] the voice of oppressed groups, chastising a materialistic America for its failure to live up to its revolutionary ideals in its treatment of” the marginalized. Fuller’s remarkable article “The Great Lawsuit” (1843), which was later revised and developed into the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), made her one of America’s leading women social activists, and called for increased legal rights and greater self-reliance for women as well as equality within marriage for a more harmonious and desirable union. Fuller’s work “is now considered the foundational text of the women’s rights movement in America.”

In this chapter, we will discuss the marginalized status of women in the early nineteenth-century, Margaret Fuller’s radical argument for women’s rights compared
with her fellow Transcendentalists’ views, and her Boston Conversations through which she wanted to encourage women to free themselves from confining social boundaries.

**Women in the Early Nineteenth Century**

In the 1800s, American women were oppressed by society. Women were socially and economically discriminated against and they were dependent upon their husbands for financial support. Marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood were the two roles available to upper- and middle-class women. Both led to domestic dependency upon a male provider. In some cases, women were able to find jobs. These were usually limited to working as shop girls or factory workers. However, women were discouraged from getting paid jobs because the society viewed women who earned wages as “unnatural.” In addition, “[l]ow wages, the absence of upward mobility, depressing and unhealthy working conditions, all made marriage an attractive survival strategy for working-class women.”

During Margaret Fuller’s adult life (the 1820s through the 1840s), housewives became a symbol of “bourgeois class hegemony.” The nonproductive matron was the model now known as the forms of the “Cult of True Womanhood.” This ideal “prescribed a female role bound by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity,

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12 Ibid.
and crowned with subservience.”¹³ In her book *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1976), Barbara Welter portrays the “True Woman” who was designated as the symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home and as being regarded as innately superior to men when it came to virtue. Welter also describes “[P]iety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” as thought to be natural to women and being a True Woman was a grand charge:¹⁴

In a society where values changed frequently…one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to temper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic. It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, the nineteenth-century American woman had.¹⁵

During the first half of the nineteenth century, there were numerous social issues that emerged from the sky rocketing population of immigrants, rapid urbanization and industrialization in the land. The U.S. population skyrocketed from 3 million in 1790 to 13 million in 1850 with the arrival of more and more European immigrants. The mass immigration of non-Protestants, which included many Catholics, worried Puritan society.¹⁶ The rising capitalism and industrialization drew men away from home to work.¹⁷ Capitalism also produced low wages and poor living conditions. Furthermore,

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¹⁵ Ibid.


the numbers of saloon increased and many men, especially poor immigrant laborers, spent their hard earned money to drink and gamble.

In this fast moving and changing world, a True Woman was responsible to serve as the protectress of religion and civilized society whereas men were charged with the work of creating and growing an industrialized civilization from a wilderness.

Because being a True Woman was such an important duty in the rapidly changing world, the ideal of True Womanhood was imprinted upon young girls, who were educated to be compliant and display great self-discipline.\textsuperscript{18} Girls were also taught to value their virginity as their greatest asset like “the ‘pearl of great price.’”\textsuperscript{19} Each girl was expected to prepare herself for marriage by keeping herself pure for her future spouse and learning the skills required to manage a household and raise children. The society valued motherhood as the most fulfilling and fundamental of all women’s duties. This view, Woloch explains, was developed from the eighteenth-century ideal of Republican Motherhood, which charged women with the work of “shaping the values of their sons, who were likely to have a direct impact on the nation’s success.”\textsuperscript{20} Young women were familiar with this view through their families, churches, and schools, as well as “periodical and popular literature, medical texts, and etiquette manuals.”\textsuperscript{21}

While middle-class women could attend female seminaries and colleges, the program of

\textsuperscript{18} Westerkamp, \textit{Women and Religion in Early America}, 4.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 5.


\textsuperscript{21} Welter, \textit{Dimity Conviction: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century}, 3.
study at these schools was usually limited to religious lessons and basic “book learning” which would equip a woman—as a mother—to educate her children.\textsuperscript{22}

A True Woman, Cogan points out, was expected “to fulfill herself in the ‘instinctive’ arts of child rearing, domestic pursuits, and spiritual comfort” while her intellectual pursuits were ignored and discouraged.\textsuperscript{23} Since a woman’s “heart” was valued over her “mind,” intellectual women like Margaret Fuller were criticized by many people, holding the fixed image of womanhood, as “unfeminine” because of the strong mind supposedly linked with the masculine.

While a True Woman was supposed to be a symbol of moral strength and virtue, ironically, she was also depicted as delicate and fragile, prone to fainting and sickness. Therefore, to keep her health, a True Woman was prohibited from doing much physical activity or being emotionally startled. The nineteenth-century general assumption was that women have “much more delicate nervous system[s] than…men because of the particular function of their reproductive organs…[T]heir fragile nervous systems were likely to be over stimulated or irritated, with disastrous results.”\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps, this physical deficiency was partially real, deriving from the constricting dress of the time. Eleanor Flexner portrays that it “stays so tightly laced that women could hardly breathe, and half a dozen skirts and petticoats (which might weigh as much as twelve pounds), long

\textsuperscript{22} Crouse, “‘If They Have a Moral Power’: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the Question of Women’s Moral Nature.” 188.

\textsuperscript{23} Frances B. Cogan, \textit{All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America}, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 68.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 29.
enough to sweep up refuse from the streets and dust from the floor.”

Women of Margaret Fuller’s time “practice[d] devotions at the shrine of fashion and beauty, the former in whose service she distort[ed] her rib cage and internal organs with corsets.”

Since women were thought to be emotionally and physically weak, a male family member’s protection was needed for a True Woman. She also expected to have the luxuries that her husband’s wage could provide. In the early nineteenth-century, an upper-class woman’s major role was to “display…her husband’s wealth,” for “idleness…had become a status symbol.” And, the middle-class women’s purpose was to “elevate the status of [their] famil[lies]” through “setting ‘proper’ standards of behavior, dress, and literary tastes.”

It was a social norm that women dedicate themselves to “the ladylike consumption of luxury goods.” Smith-Rosenberg explains that America, lacking the traditional class formation of England and Europe, substituted wealth for bloodline in order to “transform the formless and uncertain into the structured and familiar,” portraying “wealth and social status” as the rewards for “self-reliance” and a “drive for success.”

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28 Ibid., 190.


teach children to carry on the success and riches of her husband. Materialism was at the center of this ideal. Regarding the social structure and the generation of women who supposed themselves as weak and submissive, initiating feminist activities was a very hard task during this time.

However, some women began to resist the social norm and struggle to enter the public sphere for themselves while True Womanhood devoted to learn to enhance the ability to carry out domestic duties. As the century was progressed, increasing opportunities for education and involvement in the moral and cultural welfare of their communities led some women to rethink and challenge fixed gender roles. They sought to step out from the private realm to the public space and break the gender segregation in society. They crossed over the cultural and social boundaries through publishing, performance, and participation in public rituals. Eventually, they started to raise their voices to acquire the vote and the right to hold public office.

This movement, of course, confronted challenges. Since “public visibility for a woman was equated with loose sexuality,” controversy followed them. Their public activities were condemned as a woman outside the home without a decent male escort would instantly be suspected of participating in something unethical or socially marginal.  

During this era, there was also a religious shift; the decline of Calvinism which had dominated the New England Puritan community. In the late 18th century, Arminianism emerged as a major presence in America where Calvinism had dominated.

the field of theology and most Christian faiths. Calvinistic doctrine promoted the idea of a limited atonement. In other words, it held that God’s salvation was given only to the elect and damnation was the fate of all others. The relationship between God and humans was seen as one directional. The concepts of order, punishment, absolute authority, and exclusion were necessary elements to uphold the doctrine of Divine sovereignty. Against this Calvinism, the Second Great Awakening widely spread Arminianism which interconnected with Jacksonian democracy of the 1830s and 1840s and the disestablishment of the Church.  

In the early nineteenth century, evangelicalism, particularly Methodism and the revivals with Charles Finney, brought the ethical efforts and “conversionist fervor” that encouraged many women to step out from the home and work for social reform through numerous charitable organizations. Middle and upper class women, who were untied from domestic chore because of economic fortunes of husbands or fathers, were able to attend religious meetings. The women who had conversion experience through these meetings began to pour their energies into morally reform themselves and their society. For these women, evangelical churches provided the opportunity to learn such social skills such as “fundraising and public-speaking.” This led women to participate in numerous social activities—“great antislavery, temperance, missionary, and suffrage crusades” of the era. Further, some women continued to feel a call to a preaching

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34 Ibid., 93.
ministry and became preachers while some women who felt a stronger call to the ministry might have entered the mission field although their positions were usually limited to the partners/spouses of male missionaries.\textsuperscript{35}

However, because of the biblical interpretation and religious dogma issues, many women social activists later left evangelical churches and chose their own ways to reform the social structure.\textsuperscript{36} Additionally, liberal Quaker, Universalist, Unitarian, and Spiritualist groups influenced many women to actively participate the abolitionist movement.\textsuperscript{37}

Eventually, many women began to enter the public realm, which was normally thought to be a man’s space, and challenged the structural male privilege. Some “conservative evangelical churchwomen” participated in this movement, however, the strongest women activists were the “Freethinkers or Spiritualists,” who turned back from Calvinism to “individualistic and scientific faith”—who denied men’s superior positions in society.\textsuperscript{38} Evidently, Margaret Fuller was one of the radical female social activists.


\textsuperscript{36} Hempton, \textit{Evangelical Disenchantment}, 94.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 93.

Women’s Nature and Rights: Margaret Fuller’s View Point within Transcendentalists Circle

The cult of True Womanhood grew around promoting women’s role in the home and encouraging these virtues as distinctly feminine to the point that women were considered to have an innately superior moral nature. Ironically, however, this still related to their primary identification with the body. Their frail bodies, and hence frail virtues, relegated them to the domestic sphere, since any active involvement in the public sphere was thought to destroy their health and contaminate their purity. On the other hand, the shelter that they received in the home protected their virtues and equipped them to be the primary moral guides for their children. Jerome Loving, however, points out the double bind this belief produced since it “rendered the female politically inferior by proclaiming her superior as a mother and thus the keeper of social mores and religious principles.”

This domestic realm was consequently valorized as a woman’s dominion and sphere of influence. From this premise, a number of people, such as Catherine E. Beecher, argued for a better education for women so that they could be better wives and mothers, more suitably equipped to be moral guides for their children.

Along with urging for better education, some moral reformers particularly abolitionists, in order to drive many women to fight against the great social sin of slavery, frequently insisted that women were born with deeper moral sensibilities. This dependence on fundamental gender differences and particularly the moral nature of women produced troubles for the women reformers—such as Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth

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Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony—because it could never be thoroughly extricated from the argument that kept women inside the domestic circle.\textsuperscript{40}

In spite of radical theological revisions, the Transcendentalists were surprisingly conventional in their acceptance of essential gender differences of women including their assumed higher moral nature. However, perhaps as a contradiction, they supported women’s rights. For example, their acceptance of Fuller along with other women, as an intellectual into their circle, can be read as the evidence of their support for the rights of women. Furthermore, in their periodical, \textit{The Dial}, she published her first feminist essay, “The Great Lawsuit: Man Versus Men; Woman Versus Women.” And, fellow Transcendentalists generally gave positive reviews to the essay and the extended version, \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth Century}.

In “The Great Lawsuit” and in \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth Century}, Fuller said that she was aware of the fact that popular opinion was against her, “society at large not [being] prepared for the demands” she was about to make.\textsuperscript{41} Her response was to effectively appeal to patriotic motives and, at the same time, challenge imposed restrictions. Because, Fuller proclaimed, the United States has been founded on the principle that “all men are born free and equal,” it “is surely destined to elucidate a great moral law” for all humanity.\textsuperscript{42} But slavery and restrictions on women contradicted this founding proposition. Hence, concluded Fuller, for the nation to achieve its


\textsuperscript{41} Margaret Fuller, \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth Century}, 18.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 15.
destined greatness, it must liberate slaves and get rid of all restrictions on women. Fuller firmly believed that full equality for women must be attained as the fundamental condition for the improvement of humankind in general and the fulfillment of national providence in particular.

Her aim of writing those was to motivate readers, as she was already deeply committed to do, to independently discover a “truth.” Describing men and women as “the two halves of one thought” in the preface to Woman in the Nineteenth Century, she asserted: “I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that this truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognized as the same for the daughters and the sons.”

Making her audience reach a predetermined conclusion was not Fuller’s purpose. In order to create a mutual process of statement and response in which various voices could find a place, Fuller rejected authoritarianism and manipulative strategies. “Certainly, in conveying her “truth,” Fuller’s purpose was to initiate a new consensus.”

Fuller did not accept an argument for women’s rights based on a higher moral position for women. When examining Fuller’s feminist argument within the context of Transcendentalism the inquiry into women’s moral nature becomes a focal issue. As

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44 Ibid., vi.

45 Ibid., 376.
Crouse noted, Fuller cleverly changed the “premises of the cult of True Womanhood” to represent a much more radical argument than her Transcendentalist counterparts. She, more firmly than her fellow Transcendentalists, held the Transcendentalism principles: a soul embodied in every one and self-culture. Based on this belief, Fuller refused to admit essential gender differences between men and women, which were generally believed in her time, and she developed an argument that came close to the modern understanding of socially structured gender differences.

Within the Transcendentalist circle, the only known exception to the positive support Fuller received was Nathaniel Hawthorne. This was quite unexpected since Nathaniel Hawthorne had a close relationship with Fuller and Fuller praised Hawthorne as the person who could balance both masculine and feminine characters. However, Hawthorne notably held to the idea of a woman’s moral nature and domestic role. Based on this view, it can be assumed that he harshly criticized Fuller because of the rumor about her illegitimately conceived child and subsequent marriage. The rumor certainly disappointed Hawthorn to whom Fuller probably was a woman supposedly having superior moral nature. He described these thoughts in his journal:

There appears to have been a total collapse in poor Margaret, morally and intellectually...She was not working on inanimate substance, like marble or clay, there was something within her that she could not possibly come at, to re-create and refine it...On the whole, I do not know that I do not like her the better for it,--the better, because she proved herself a very woman, after all, and fell as the weakest of her sisters might.

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46 Crouse, “‘If They Have a Moral Power’: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the Question of Women’s Moral Nature,” 260.

47 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, III: 66.

The prominent Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, deeply respected Fuller’s intellectual capabilities. Fuller admired him as a dear friend and as a great teacher whose theory of self-reliance and independence became empowering for women, of course especially for Fuller. In Emerson’s radical view, gender was fluid as masculine and feminine flowing and mingling with each other within an individual. Emerson, furthermore, regarded traditionally feminine traits such as intuition over the traditionally masculine traits of reason and understanding as the superior way of knowing. Perhaps, to women this view was encouraging. Nonetheless, this valuation clearly reinforced conventional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Emerson, Christina Zwarg points out, “has trouble making the subtle distinction between gender and sex that theorists have begun to make today. By contrast, Fuller’s unconventional experience as a woman enabled her to remind Emerson through her complex alignment with masculine activity that one’s sex, though seemingly fatal in nature, need not be restrictive in life.” However, in spite of Fuller’s guidance, Emerson’s concept of women’s rights was inadequate compared to Fuller’s because he was not able to question the traditional ideas about women’s nature. Indeed, Margaret Vanderhaar Allen called him “antifeminist.”


Branson Alcott, one of Emerson’s followers, presented a similar argument. Twenty years after Fuller’s death, in his memoir, *Concord Days* (1872), Alcott recorded his thought about Fuller. The claim that “the sex had no abler advocate” was Alcott’s reflection on the importance of her life and work in the current environment of the women’s rights movement. He praised Fuller as “a sibylline intelligence that divined oracularly.” This expression, according to Alcott’s notions, was the highest compliment he could give. Like Emerson, he, however, seems not to be aware of the more radical propositions of Fuller. In fact, he believed the traditional assumptions about women, that they were “the natural leaders of society in whatever concerns private morals.” His argument was based on this premise that women’s moral power was essentially needed in society: “her vote will tell for personal purity, for honor, temperance, justice, mercy, peace,—the domestic virtues upon which communities are founded, and in which they must be firmly rooted to prosper and endure.” Therefore, Alcott’s arguments for women’s rights disappointingly failed to question the conventional presuppositions.

A Transcendentalist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, the radical when compared to other Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Alcott, carried the argument to a much stronger conclusion. He firmly asserted that women should participate in public life. Parker argued for women’s independence and believed

52 A. Bronson Alcott, *Concord Days*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872), 77.
53 Ibid., 78.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 79.
women’s growth towards independence while Emerson did not fully carry out his belief in self-reliance in relation to women. For instance, Parker addressed that “Womankind is advancing from that period when every woman was a slave, and marriage of some sort was guaranteed to every woman, because she was dependent on man,—I say, woman is advancing from that, to a state of independence, where woman shall not be subordinated to man, but the two coordinated together.” His belief in the value in women’s independence led to the assertion that women’s sole function was not domestic life. He further saw the problem that domestic duty placed unreasonable restrictions on women’s natural capabilities and was a “monstrous waste of the most precious material that God ever made.” His argument quite sincerely reflected the transcendental belief that self-culture is a human right. He persuasively continued that “[w]oman has the same individual right to determine her aim in life, and to follow it; has the same individual rights of body and of spirit,—of mind and conscience, and heart and soul; the same physical rights, the same intellectual moral, affectional and religious rights, that man does.” Overall, his point was that women ought to be competent to pursue and practice any vocation that they satisfy; it could be, ministry, politics, business, higher education, journalism, medicine, or law.

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57 Ibid., 566.

58 Ibid., 574.

59 Ibid., 567-79.
While Parker seemingly argued on the basis of a general human nature, when his topic moved from what women may do to why women are needed in each of these fields, his arguments showed the same premise in women’s distinctive moral nature:

She has moral feeling, affectional feeling, religious feeling, far in advance of man; her moral, affectional, and religious intuitions are deeper and more trustworthy than his. Here she is eminent, as he is in knowledge, in ideas, in administrative skill. I think man will always lead in affairs of intellect—or reason, imagination, understanding—he has the bigger brain; but that woman will always lead in affairs of emotion—moral, affectional, religious—she has the better heart, the truer intuition of the right, the lovely, the holy.\(^{60}\)

This evidently proves that Parker still held the then-current understanding of the difference between the sexes.

Another Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, who greatly influenced Fuller with his ideas, the foundation of Transcendentalist thought, seems to have subscribed to the prevailing concept of women’s nature. Channing’s emphasis on all human beings as souls received Fuller’s high praise and it became a key point for Fuller’s argument. “He regarded [women]” Fuller wrote, “as souls, each of which had a destiny of its own, incalculable to other minds, whose leading it must follow, guided by the light of a private conscience…Thus all beings were treated by him with an equal, and sweet, though solemn courtesy.”\(^{61}\) As Fuller respected and praised him because of his view on women as described in the sentences, it is not difficult to imagine how the society mistreated women in Fuller’s era.

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\(^{60}\) Parker, “A Sermon of the Public Function of Woman,” 583.

“And his profound reverence for women’s nature and function gave that charm of unaffected courtesy to his manner, look, and tone, which won them liberally to exchange their cherished thoughts, as with an equal.”62 It is clear that he treated women as equals, but his views on women were not departed from then contemporary notions. He considered women as having an essential nature and function as women. He stated, “I always think that a woman looks on such a house with something of the feeling, with which a sovereign surveys his empire, and not without some reason, for within that little province, home, her power is as absolute, and its order and happiness are even more dependent on her wisdom and virtue.”63 This proves that his respect for women related to the domestic function and virtuous nature of women, indeed.

Now, it can be observed, according to the previously mentioned view points of the Transcendentalists, that Transcendentalism, in general, was supportive of women’s rights. These Transcendentalists surely encouraged women’s progress and the increase of their participation in society. They as a group, however, did not question the idea that men and women have separate distinct and fundamental natures. They also accepted that women are, by nature, more intuitive, emotional, and moral. Consequently, in the context of Transcendentalism, Fuller’s arguments for women’s rights were indebted to Transcendentalist beliefs while she radically departed from her fellow Transcendentalists at the same time.

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63 Ibid., 610
Fuller’s argument was based on the Transcendentalist perception of the primacy of spirit over matter. Her key point was from Channing’s belief in human beings as souls. For Fuller’s feminist argument, this understanding of a primary spiritual nature had significant implications as it clearly contrasted with the old tradition of identifying women with the body and men with the mind or will. In her conceptualization of all human beings as souls, everyone is subject merely to God. She asserted, “If the Negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appareled in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable. There is but one law for souls, and if there is to be an interpreter of it, he must come not as man, or son of man, but as son of God.”

Her recognition was that the identification of women as bodies had led to such cruel abuses; for example, she said, there were cases that daughters were sold into marriage as mere property and beaten as animals by their husbands or fathers. From fuller’s perspective, a truly happy and harmonious marriage cannot exist unless both partners consider each other as “another soul, which, if not eternal in themselves, must eternally affect one’s own’ growth.”

By identifying the spirit as primary, Fuller’s arguments, compared to other Transcendentalists’, more fully embodied Transcendentalist belief. In her argument, she laid the ground for seeing men and women with similar natures rather than different and, therefore, biological differences become insignificant.

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64 Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman, 37.

65 Ibid., 71

66 Ibid.
Fuller’s claim of the right of Transcendentalist self-culture for women equally as for men was deeply linked with her stress on the spiritual nature of all humans. Fuller effectively used Miranda character to address this logical claim: “Religion was early awakened in my soul,—a sense that what the souls 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.”

She asserted that since men have repeatedly denied this ‘right’ to women in their lives, women “must leave off asking [men] and being influenced by them, but retire within themselves, and explore the ground-work of life till they find their peculiar secret.” She, further, boldly stated that even if this process requires women temporarily to give up marriage, they must seek their own independence and develop themselves from within, by their own resources. This suggestion clearly contrasts with Parker’s and Emerson’s view on marriage. They both encouraged women to marry to find their guardians.

By exposing the primary motivations behind the reasoning as merely a way of keeping women under men’s control, Fuller also negatively criticized the legitimacy of the arguments for women’s unique moral nature. She said that women’s “excessive

67 Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman, 40.

68 Ibid., 121.

69 Crouse, “If They Have a Moral Power,” 270.
devotion”\textsuperscript{70} to their husbands is in reality a vice, a sort of idolatry. According to her, being selfless is not a virtue at all, only veiled passivity. “I wish,” Fuller stated, “Woman to live, \textit{first} for God’s sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink into idolatry. Then she will not take what is not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in Man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of love.”\textsuperscript{71} From Fuller’s perspective, women’s excessive devotion was from a weak sense of self, resulted from being placed in a lesser position. She emphasized that true love could only be cultivated between equals.

Fuller also stood against the argument that woman’s public involvement would contaminate her. This misleading logic kept women in the domestic sphere to protect her virtuous character. She sharply pointed out the double standard applied to women: “Those who think the physical circumstances of Woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for negresses to endure field-work, even during pregnancy, or for sempstresses [sic] to go through their killing labors.”\textsuperscript{72} Fuller showed that women were hardly as frail, physically or emotionally, as many would like to believe they are in order to keep them inside the domestic circle.

Refusing the social assumption that woman’s nature suits her naturally for domestic life, Fuller argued that nothing intrinsic in woman’s nature makes this her

\textsuperscript{70} Fuller, \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman}, 175.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 35.
innate sphere. Like any other, Fuller stated, domestic work should be chosen freely, rather than forced on women as their unavoidable function in life. If a woman does not feel suitable for domestic labor, it should not be imposed on her: “all need not be constrained to employments for which some are unfit.” Fuller argued that any professions like sea-captains should be open to women because women need to have the chance to find a fitting type of job for themselves.

Fuller understood that gender was much more socially constructed than innate. Hence, she made the argument for women’s rights by altering the fundamental premises.

Fuller, in fact, explicitly distinguishes a woman’s gender from her nature at a time when the two were fast becoming synonymous: hence in Woman she contends that ‘what woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded…’ Here, the freedom and lack of impediments she believes to be guaranteed any soul are conferred upon woman precisely by identifying her as soul versus the traditional identification of woman with (or as) body. Fuller’s treatise provides women with a loophole of retreat from the increasingly essentialized and pathologized woman’s nature.

Davis pointed out that, by resting her argument on the belief in human beings primarily as souls, Fuller detached herself from the position leading to the traditional understanding of women’s nature. Fuller was able to be away from the norm of her day including beliefs that her transcendentalist friends accepted without questioning.

73 Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman, 175.

74 Crouse, “‘If They Have a Moral Power’: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the Question of Women’s Moral Nature,” 272.

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she clarified that masculinity and femininity are not two different natures only existing in the biological sexes, but both should coexist within individuals as the aspects of human beings: “Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes fluid. There is not wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.”

Therefore, compared to Theodore Parker and other Transcendentalists who argued for greater involvement of women in society because a balance of masculine and feminine qualities in all human communities was needed, Fuller went well beyond their understanding.

Fuller believed that granting women independence and *self-culture* could only make positive effects on both women and men. The radical nature of Fuller’s argument came out of understanding the natures of men and women as inextricably connected rather than trying to divide them and regard each as separate and distinct. When most Transcendentalists argued for women’s rights while still accepting traditional beliefs of women’s nature, Fuller went beyond their limited views, by pointing out the faulty premises they were based on. She wisely did not choose the way to fight with women’s supposedly superior moral status. Instead, she presented an argument that sought to unite, to treat all human beings as souls in need of freedom to grow. In this sense, she was the most sincere Transcendentalist who applied its principle very consistently.

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76 Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and kindred Papers relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman*, 115-16.
The Boston Conversations: Intellectual Discussion Group

1839 was a significant year for Fuller’s career as this was the year in which her Conversations in Boston began. Starting in November 1839 and continuing through May 1844, each fall and spring Fuller led a series of conversations on variety of subjects. The main subjects were from mythology, philosophy and the arts. Most participants were Boston area women and some were from as far away as Providence and New York.77

Previously, she had left neo-Transcendentalist Greene Street School in Providence where she had successfully completed nearly two years’ teaching. Through her teaching experiences at Greene Street School and earlier at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School, she had gained a good deal of self-confidence. Further, she also gained the idea, preached by Alcott, that teaching could be culturally important if a teacher only effectively used a sufficiently idealistic teaching method. Having this idea in her mind she wrote to her friend William Henry Channing just before she left Providence, emphasizing her own “dreams and hopes as to the education of women.” She, in the letter, finally hoped that education of women would be her vocation.78 Probably, Fuller’s meetings with the inadequately prepared girls at Greene Street School had reinforced her sense of the insufficient educational opportunities for women. Thus, with her practical teaching strategies and her continuing fascination with all forms of public


78 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, 1: 352-55.
discourse, she began to consider some means by which “to systemize thought and give a precision in which our sexes are so deficient.”

In America, during the previous two decades, there had been the development of women’s education such as the growing numbers of “female seminaries” and mass middle-class female secondary school education. This development was launched and supported by the mighty evangelical churches which expected that “women’s supposedly unique self-sacrificial virtues would gain greater influence and the ‘salvation’ of an otherwise overly expansive and competitive republic be guaranteed.”

Nevertheless, by the end of the 1830s, some critics noticed the visible sign that the educational system was beginning to fray. Apart from its religious or moral dimension, knowledge at most of these schools was still generally conceived of as ornamental and invariably taught by rote. This weakness was related to a fundamental contradiction in the whole female education movement. While the movement opened the door to the widest possible vistas of intellectual accomplishment, the schools—the products of the movement—were intended to prepare young women for only two occupations: that of wife and mother or, in the case of middle- or lower-middle-class single girls, teaching.

But these limited choices still left a significant number of young single women, who did not get into a college and had no clear social role, and a certain number of older educated women, for whom the roles of wife and mother were insufficient. This

79 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, III: 2:87.

was particularly true of a considerable number of Boston matrons and young women who were generally well-to-do and therefore were not eager to hold underpaid teaching positions. Because they were liberal in their religious views, they were not attracted to the female education movement that, as benevolence crusades, was supported by evangelical churches and that absorbed many women. Moreover, they were raised in the families and circles that were highly conscious of education and culture, so consequently were educated to promote an interest in literature and idea almost as much as in customary domestic roles.  

Fuller was aware of the sad fact that individual woman, of course, including the participants of the Boston Conversations, found it was hard to believe that their minds were equal to men’s even though they were exposed to the liberal rhetoric about universal equality and scattered motions, made toward higher education for women. Even Fuller herself was not free from self-doubt, despite the bold movement she made. Her public experience at any time she stepped out her own sphere, and occasionally even/yet within it, confirmed her in numerous ways to the extent that though she was smart and intelligent she was not somewhat a whole woman by the existing social standard.  

Thus, Fuller sought to help women triumph over the twofold educational and social handicap by encouraging them to fully connect their minds to an atmosphere that was as free as possible from criticism. The hope, she had, was to stimulate them to

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82 Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: from Transcendentalism to Revolution*, 147.
systemize their idea and express themselves fearlessly as they had never been requested to do before. She also wanted to make them to sharpen their thinking habits. Further, more importantly, she dreamed to guide them to discover that their “inadequacy were not innate,” but were the outcome of shallow education and the “attitude of self-deprecation instilled by social custom.” Fuller’s conversation classes were a venue where these women could join to freely enter the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural quest. Additionally, it is obvious that Fuller struggled with the same conflicts as these women.

The ideal of a conversation as a significant intellectual means was ultimately from Plato. Fuller reread Plato’s Socratic dialogues and deeply impressed by it months before she began her conversation classes. However, the person who developed the concept of a conversation as a revolutionary educational device and variable cultural force was Bronson Alcott, a Platonic enthusiast of transcendental circle in America. Fuller had witnessed Bronson Alcott’s efforts to utilize conversational dialogues as a teaching tool at his Temple School. And, more recently, as Fuller was aware, “Alcott…had launched a series of moderately successful traveling conversations in various towns in eastern Massachusetts.” These observations obviously influenced Fuller and eventually the conversation became for Fuller a method of feminist activism.

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83 Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: from Transcendentalism to Revolution*, 147.


The value of a conversation, Alcott found, was its power of revealing truth, which was conceived to be deeply subjective.\textsuperscript{86} There were particular reasons why American Transcendentalists like Fuller and Alcott admired the conversation method. First, its spontaneity and flexibility seemed to them to reveal the deeper spiritual truths that “frozen” written language could not possibly capture. Second, conversations, in contrast to the inactive medium of the popular lecture, effectively encouraged originality and intellectual self-reliance. It can be assumed that, beside her famous talent for informal talk, Fuller’s lack of opportunity as a woman to lecture was also a factor in attracting her to the conversations. However, theoretical concerns were also very important. As she stated in her opening lecture, she was “not here to teach” but “to provoke the thought of others” in order to encourage the kind of intellectual reproduction and self motivated activity, which men were able to experience outside of a conversation classroom, inside a conversation classroom.\textsuperscript{87} She did not want chiefly to entertain or teach, but to change the image women had of themselves.

It is helpful to look at who these women were in order to grasp the atmosphere of the Conversations. First, there were a small group of women attending the classes who were well-known (in the area) and self-supporting female writers and educators like Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Alden Ripley, and Elizabeth Peabody. The women of the second category were younger single women who were high-spirited and interested in new trends. They were Edna Littlehale, Mary Ann Haliburton, Mary and Sophia Peabody sisters, and Maria White. Third, a group can be categorized as women who

\textsuperscript{86} Fuller, \textit{The Letters of Margaret Fuller}, I: 287.

\textsuperscript{87} Fuller, \textit{Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli}, I: 329.
married or related to men prominently associated with social reform movements. The
wives of virtually all the leading Transcendentalists and many significant abolitionist
leaders were among this group. Lidian Emerson, Elizabeth Hoar, Sophia Ripley, Sarah
Clarke, Elizabeth Davis Bancroft, Lydia Cabot Parker, Ann Terry Phillips, Wendell
Phillips, and Louisa Gilman Loring were those women.

Finally, Margaret Fuller’s close young friends were the most active participants
of the Conversations. Most of these women were fervent supporters, and in many cases
close friends of the leading figures of the Transcendentalist circle. This group included
Almira Barlow, Eliza Farrar, Anna Barker, Caroline and Ellen Sturgis, Jane Tuckerman,
Marianne Jackson, and Mary Channing.\(^88\)

Certainly, these women shared some common characteristics. First, they were
essentially all religious liberals or Unitarians; a few numbers were holding conservative
Unitarian view and a larger number were leaning toward Transcendentalism. Second,
they already had high educational background. Most of them were multilingual and well
read in classical and modern literature. Their high education was generally obtained
through private tutoring—often from a scholarly father or brother—combined with
instruction at one of the older and generally superior, compared with the newer
evangelical academies, non-evangelical private girls’ schools in or around Boston.

\(^{88}\) Capper, “Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer: The Conversations in Boston,” 510-11.
These common backgrounds made the conversation group somewhat typical Unitarian elite with variety of individuals.89

Fuller’s first class was held in the front parlor of Elizabeth Peabody’s combination house and Transcendentalist Bookstore on West Street at eleven o’clock in the morning on Wednesday, November 6. There were twenty five women in attendance. The bookstore was not officially open yet. In the meantime, Peabody gladly made the room available to Fuller and her pupils at no charge. For a ticket of admission for the two-hour, thirteen-week course, each woman paid ten dollars. This price was nearly equivalent to what Emerson and other famous lecturers were charging. Because of popular demand, Fuller began a new series the next spring. Then, every winter and spring for the next four years, Fuller conducted two twelve- or thirteen-week series of conversations. A total of over two hundred women participated in the Boston Conversations.90

She suggested such weekly meetings would be meaningful if they provide a place of mutual “stimulus and cheer” for Boston’s many well-educated and thinking women who, she said, in spite of the city’s “pretensions to mental refinement,” had nothing of this kind. She further wanted not only to socialize women but also to educate them, essentially by changing their way of thinking. She hoped to achieve this by two


90 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, II: 92, 97, & 182; Fuller, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, I: 336 & 350.
means. First, she wanted “to systematize thought” by examining its various divisions and trying to place them “in due relation to one another in our minds,” and so “give a precision in which our sex are so deficient because they have so few inducements to test and classify what they receive.” Second, she hoped to precisely describe the objects of thought, or “to ascertain what pursuits are best suited to us in our time and state of society, and how we may make the best use of our means of building up the life of thought upon the life of action.” Having these goals she desired to organize a circle of conversations. In an August 1839 letter to Sophia Ripley, the wife of the Transcendentalist minister George Ripley, Fuller described her teaching plan to organize a series of weekly meetings for “well-educated and thinking women.” She was expecting this plan would forge intellectual community, as well as, “answer the great questions. What were we born to do? How shall we do it?”

One major concern at this point was how to reconcile a call for the integration of idea and action with the reality of American women’s strictly limited sphere of activity. Fuller certainly was aware of the contradiction. She found it as the core and fundamental problem of American female education. “Women are now taught, at school,” she told her pupils in the first conversation class:

All that men are; they run over, superficially, even more studies, without being really taught anything. When they come to the business of life, they find themselves inferior, and all their studies have not given them that practical good sense, and mother wisdom, and wit, which grew up with our grandmother at the spinning-wheel. But with this difference; men are called on, from a very early

91 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, II: 86.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 86-87.
period, to reproduce all that they learn. Their college studies, the first actions of life in any direction, call on them to put to use what they have learned. But women learn without any attempt to reproduce. Their only reproduction is for purpose of display.  

It was a very complex task to solve this conflict without a drastic revision of the fixed idea of different gender roles, especially in the economic area. Fuller would again deal with this heavy agenda several years later in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*—“a much greater range of occupation than [women] have, to rouse their latent power.”

Fuller’s continuing central concern was with women’s intellectual and spiritual character. And in her view, employment could be a means to that end. Second, Fuller, like Emerson and other Transcendentalists, firmly believed intellectual and artistic activity ideally as practical and worldly as the activity of any businessman or politician. Based on this assertion they criticized the “passivity, derivativeness and gentility” of the contemporary Boston-Cambridge intellectual or “scholar.” With this assertion, Transcendentalism caught the hearts of young people, especially, who found themselves, in any reasons, alienated from the traditional institutional careers of their culture such as the ministry, politics, or housewifery. These young people at Emerson’s lectures, Fuller’s classes or later at Brook Farm, found surprisingly appealing to Transcendentalism’s claim leading intellectual life itself to an activity and a career, separated from institutions and founded on the self-reliant individual. Fuller wanted the women in her conversation classes to adapt this *self-culture* idea. She dreamed that,

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95 Fuller, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, 159.

96 Capper, “Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer: The Conversations in Boston,” 514.
through conversations, they might attain privately some of the same intellectual benefits that the public sphere refused to give to them. 97

The “magnetic intensity of Fuller’s personal presence,” according to many of her contemporaries’ comments, surely contributed significantly to the success of the Boston Conversations. 98 For instance, Emerson had praises for her that her conversation was “the most entertaining in America.” 99

Furthermore, her rich knowledge in literature and philosophy in several languages, along with her reading and teaching in formal rhetoric, enabled her to stimulate the enthusiasms of the conversation participants. Equipped by vast education, she could “open a subject” and offer “as good a general statement as I know how to make.” 100

A letter she wrote to one member of the group reveals her educational philosophy of her conversations:

I have immediate and invariable power over the minds of my pupils; my wish has been more and more to purify my own conscience when near them, to give clear views of the aims of this life, to show them where the magazines of knowledge lie, and to leave the rest to themselves and the spirit that must teach and help them to self impulse.

The best that we receive from anything can never be written. For it is not the positive amount of thought that we have received, but the virtue that has flowed into us, and is now us, that is precious. If we can tell no one thought, yet are


99 Blanchard, Margaret Fuller: from Transcendentalism to Revolution, 146.

100 Fuller, The Letters of Margaret Fuller, 3: 2:88.
higher, larger, wiser, the work is done. The best part of life is too spiritual to bear recording.\textsuperscript{101}

This passage was shrewd and experimental-minded, challenging and intriguingly self-satisfied and, plausibly at its deepest point, semi-mystical.

“Fuller wanted the women in her classes to reach through their socially constructed outer shells to the vital ‘I’ she believed was ‘within’ them.”\textsuperscript{102} As hoped to guide the women in her classes to their own independent discovery of a “truth,” she really did. Fuller’s notion of “truth” as a process of unfolding revelations had been reinforced by her experience with the conversation series.

\textsuperscript{101} Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, (New York: Chelsea House, 1981), 118.

\textsuperscript{102} Murray, Margaret Fuller: Wondering Pilgrim, 164.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

I wish woman to live, first for God’s sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry. Then she will not take what is not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved. By being more a soul, she will not be less woman, for nature is perfect through spirit. ¹

In Woman in the Nineteenth Century Fuller contends that women are not achieving full development because they are not independent beings; they are instead being fully identified and absorbed by their roles as wives and mothers. Fuller presented an example, the trader’s wife, whose husband—a spokesperson for the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood—expects her to be the unthinking “heart” of the marriage, “too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex,” and subject to her “head” in everything. ² In a radical criticism of such marriages, Fuller asserted, “Union is only possible to those who are units.” She, therefore, stated that “celibacy as the great fact of the time.” ³ She urged women to leave from men’s instruction and from the contamination of modern society in order to become “virgins.” She used this term

¹ Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, and Kindred Papers relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman, 176.
² Fuller, The Essential Margaret Fuller, ed. Jeffrey Steele, 255-56.
³ Ibid., 312.
to indicate women who are celibate in soul rather than in body: “self-reliant, self-taught, self-fulfilled beings.”

Anne C. Rose notes that “Margaret Fuller’s contribution to Transcendentalism” and to the rise of twentieth century feminism and values, “was her balanced respect for woman’s individual identity,” which she notes elementally influenced the social development of both sexes: “Men as well as women…suffered from the bonds of womanhood that kept humanity as a whole from its destiny.” Margaret Fuller did not deny that she was a woman while she never wanted that reality to dictate her choices or limit her opportunities.

Fuller liked to experiment with ways of harmonizing and balancing opposing elements: humanism and idealism, culture and nature, intuition and tradition, male and female. For Fuller, ‘man’ meant both man and woman harmonizing and balancing within one soul. The social structure that limited women’s capacity could not block her soul which was ceaselessly seeking for the truth. She was ‘unnatural’ because she did not gently stay inside the home but stepped out from it to follow the truth that her soul guided to. It was her destiny to awaken people, especially women, to find the truth within each one and freely develop self.

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4 Kimberly Vanesveld Adams, “The Madonna and Margaret Fuller” Women’s Studies 25 no. 4 (June 1996): 388, [http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/itx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(KE%2CNone%2C28)+Madonna+and+Margaret+Fuller%24&srHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescending&searchType=BasicSearchForm&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&searchId=R1&currentPosition=6&groupName=mlin_b_bumml&docId=A18394847&docType=IAC](http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/itx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(KE%2CNone%2C28)+Madonna+and+Margaret+Fuller%24&srHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescending&searchType=BasicSearchForm&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&searchId=R1&currentPosition=6&groupName=mlin_b_bumml&docId=A18394847&docType=IAC) (Accessed July 12, 2009).

Her conversational strategies proved revolutionary as through it numerous women opened their eyes that were able to see the flowing possibilities within each one. Further, it functioned as the guiding light for the first wave of the feminist movement in the United States. Fuller was a leading Transcendentalist, author, critic, and feminist. She was a true embodiment of the Transcendentalist quest—and becoming this, she likewise became a beautiful soul.
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