

## Woman in the Nineteenth Century

### Sarah Margaret Fuller

"Woman in the nineteenth century" examines the challenge of improving the relationship between men and women. In their current status -- current referring to Fuller's era -- the repressed role of women impedes the process of social harmony. In their repression, women achieve only discounted value at best, preventing the full incorporation of their talents from benefitting the greater social structure. According to Fuller, neither men nor women are fully responsible for the problem of inequality, yet both sexes are needed to resolve it. Fuller examines the problems and the possibilities through a variety of examples and comparisons.

It is important to define the concept of social harmony. According to Fuller, it is not the ability to merely coexist in the same sphere; nor is it a parasitic relationship. Harmony involves a symbiotic relationship in which the strengths of one gender complements the strengths of the other. It is not a question of one being subservient to the other; it is concerned with both genders learning to serve each other, not out of duty but pleasure. As Fuller writes: "I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other." (1634). As well, harmony is not acquired through a sense of duty, but a sense of fulfillment. It involves satisfying the desires which arise from the instincts of nature rather than the persuasion of social behavior. And as will be discussed further, rather than the teachings of culture, it is the androgynous quality of nature which should quantify the interactions of gender.

Predominantly, the androgyny of human composition does not propel the present style of interactions, according to Fuller. Rather than interpreting the tendencies of one's own nature, typically behaviors are imitated through the patterns of one's culture -- primarily the family. Fuller examines the structure of the family as one of the primary reasons women lack the ability to participate meaningfully in society. From an early age, girls and boys learn different patterns of behavior, and thus, live an adult life composed of childish reenactments. Part of the problem has to do with a lack of respect; both from the male and female perspectives. The male is brought up believing that the woman is inferior; therefore, he does not learn to respect her. The female is raised to rely upon the man

for subsistence and guidance, and consequently, never develops a sense of self respect. She learns to trust others rather than have faith in herself. She becomes dutiful to everyone but herself, which is where the problem lies.

This sense of duty, rather than the pursuit of satisfaction, is what propels many women. Fuller emphasizes her admiration of women who pursue traditional "functions," provided these are sought with zeal: "these functions must not be a drudgery, or enforced necessity, but a part of life." (1644). Often, women assume a traditional role without ever having questioned themselves, much less their spouses. Failing to assess their own needs, many women become locked into a pattern of activities which neither pleases nor enriches them, yet they pursue it without question. Failing to express themselves and their needs, they leave their spouses to assume that such activities are satisfactory. And downward continues the cycle.

Which leads to Fuller's view of women's passivity. While many may complain of the disproportion of liberty, few are driven to react against it. Much of women's passivity is related to their upbringing; however, Fuller emphasizes that women must place greater faith within themselves, and less within men, if women hope to influence change. Writes Fuller: "But men do not look at both sides, and women must leave off asking them and being influenced by them, but retire within themselves, and explore the groundwork of life till they find their peculiar secret." (1649) Basically, what Fuller is pronouncing is that women must make their own opportunities since men will not willingly make way. For a full view of the stage, one must work her way through the crowd and find the location which suits her view; such a stance might even require that one circumvent the obstacles which present themselves. This seems to be Fuller's message: for women to find their own seat, rather than accept the place assigned to them. The "peculiar secret" she mentions involves introspection to decode; it is unique to each woman, not something which a culture can or should dictate.

This leads to the idea of self-reliance as a means of improving women's status. Women, having not been raised to be independent, cannot achieve equality until they first learn to rely upon themselves. In primary reliance upon themselves, women will acquire the aptitude to live in harmony with men. Says Fuller: "I have urged upon the sex self-subsistence in its

two forms of self-reliance and self-impulse...then, if she finds what she needs in man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved." (1653). Fuller is indicating that without a clear appreciation of the self, a woman cannot hope to appreciate her interactions with others, primarily men. After she learns about herself--her needs and desires--then, and only then, will she be of value. Her sense of self-worth augments her worth in social contexts, but it requires introspection to develop. Until this idea is accepted, Fuller concludes, social harmony will not exist.

Fuller also considers the concept that living fully is the greatest liberty of all. It does not matter whether one is a man or a woman, the opportunity to rely upon the power of the individual mind is what sets one free: "That makes no difference. It is not woman, but the law of right, the law of growth, that speaks in us...I know that I, a daughter, live through the life of man, but what concerns me now is, that my life be...a complete life in its kind." (1654). Fuller seemingly is not asking to completely overthrow the roles of men and women; while she is content to remain a woman, her plea lies in equal opportunity. Given equal opportunity, the most appropriate person for any task will adopt it; the main point, according to Fuller, is providing the opportunity: "The difference would be that all need not be constrained to employments for which some are unfit." Like the old saying goes, "Don't judge the bushel by one piece of fruit;" it is the same idea here. Fuller wants each woman's individual talents and desires be considered in determining how and where that woman will participate. By discarding old stereotypes, character judgments can be aptly made rather than merely assumed. Such improvements in judgments will improve the overall interaction between the sexes because aptitudes and temperaments will be considered before assumptions are made.

Part of living fully lies in the realization that, in adopting some mannerisms of the opposite sex, one does not tarnish the quality, nor forfeit the identity, of one's gender. Fuller presents that these beliefs constrain the progress of equal opportunity. Women, if allowed to adopt more masculine mannerisms, will lose the perceived gentleness and innocence of their gender. Men, on the other hand, will weaken their intellect and strength if allowed to partake of more feminine pursuits. However, Fuller depicts the error of such thinking by revealing there is a balance of masculine and feminine qualities

in all persons. Consider this excerpt: "Nature provides exceptions to every rule. She sends women to battle, and set Hercules spinning; she enables women to bear immense burdens...she enables men...to nourish his infant like a mother." Fuller's reference to nature as a source of balance reveals an important concept: that nature's intent should prevail over social establishment. Presumably, the balance of nature's chemistry is not without meaning; to tamper with natural tendencies is to smother half of one's existence. Since there exists no purely masculine man, nor purely feminine woman, this balance must be appreciated or one will forfeit a portion of one's being: "Let us be wise and not impede the soul. Let her work as she will."

As always, poor communication is the source of the problems Fuller presents. Women fail to assert their needs and express their desires; in absence of a complaint, men assume that the situation is satisfactory. Ironically, though society has progressed tremendously since Fuller's day, many of the same problems still plague modern society. We have not come as far as we believe, seemingly, because we don't realize how much further we have to go.