Conversation in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*: A Tool Used to Prepare Units for Union

After describing a story of a young Native American woman who defied the tribal tradition of getting married so that she could live alone as a single individual, Margaret Fuller says, “We must have units before we can have union” (119). Here, the use of “units” suggests that individuals coming into a relationship must be complete before they combine to make a whole. Another word used to describe personal growth and individual completion is self-culture, described by David Robinson as “the continual growth of the soul” (85). This goal, Fuller argues, would result in ripeness for all mankind, letting “the woman be a soul” (110); however, for Fuller, the growth that self-culture requires also includes intellectual growth, a kind of growth that society did not support at the time Fuller wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (hereafter *Woman*). In the 1840s, when Fuller published *Woman*, schooling for girls and young women was limited to academies and seminaries, which did their best to train girls for domestic roles. These opportunities were “restrictive and inferior” in comparison to the educational opportunities for men. This restriction created a gap between the education that forward-thinking people saw as necessary for the roles of mother and wife and the education society provided women (“Women in Education”). In a climate where only self-culture was possible because women’s schools were inadequate, Fuller’s promotion of an individual complete unit demonstrated the need for a new approach to female education.
Early critics dismissed Fuller’s attempt in *Woman* to argue for the right of the female intellectual because of her conversational tone and lack of clarity. They defined *Woman* as a long talk instead of a book or a treatise (Kolodny, 139-141). Critiques have since separated Fuller’s content from the form to help readers see the importance and validity of the text. Robinson has done an extensive look at the content of *Woman* and the ethos portrayed, arguing that Fuller desired men and women to be able to win the war between themselves and their ideal natures (85). Robinson’s perspective remains focused on the individual and his or her own potential. At the same time, by examining Fuller’s conversational form, Kolodny found *Woman* an effort to “break away from things ‘taught and led by men’” and a way for Fuller to avoid appearing aggressive (142). These two positions maintain Fuller’s view of the individual’s ability to come to self-culture; however, they fail to discuss Fuller’s purpose of self-culture as a means of accomplishing union. An examination of the nature of the form and content of the conversation in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* demonstrates that Fuller’s idea of individual self-culture does not involve the individual alone, but involves creating unity built by interactions with others.

As a teacher, Fuller used conversation to engage the individuals in her classroom, giving them a sense of self-culture by requiring them to share and develop their original thoughts. Once invited to teach at the Greene Street School in Providence, Fuller had a hands-on experience with this issue, facing a problem that was not unique in female classes: her sixty students were not at the expected performance level and their minds were inactive (Blanchard 121). Realizing that their current learning patterns would not help her students strengthen their inactive minds, her thoughts turned to reform. In a classroom culture that favored memorization and recitation, Fuller, in effort to try something new, had the students converse and do the work, discussing and
applying the lessons they had learned. One of her students describes the classroom as a place where they “must talk and let [Fuller] understand our minds” (as qtd in Blanchard 121). Fuller would assign texts to read with themes to think about, and students were responsible for sharing their reactions and their questions that came from their reading. This encouraged them to self-culture, or educate and experience things for themselves, so that they could come to class and expand on the prior knowledge that self-culture gave them. After weeks of practice, Fuller saw improvement and success, and she concluded that “the standards [the conversational method] set were higher, not lower, than the ones they were used to” (Blanchard 122). As Fuller constantly challenged her students and asked them to answer tough questions and defend that answer, students’ minds became activated, leading to better performance of the education they had acquired by self-culture.

Though conversation led to success in Fuller’s classroom, the individual effects recorded by students better describe the personal growth that came from these conversations. Fuller’s teaching methods are preserved in many journals written by her students, complete with reactions considering their own abilities. When Miss Fuller was introduced to the classroom, a young student named Mary Allen noted, “‘I love her already but also fear her…and think she should be very severe,’” and for the first week she was, as Fuller was “showing them what was ‘defective in their acquirements and methods’” (McAllister 127, 29). Though students were shown their weaknesses, much of their work became better as they spoke about and comprehended the material. This method was hard for some students. Ann Brown, another student of Fuller’s complained that “it was harder to think of something to say on the subject than to learn a lesson by heart” (McAllister 130). Brown continues to note that Fuller required students “to have distinct ideas” while interpreting texts, letting “‘nothing pass from you in
reading or conversation that you do not understand, without trying to find out’” (Fergenson 83). After practice, one student wrote, “’We owe you so much for showing us we can become something better; we are still stupid but we feel we are going in the right way. Help us to do more and better. You have given us hope’” (as qtd. in McAllister 130). This last letter, speaking in third-person plural, speaks of a hope that is given to multiple individuals. The tone tells of students interacting with each other, and talking about Fuller’s methods. They realize that although they have been pushed in their studies, they are better for it, and most importantly, they crave more knowledge. In her classroom, Fuller created a community of individuals who were becoming more capable of critical thinking and sharing their thoughts. Through interacting with each other, they were becoming better single units.

With Fuller’s success in helping her young female pupils achieve using the conversational method, it is not surprising that once she was in Boston, she proposed a plan to have formal conversations for adult women who had already completed formal schooling. The women in Fuller’s circle who had been educated and knew how to read were “seeking satisfactory outlets for their intelligence” (Albert 464). Up to this point, women had autonomy in that they were teaching themselves, but there was no way to practice communicating that intelligence. In these gatherings, Fuller hoped to create a space for women to develop intellectually. Her audience, as Capper explains, were rather homogenous; they involved Fuller’s acquaintances who were all educated, wealthy wives or daughters from successful families. Many spoke multiple languages and were religiously liberal. Fuller gathered her circle “to answer ‘the questions,--What were we born to do? How shall we do it?’” (Capper 513). In this intellectual space, women were able to explore art, literature, and mythology to define abstract
topics like “faith” or “beauty” (Capper 516), and add their voice to the bigger dialog concerning these topics by sharing their perspective.

The Boston Conversations, as Fuller called them, worked to parallel the open conversations and dialog that men were allowed and welcome to be a part of. In many ways, as Fuller organized the Conversations, she was trespassing on the culture of male intellect. As McAllister notes, Boston was a space for reform groups such as Abolitionists and the Temperance Society, which gave frequent stimulating lectures, and discussion groups like the Transcendental Club or the Saturday club, which were attended and sponsored by many men (143). Fuller compared the experiences of women, who were denied opportunities to apply their education, to the experiences of men, who from the beginning of their education, were asked to use what they had learned (Capper 514). Fuller’s intent was to use the same format men used in their discussion to frame their female discussion, creating an opportunity for a collective female intellect.

The Boston Conversations impacted the growth of self-culture in the attendees, helping them to grow as individuals and yet be stimulated by the group’s discussion. As women were making use of their new sphere, they were reinforcing and applying the knowledge that they had already received by self-culture. Capper quotes attendees Esther Mack and Ednah Littlehale Cheney in an effort to understand their perspective on the conversations. Mack wrote that “‘[she] would rather not have doubts and difficulties suggested to [her] which [she had] not yet met with in [her] experiences of life’” (Capper 519). That Mack would say this shows that during the conversations, women were discussing issues and events in a way that required women to confront the social difficulties they had always set aside. While Mack was pessimistic about the conversations, Cheney describes her reaction: “‘I was no longer the limitation of myself, but I
felt the whole wealth of the universe was open to me’’ (Capper 520). The limitations that were forced upon Cheney because she was limited to her sphere no longer bound her, and Cheney could think freely and critically about the universe. Whether or not the attendees were ready to confront the knowledge that they gained through this experience, they were overcoming a “sense of intellectual isolation” by forming and interacting with a community (Quawas 135). This new space, which asked attendees to apply their prior knowledge, reinforced self-culture by both using the individual’s own past experience and education, and their current and original perspective.

Fuller’s use of a conversational tone in Woman uses the same patterns that her dialog-centered teaching and Boston conversations used. Fuller’s past success in using conversation to strengthen the individual by working with a community provided her with the tools she needed to achieve a tone that would connect with her audiences for her work on Woman. As mentioned before, this tone has been criticized for being unclear; however, Kolodny hints that Fuller used this tone to “prompt readers to their own independent truth” (150). If this is the case, Fuller requires the reader to do similar work that she required of her students. Fuller supplies the background and examples, and her audience is to sift through the information critically and come to their own original conclusion. This pattern of giving information, letting the audience form their own opinion about it, and shaping the experience that the audience has while sharing that opinion follows what she has used to reinforce self-culture in her spaces of dialog. However, to look at this pattern and say that this was the sum total of Fuller’s intent while writing Woman ignores Fuller’s belief that self-culture lead to participation in a union.

In Woman, Fuller’s conversational tone reaffirms her belief about individual self-culture, but it also invites a more general audience by connecting to a union, a common community
dialog, that has already been established. To have her voice be heard, Fuller knew that she would have to reach to her male audience. She addresses this in the preface of Woman, first, asking for women to consider their own experiences and see what liberties they can strive for, and then addressing men, who she asks for “a noble and earnest attention to anything that can be offered on this great and still obscure subject” (101). These sentences lets us know that she was not only directing her writing to the women, but also to the men. More importantly, she wanted the men to have a purpose while reading her work: She needed them to pay attention to the matter of women’s rights. Her purpose in writing to both a male and a female audience was to expose both groups to the possibility of female intellectual liberty. Bringing both audiences to the subject of female liberty required Fuller to allow her audience to do their own critical thinking. This meant that Fuller needed to apply the same patterns she used in her smaller circles of conversation to her essay. Requiring the audience to do the work also means that they are bringing their experience to their reading and critical thinking about the information that she introduces. The result of having her audience use their own experiences to make meaning of her work is that Woman is situated between what her audience already knows about intellectual liberty and human potential, and the future discussion about the issue of women’s rights.

Essential to her effort of reaching into an already established dialog was her plea for both men and women to work towards their full potential. To reach into the ongoing conversation, she cannot talk about women’s potential only; she needs men to see that even they have not become the most complete human beings yet. From the preface, she goes on directly to explain that both men and women have not become complete human beings. She first claims that man has not “fully installed his powers” (102) and that he is “still a stranger to his inheritance” (103), making sure that the audience realizes that there is a lot more to their selves than what they have thus far
developed. After establishing the fact that men have not reached an ideal state, she calls for a “universal, unceasing revelation” that makes a path for all human beings to answer the call “‘Be ye perfect’” (103). Turning *Woman* into a call to action for every individual to become an ideal expanded her audience immensely. Without an address to men, *Woman* might have hurt the cause for women’s rights instead of helped it. Instead of a plea for social reform that benefits everyone and pointing out flaws in social systems that do not benefit anyone, what would be left would be merely a sermon directed at women explaining how society is leaving out women. Though women were at a huge disadvantage, the needed conversation cannot happen between men and women if they are not already on some common ground and have common goal. Fuller establishes a universal need from the beginning, not only calling men to critically think about women and their situation, but also to think of the situation of the human whole, and to fill those social gaps, that they, as men in power, have created.

Including men in the conversation on how to make society a place for humankind to reach its ideal state was also a clever way to avoid being combative. Kolodny acknowledges that in using the conversational tone Fuller would avoid pointing a finger at men, causing them to recoil and argue back (142). Fuller realized that she needed to include them in this new conversation, without being in any way accusatory, to bring the subject of women’s betterment to the table. The conversational tone created that space for men to see that there was a lot of work to do to create a better society, and that there were needs that were not being filled all around. Fuller made it clear that her argument is not for women, but for all mankind. Thus, the effect of the conversational tone went beyond prodding her audiences to think critically, but it achieved “a collaborative process of assertion and response in which multiple voices could—
did—find a place” (Kolodny 159). In other words, Fuller’s conversational approach created a space where men and women could collaborate and respond to her message.

From Fuller’s conversational tone sprouted the inclusion of moments of conversation that further engaged her universal audience in questioning the current social position of women. During these conversations, the audience is invited to overhear dialog that questions the roles of men and women, making apparent the limited sphere that women are limited to. The results of these conversations between two voices is that it “opens a potential site for critique” (Zwarg 176), without Fuller openly stating her opinion, and it requires the work of her audience. The first of these overheard conversations is particularly striking. The audience overhears a conversation between a person and a husband who is against his wife being at the polls. He insists that he gives his wife all she needs by providing her indulgences. This is questioned by the listener, who asks if he has ever asked if his wife is “satisfied with these indulgences.” To this, the husbands replies that he knows that she is, that he is the head of the house, “and she the heart.” The reply of the listener begs the most attention from the reader; the listener replies that if the woman is the heart and the man is the head, “the head represses no natural pulse of the heart, there can be no question as to your giving your consent. Both will be of one accord, and there needs but to present any question to get a full and true answer” (Fuller 107). This conversation calls into question the widely accepted roles of man and women, and the established relationship requiring women to submit to the consent of men. Fuller subtly situates her logic, that men and women should work together to understand truths, at the end of the conversation, making a space for the audience to draw their own conclusions based on whether they agree.

At another time, Fuller uses conversation between two voices to express the differences between the expectations of men and women. Fuller takes time to establish that improving the
female intellect will not only make a woman her best as an individual, but it will also prepare her for all relationships she might have in life, and prepare her to raise children better. She closes this argument by addressing possible counterarguments in a conversation between a husband and wife concerning the education of their daughter. The husband does not want their daughter to be too educated because “if she knows too much, she will never find a husband.” To this, the wife replies that their daughter should know as much as she can no matter if it helps her find a husband or not. To this, the husband replies that he “wants her to have a sphere and a home,” and a husband to protect her when her father is gone (Fuller 123). About this exchange, Zwarg notes that this conversation highlights how “a woman is caught in a double bind, first through her father’s ‘protection,’ which keeps her from developing her skill, and then through her future husband, who will likely refuse to consent to any deviation from her prescribed role as wife and mother” (176). That Fuller addresses this double bind by bringing up a possible counter argument against better education for women— that it makes them less marriageable—accentuating the differences between a man’s and woman’s experience trying to gain education. Society requires men to gain every possible means of education, while women are limited not only in opportunity, but by socially constructed limits that have a very real effect on a woman’s everyday life.

Thus Fuller uses moments of conversation in Woman to call into question social roles and men’s and women’s different expectations. A dialog is created that reacts to the current situation of social relationships. Limited to two voices, and two opposing positions on the spheres and abilities of women, the conversations make socially established inequalities between men and women clear. Through the simple but powerful tool of dialog, men and women are forced to confront the inconsistencies caused by double standards (Urbanski 135). While one of Fuller’s
characters is often the voice of reason, and hints at possible solutions to the issues the conversations present, she leaves the dialog open, allowing the audience only to hear a little of what is said. This gives the audience a space to insert their own opinion and experiences into the conversation that is being created by Fuller. In many ways, these conversations call for a “reevaluation of the bearing that [the terms ‘female’ and ‘male’] had on the culture of the self” (Robinson 93). Throughout Woman, Fuller argues that “female” and “male” were no longer adjectives describing people, but labels for separate spheres of opportunity in the home and in the workplace. In these small conversations, she subtly asserts that these spheres are constructed and maintained by years of socialization, and that they will no longer benefit men or women if they do not lead the individual to realize their ideal nature. Using conversation to point out that limiting individuals to certain spheres damages the ability for every human being to develop self-culture, Fuller exposes her main argument: not everyone has the ability for self-culture, and those in power need to act in ways that open up those opportunities.

In form and in brief overheard conversations that are part of the text, Woman supports Fuller’s argument for the development of self-culture in human kind, furthering the philosophies that she shares in the content. If Woman called for men to realize the gaps in social constructs and involved them in constructing conclusions about the inequality of spheres, and how the individual is better when they are educated, then men and women would be working to build a space for self-culture. The self holds high value, and it is the increased abilities of the self that prepare the self for “every relation to which it may be called” (Fuller 118). Fuller valued the self and its development, and saw conversation as critical to the idea of selfhood. Ellison, as quoted in Zwarg, explains that for Fuller, the self was the combination of many conversations in the mind, hence reading and participating in dialog beyond that of the self was critical to self-culture.
Fuller wrote *Woman* to demonstrate the value of the individual and to help women realize their potential to develop their ideal self. The form of *Woman* is reflects the desires that Fuller has for women and for the betterment of society by reinforcing the content. The audience cannot ignore their exposure to these ideas no matter what experience they are bringing to this text.

Though Fuller uses all of the conversational tools that she has known and mastered to communicate the need for self-culture, she also uses these tools to establish possible relationships that may result between many self-cultured individuals. After arguing for education and why women should be given opportunities to gain the knowledge that they need to become the ideal version of themselves, she states: “Woman the poem, man the poet! Woman the heart, man the head! Such divisions are only important when they are never to be transcended” (Fuller 115). Using common metaphors, connecting the audience through their experience of having heard or used them, Fuller involves her audience in her conclusion that division is not a transcendent way to live. Division is not ideal. Fuller explains the ideal relationship between the individual and their community by saying “we must have units before we can have union” (119). This idea that an individual becomes their ideal self in order to take a meaningful part in their community is not unique throughout *Woman*. Fuller paraphrases Plato’s belief that “man and woman [are] the two-fold expression of one thought (119). Men and women work united, being the same species, humankind, but being two different parts of that species. Later, Fuller says, “As this whole has one soul and one body, any injury or obstruction to a part or to the meanest member, affects the whole. Man can never be perfectly happy or virtuous, till all men are so” (130). In other words, all mankind are part of a community that comes from different parts, but works together. The community, that is here represented as a whole, cannot be complete without each of its parts working, and working together. Again and again, Fuller describes the
relationships between the individual and their community as one where the community provides the individual with what they need to become their ideal self, and then, after making use of those tools, the individual becomes a meaningful part of the community who can pass those opportunities to the next individual who has yet to discover their potential.

A major part of being a meaningful member of society is having the education and the knowledge necessary to make connections and build relationships with and between other people. This reinforces the established community, while making room for others. As Fuller addresses the claim that women need education for the sole reason of being better mothers and better wives in their own spheres, Fuller states, “Give the soul free course, let the organization both of body and mind be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called” (118). Though Fuller is speaking primarily about female education, it fits into the conversation that she has established to include men. If any soul, meaning any being, is allowed to develop the self to their ideal self, in body and in mind, then that individual will be prepared for any relationship that the members of their community offer them. Here, Fuller moves from the potential of the individual, and extends it to a potential for the community, implying that if there is an individual ideal, there is also a communal ideal. She moves past the idea of individual knowledge for the individual only, but suggests that individuals properly equipped with knowledge, may discover truth and share it “for the good of all men” (Fuller 118, italics added). She acknowledges that self-development and self-dependence might lead people to live on their own, and that women might become “old maids” and still be useful people. Saints and geniuses have found themselves in the same lonely position, and the result is that they are better able to understand and reproduce life. To sum up, self-culture, while it leads to self-dependence is not for the benefit of one person or one group of people, it is for a community.
Realizing this truth, it follows that every individual, male and female, needs to be given the space and the tools to become their ideal self and participate in multiple kinds of relationships in their communities.

Once these relationships are formed, they are maintained by conversation, making dialog a necessary instrument in an individual’s community. As Fuller realized in her experience teaching at the Greene Street School and organizing the Boston Conversations, conversation is a constructive way to bring people together to discuss and make meaning of life. It requires participation from all individuals, and makes it necessary that those individuals involved understand the relationship between actions and consequences. These consequences that affect society do not impact only those making the decisions, they impact all of the community, making it necessary for those shut out to be a part of the conversation. Fuller notes, “Many women are considering within themselves what they need that they have not, and what they can have if they find they need it. Many men are considering whether women are capable of being and having more than they are and have, and whether, if so, it will be best to consent to improvement in their condition” (107). Here, Fuller points out that in the current state, although women are subjects of the conversation, they have yet to be a part of it themselves, participating in the dialog and inserting their own experiences and original ideas. Fuller shows that it is important for the community, not just for self-culture, that women are included in these dialogs, or are at least given space to insert themselves. Urbanski realizes that Fuller has modelled how to get involved in the conversation as an individual, while involving the collective body. She points out that Fuller’s constant switching between “we” and “I” shows Fuller’s efforts to use her own experience as representative of all women (136). I would extend this observation by asserting that the use of “we” and “I” also shows her efforts to have a collective conversation that is not
limited to one social group, but is relevant and important to every individual in the larger community.

Fuller’s idea of how to attain self-culture does not separate the unit from the union, but prepares individuals to react to their relationships and their unique experiences. Establishing a unit and a union through conversation is futile if the individual cannot make meaning of their life situation. In many ways, having a whole unit is not possible without understanding of the individual relationships established outside of the self. Robinson has quoted Alcott’s idea of self-culture as “the art of revealing to a man the true idea of his being—his endowments—his possessions—and fitting him to use these for the growth, renewal, and perfection” (85). If self-culture is defined in part by an individual’s endowments and possessions, it follows that individuals must consider where these endowments and possessions come from, their community, in order to define themselves. This definition also, in a time where women “[do] not hold property on equal terms with men” (Fuller 108), denies a large group of the community the ability to achieve self-culture, and raises the question of who is withholding the female’s opportunity to examine their relationships with others in an effort to understand their own relationships. Fuller’s argument for the community and the individual to work together towards a more perfect union built by stable units, requires some endowments and possessions to come from the community.

When this is understood, Fuller’s use of conversation in her writing not only results in giving females a space to think critically about their experiences in their community, but also gives women a space in the conversation about their rights and freedoms. They can require their communities to give them the tools that they need to gain self-culture and self-reliance. Self-culture is more than education that impacts the individual; it requires relationships to be
developed. From those relationships come the endowments women need to identify and culture themselves. Though in Fuller’s time they did not have the ability to have possessions of their own, their endowment, or knowledge, could come from their relationships and meaning that they were drawing from the community. In the examples of Montague, Somerville, and Staël, despite the limitations put on females, they drew on their community’s relationships and acquired knowledge that allowed them to practice application in a way that helped them discover their unique purpose, and give a “light upon the path of the sex” removing many obstructions to the ways they could contribute to their society (Fuller 117). As discussed earlier, Kolodny has noted that Fuller’s use of conversation “prompts readers to come to their independent truth” (150). I would like to extend Kolodny’s observation by saying that Fuller’s use of conversation also prompts readers to realize that unless they act on that truth, achieving the ideal unity in society will be impossible. Fuller’s conversation created a space for women to realize they had a right to equality, to understand that they could claim that right for themselves, gradually opening an entrance point for the women of the community to be meaningful members of a successful union.
Works Cited


