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Conversation in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*

A Tool to Prepare Units for Union

Camille Pay

“We must have units before we have union,” declares Margaret Fuller, an early nineteenth-century women’s rights activist (119). Fuller envisions a world where male and female individuals are provided with a climate that allows all to reach their full potential. This helps them become complete as individuals, so they can improve their community. In the 1840s, when Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (hereafter *Woman*), women and men were limited to their separate spheres. Such expectations were reinforced by the difference in educational experiences girls and boys were receiving. Schooling for girls and young women was limited to academies and seminaries, which did their best to train girls for domestic roles. These roles were “restricted and inferior” in comparison to the educational opportunities for men, creating a gap between the education that forward-thinking people expected of modern women and the education women were actually receiving (“Women in Education”). In a climate where women were limited to learning by self-culture, or learning by one’s self for one’s self, Fuller’s promotion of an individual and complete unit demonstrates the need for an approach that extended women’s education to their communities.

Unfortunately, Fuller's suggestions for educational reform were dismissed because she used an informal, conversational tone that often lacked clarity. While conversational tones were seen as informal, a modern feminist scholar Rula Quawas noticed that Fuller increased a feeling of community and active participation by using a more casual tone (131). Early critics, quoted and studied by rhetorical analyst Annette Kolodny, defined *Woman* as a long talk instead of a book or treatise (139–141). Third-wave feminist critics, who worked to deconstruct and re-define early feminist notions, have since separated Fuller's content from the form to help readers see the validity of the text. David Robinson, who studied Fuller's *Woman* in the context of nineteenth-century self-culture, has done an extensive look at the content of *Woman* and the ethos portrayed. He argues that Fuller desired men and women to be able to win the war between their current self 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 finds *Woman* to be an effort to avoid appearing aggressive, "break[ing] away from things 'taught and led by men'" (142). Both Robinson and Kolodny's perspectives on *Woman* maintain Fuller's purpose for self-culture: to accomplish union and enable an individual to serve a community. An examination of Fuller's use of conversation as a rhetorical tool in her community and in *Woman* demonstrates that all men and women must realize self-culture to contribute to their community. This realization will give individuals the influence to act in ways that equalize opportunities for males and females, causing individuals to use their unique experiences to create a critical space to evaluate their community.

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. In a study of Fuller's life, Paula Blanchard describes how Fuller, once invited to teach at the Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island, faced a problem that was not unique in female classes: her sixty students were not at the expected performance level and their minds were inactive (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 used practices that focused on discussing and applying the lessons they had learned. One of her students described the classroom as a place where they "must talk and let [Fuller] understand our minds"

(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 educate themselves by their own effort, so they could expand on the prior knowledge that self-culture gave them in class. 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” (qtd. in Blanchard 122). As Fuller constantly challenged her students and asked them to answer tough questions and defend their answers. This activated the students’ minds and led to better application of knowledge gained by self-culture.

Though conversation led to success in Fuller’s classroom, the individual effects of self-culture recorded by students better describe how classroom conversations resulted in personal growth. Marie M. McAllister compiles many journals to understand Fuller’s teaching methods; many entries describe the students’s feelings about their own abilities. When 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” (McAllister 127). For the first week, Fuller was severe as she “show[ed] them what was ‘defective in their acquirements and methods’” (129). 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. Another student named Ann Brown complained that “it was harder to think of something to say on the subject than to learn a lesson by heart” (qtd. in 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” (qtd. in 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” (qtd. in McAllister 130). The writer uses first-person plural to speak 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. Most importantly, they crave more knowledge. In her classroom, Fuller creates a community of individuals who were becoming more capable of critical

thinking and sharing their thoughts. Through interacting with each other, they reinforced what they learned through self-culture by applying what they learned during critical conversations.

Because Fuller's conversational method succeeded in helping individual pupils, Fuller proposed a plan to have formal conversations in Boston for adult women to discuss their thoughts and feelings. 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 explored 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 perspectives. These conversations were called the Boston Conversations.

The Boston Conversations 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 discussions to frame their female discussions with the goal to create 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” (qtd. in Capper 519). That Mack would say this shows that during the conversations, women were discussing issues and events in a way that required them 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” (qtd. in 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 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 success in using conversation to strengthen the individual by working with a community provides her with the tools she needs to achieve a tone that connects 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). Fuller needs to apply the same patterns she used in her smaller circles of conversation to her essay. Conversation is a tool that Fuller uses in her writing to create room for readers to make meaning from the text. They can then compare their perspective to *Woman* and to the greater conversation that the community is having about women’s rights. Fuller supplies the background and examples, and her audience is to sift through the information critically and come to their own original conclusions. 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 the technique she used to reinforce self-culture as a teacher and mentor. Fuller’s efforts develop women’s self-culture through conversational tools aimed to affect the larger community.

Fuller knew that to impact changes concerning female liberty, she would have to include a male audience for *Woman* to enter influential social conversations. She addresses this in the preface of *Woman*, first, asking for women to actively seek liberty, and then, “from men . . . ask a noble and earnest attention to anything that can be offered on this great and still obscure subject.” She also explains that when she writes “man,” she uses it meaning “both man and woman,” and that she “lay[s] no especial stress on the welfare of either” (101). These sentences show that Fuller values women and men as equal members of her audience, placing responsibility on each party as readers. That is, they must reflect on past experiences and their current educational and social climate to give attention to the matter of women’s rights. Communicating her need for male support is particularly important because they had the social power to give weight to the topic of female liberty in the larger communal conversation. Bringing both men and women to the subject of female liberty requires Fuller’s audience to do their own critical thinking and follow the process that she exercised in Providence and Boston.

Fuller’s plea for both men and women to work toward their full potential is essential in her effort to reach into an already-established dialog about women’s rights. 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. After establishing her desire for men and women to be the audience of *Woman* in the preface, she explains that both men and women have not created a culture where people can reach their potential. She first claims that man—“by man I mean both man and woman”—has not “fully installed his powers” (102), and that he is “still a stranger to his inheritance” (101, 103). This assertion ensures that the audience realizes that there is a lot more to themselves than what they have thus far developed. After establishing the argument 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). By calling every individual to become an ideal, Margaret Fuller expands 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 would benefit everyone, *Woman* would be a mere explanation of how society limited women. Though women were at a huge disadvantage, the needed conversation cannot happen between men and women if they were not already on some common ground with

a common goal. Fuller establishes a universal need from the beginning for men and women to think of the human whole and to fill the social gaps that prevented full potentials to be reached.

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

From Fuller's conversational tone sprouts the inclusion of written conversational dialog that depicts the points of view of two individuals and further engages 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 sphere that women are limited to. The results of these conversations between two voices is that it "opens a potential site for critique" without Fuller openly stating her opinion, and it requires the audience to put forth effort (Zwarg 176). The first of these overheard conversations in *Woman* particularly striking. The audience overhears a conversation between a husband and his friend. The husband is against his wife being at the polls, insisting that he gives his wife all she needs by providing her indulgences. This is questioned by the friend, who asks if the husband has ever asked if his wife is "satisfied with these indulgences" (106). To this, the husband replies that he knows that she satisfied, that he is the head of the house, "and she the heart" (107). 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, then "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 men and women, and the established relationship requiring women to submit to the consent of men. Fuller utilizes this metaphor to explain that if men should work in spheres of knowledge and women in spheres of feelings and emotion, then naturally, what happens in the men's sphere should follow what women desire—an equal opportunity to learn and contribute. The mind does not stop the heart from working for the body, therefore, men should not stop women from contributing to their communities. A body depends on the mind and heart together, just like a community depends on men and women. At the end of the conversation, Fuller subtly situates her logic that men and women should work together to understand truths, making a space for the audience to draw their own conclusions about whether they agree.

Fuller also uses conversation to secure her evidence regarding the limitations of social spheres by addressing possible counterarguments in a conversation between a husband and wife. 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. 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). Regarding 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). Fuller addresses this double bind by bringing up a possible counter argument in conversation against better education for women—that it makes them less marriageable. Both the male and the female contribute their perspectives, accentuating the differences between a man and woman's experiences trying to gain an education. While society requires men to gain every possible means of education, opportunities for women are limited to fit socially-constructed expectations enforced by those with power.

Fuller uses moments of conversation in *Woman* to call into question the expectation of different male and female spheres in the home. She creates a dialog that reacts to the current situation of social relationships. Limited to two opposing voices on the spheres and abilities of women, the conversations make socially-established inequalities between men

and women clear. The simple but powerful tool of dialog forces men and women to confront the inconsistencies caused by double standards (Urbanski 135). While one of Fuller's characters is often the voice of reason and suggests possible solutions to the issues presented in the conversations, Fuller leaves the dialog open, giving the impression that readers only know a fraction of what is said. This leaves the audience space to insert their own opinion and experiences into the conversation. 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* are 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. Fuller uses conversation to point out that limiting individuals to certain spheres damages the ability for every human being to develop self-culture, and those in power need to act in ways that open opportunities to develop knowledge and experience for each person.

The inclusion of conversational tone and conversational dialog in *Woman* supports Fuller's argument for the development of self-culture in human kind. If *Woman* involves men in constructing conclusions about the limitations of spheres, then men and women will work to build a space for personal development for both groups. The self holds high value, and as one's opportunities and abilities are increased, they will be prepared for "every relation to which it may be called" (Fuller 118). Fuller values human beings and their development and sees conversation as critical to the idea of selfhood. Ellison, as quoted in Zwarg, explains that for Fuller, the self is the combination of many conversations in the mind; hence, reading and participating in dialog beyond that of the self is critical to self-culture (167). *Woman* demonstrates the value of the individual and to help women realize their potential to develop their ideal self. While early critics separated the form and content of *Woman*, the conversational form of *Woman* reflects the desires that Fuller has for women and for the betterment of society by reinforcing her argument that intelligent people would only make society stronger. 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 help establish positive relationships between many self-cultured individuals and their community. After arguing for education and opportunities for women, 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). By using contrasting metaphors, Fuller illustrates 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). The idea that an individual becomes their ideal self in order to participate meaningfully in their community is not unique to *Woman*. Fuller paraphrases Plato’s belief that “man and woman [are] the two-fold expression of one thought” (119). Men and women work united as two different but equally valuable parts of humankind. 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, men and women are part of a community that has different parts that work 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 his or her community as one where the community provides the individual with what they need to become his or her ideal self. 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 his or her potential.

A major part of being a meaningful member of society is having the education and the knowledge necessary to make connections with and build relationships between other people. This reinforces the established community, while making room for others. Fuller addresses the claim that women need education for the sole reason of being better wives and mothers. 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 and reach their full potential, 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 and 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 never get married, and that women might become “old maids” and still be useful people. In other words, self-culture makes it possible for a person to depend on their own resources; however, self-culture can only lead one to reach their full potential if that person can evaluate and increase their knowledge within a community. Realizing this truth, it follows that every individual, male and female, needs to be given the space and the tools to become his or her ideal self and participate in multiple kinds of relationships in his or her communities.

Once these relationships are formed, they are maintained by conversation, making dialog a necessary instrument in an individual’s community. As Fuller realizes after her experiences 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 the community. This makes it necessary for those with social power 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. Women need to participate in the dialog and insert 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. Marie Mitchell Olesen 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). 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 evaluate their relationships, considering how their community provides them with resources to become a complete unit themselves. 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.

Conversation in Fuller's writing not only results in giving females a space to think critically about their experiences in their community, but it 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 applied what they gained from self-culture in a way that removed 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). Fuller's use of conversation also prompts readers to realize that unless they act on the truth about the damage of limiting spheres, achieving ideal unity in society will be impossible. Fuller's conversation creates a space for women to realize they had a right to equality and 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.

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