The Literature of the Transcendentalists

1820–1850 One of the most influential American thinkers of the 19th century was Ralph Waldo Emerson. A poet, essayist, and lecturer, Emerson traveled to England in the early 1830s, where he met writers who were part of the romantic movement. Romanticism embodied a style of art, literature, and thought that stressed the human development of emotional forms of expression. Building on these ideas, Emerson developed transcendentalism—a distinctly American philosophical and literary movement that emphasized living a simple life that is not dictated by any organized system of belief.

Members of the transcendentalist movement included New England writers Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Although the movement was kindled by European romanticism, threads of transcendentalist thinking can be found in New England puritan thought, and some transcendentalists were students of Buddhism and other Asian traditions.

MARGARET FULLER

Margaret Fuller was one of the editors of the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. In 1845, Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a work that demanded equality and fulfillment for women.

"Is it not enough," cries the irritated trader, "that you have done all you could to break up the national union, and thus destroy the prosperity of our country, but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen-hearth to vote at polls and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have—every means of improvement, every indulgence."

"Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these *indulgences?*"

"No, but I know she is. . . . I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions."

"Consent—you? It is not consent from you that is in question—it is assent from your wife."

"Am not I the head of my house?"

"You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own."

—*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*

"Our objects as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor ... guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry ... thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressures of our competitive institutions."

George Ripley, in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson

In order to live a religious and moral life worthy the name, they feel it is necessary to come out in some degree from the world, and to form themselves into a community of property, so far as to exclude competition and the ordinary rules of trade,—while they reserve sufficient private property, or the means of obtaining it, for all purposes of independence, and isolation at will. They have bought a farm, in order to make agriculture the basis of their life, it being the most direct and simple in relation to nature.

from "Plan of the West Roxbury Community", by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody
The Dial, January 1842

Name _____ Date _____

CHAPTER 8

Section 3

AMERICAN LIVES

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Pioneer for Women's Rights

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."
—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments" (1848)

That women suffered as second-class citizens became clear to Elizabeth Cady as a girl. She listened as married women told her father, a lawyer, how the law denied them property rights or rights over their children. She suffered more directly when she was 11 and her brother died. "Oh, my daughter," her father lamented, "I wish you were a boy!" She combined her sense of women's oppression with her education, unusually strong for a woman of her time, to become a tireless advocate of women's rights.

In her twenties, Elizabeth Cady (1815–1902) attended abolitionist meetings, where she met Henry Stanton, a reformer. She married him in 1840, refusing to vow to "obey" her husband. Some years later, she made known that she would rather not be called "Mrs. Henry Stanton"; Elizabeth Cady Stanton was preferable.

Immediately after the wedding, the Stantons attended a world meeting of abolitionists. A fight arose when some women abolitionists were denied the right to speak. Stanton and Lucretia Mott vowed to hold a meeting to promote women's rights. It took eight years to happen. Meanwhile, Stanton worked for abolition and for reforms to state laws affecting women. Partly through her efforts, New York's legislature gave married women the right to own property.

In 1848, the first women's rights convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York. Stanton drafted a "Declaration of Sentiments" modeled on the Declaration of Independence and making the case that women were oppressed and exploited. "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her," she wrote. At her insistence—and over Mott's objections—the convention demanded the right to vote for women. Aided by a persuasive speech from Frederick Douglass, the resolution passed.

For the next 54 years, Stanton wrote, lectured, and campaigned for women's rights. For many of those years, she worked closely with Susan B. Anthony, an ideal partner. Stanton—who had charm and eloquence—was the writer and speaker. Anthony—who had administrative ability—was the organizer. Stanton was the more radical. She kept the demand for suffrage at the forefront. She also pushed for easier divorce laws, arguing that drunkenness should be grounds for divorce. She criticized organized religion for aiding in suppressing women. She worked with little rest. For more than a decade, she lectured eight months every year. She served for 21 years as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, and each year staged the annual convention for women's rights.

Stanton achieved some successes. When invited, she made a speech to the New York assembly urging it to give married women the rights to their earnings and to guardianship of their children. In 1860, such a law was passed. In the debate over the Fifteenth Amendment, Stanton demanded that women, as well as African Americans, be given suffrage. She lost that battle, and a proposed Sixteenth Amendment extending the vote to women failed ratification. In 1878, Stanton again persuaded a senator to introduce a woman's suffrage amendment. It was introduced in every session of Congress until it finally passed in 1919 and was ratified the next year—18 years after Stanton's death.

Questions

1. What common practices did Stanton break in her marriage?
2. Why would Stanton model her 1848 Declaration on the Declaration of Independence?
3. What are some of the women's issues Stanton fought for besides the right to vote?

Name _____ Date _____

CHAPTER 8
Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* The Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments"

At the first women's rights convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott issued this statement modeled on the Declaration of Independence. What grievances did the women express in this portion of their Declaration?

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . .

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken away from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her. . . .

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now, in view of this entire disenfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States. . . .

from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage,* Vol. I (1881).

Activity Options

1. Working with a partner, analyze the declaration and list the rights women have gained since 1848.
2. Write a paragraph in which you compare the purpose and language of the "Declaration of Sentiments" and the Declaration of Independence.

Name _____ Date _____

CHAPTER 8
Section 2

AMERICAN LIVES

Frederick Douglass
Advocate of Freedom and Equality

"We solemnly dedicate the North Star to the cause of our long oppressed and plundered fellow countrymen. . . . It shall fearlessly assert your rights, faithfully proclaim your wrongs, and earnestly demand for you instant and even-handed justice. Giving no quarter to slavery at the South, it will hold no truce with oppressors at the North."—Frederick Douglass, first edition of the* North Star *(1847)

Born into slavery, Frederick Douglass became an eloquent advocate for African-Americans' rights. Determined to end slavery, he was equally devoted to winning full equality for blacks.

As a child, Douglass (1817–1895) was sent to Baltimore to become a house slave. Unusually for the time, his mistress taught him to read and write. Soon he was back on the plantation as a field hand. He led six others in an attempt to escape, but they were captured. Back in Baltimore, he began to work on ships, where he met a free black sailor. Borrowing the sailor's papers, Douglass escaped by train to the north in 1838. Reflecting later on his escape, Douglass wrote that he "had been . . . dragging a heavy chain which no strength of mine could break. . . . [now the] chains were broken, and the victory brought me unspeakable joy." Named Frederick Bailey when born, he took the name Frederick Douglass on gaining his freedom.

He married and settled in Massachusetts. In 1841, Douglass went to a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. While speaking to a crowd of African Americans outside the hall, he was invited inside to address the society. His new career was born. He began to speak across the North in the abolitionist crusade. A listener wrote that he wrote "with the power of a mighty intellect" and used an ability to act and "a voice of terrific power" to move his audience.

Some critics doubted his story that he had escaped slavery, and Douglass decided to write his autobiography. Friends warned against it: to publish his story would invite arrest as a fugitive slave. Douglass did so anyway, and in 1845 the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was issued. He prudently left the country for the British Isles, where he lived for two years speaking and writing on behalf of abolition. Douglass thrived in British society, where he was treated as an equal.

He returned to the United States with enough money to buy his freedom, ending the threat of arrest. He returned, too, with a determination to win not just the abolition of slavery, but full social equality for African Americans. He began editing and publishing a new journal, the *North Star*, and in its first edition declared his twin goals: ending slavery and ending discrimination against blacks. He vowed to describe the evils of slavery in the South and injustice in the North.

In the next decades, Douglass threw himself into achieving these goals. He lectured, wrote, lobbied, and argued, urging abolition and equality. When the Civil War broke out, he pushed Abraham Lincoln to declare the ending of slavery an aim of the war. He campaigned for the use of African-American troops and enlisted two of his sons in the Massachusetts 54th, the first unit of black soldiers.

When the North won the war, Douglass joined the chorus of abolitionists who protested President Andrew Johnson's easy plan for Reconstruction. He called the first new Southern state governments—led by former Confederates—"illegitimate, one-sided . . . shams" and urged that the Southern states be required to create new governments. He demanded giving African Americans the right to vote. Years later, Douglass commented on why Reconstruction had failed: "When you turned us loose, you gave us no acres. You turned us loose to the sky, to the storms, to the whirlwind, and, worst of all, you turned us loose to the wrath of our infuriated masters."

Questions

1. Why was it unusual that Douglass was taught to read and write?
2. What made Douglass a particularly effective writer and speaker for the cause of abolition?
3. Rephrase Douglass's comments on why Reconstruction failed.

Name _____ Date _____

CHAPTER 8
Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* Dorothea Dix's Plea on Behalf of the Mentally Ill

In March 1841 Dorothea Dix visited a Massachusetts jail where she found mentally ill people being kept in a frigid cell. Appalled by these conditions, Dix further investigated asylums, jails, and almshouses throughout the state. In 1843, she submitted a report to the legislature—an excerpt of which is reprinted here.

I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses. . . .

In illustration of my subject, I offer the following extracts from my Note-book and Journal:—

Springfield. In the jail, one lunatic woman, furiously mad, a State pauper, improperly situated, both in regard to the prisoners, the keepers, and herself. . . .

Lincoln. A woman in a cage. *Medford.* One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for seventeen years. *Pepperell.* One often doubly chained, hand and foot; another violent; several peaceable now. *Brookfield.* One man caged, comfortable. *Granville.* One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise. *Charlemont.* One man caged. *Savoy.* One man caged. *Lenox.* Two in the jail, against whose unfit condition there the jailer protests. . . .

Danvers. November. Visited the almshouse. A large building, much out of repair. Understand a new one is in contemplation. Here are from fifty-six to sixty inmates, one idiotic, three insane; one of the latter in close confinement at all times.

Long before reaching the house, wild shouts, snatches of rude songs, imprecations and obscene language, fell upon the ear, proceeding from the occupant of a low building, rather remote from the principal building to which my course was directed. Found the mistress, and was conducted to the place which was called "the home" of the *forlorn* maniac, a young woman, exhibiting a condition of neglect and misery blotting out the faintest idea of comfort, and outraging every sentiment of decency. She had been, I learnt, "a respectable person, industrious and worthy. Disappointments and trials shook her mind, and, finally, laid prostrate reason and self-control. She became a maniac for life. She had been at Worcester Hospital for a considerable time, and had been returned as incurable." The mistress told me she understood that, "while there, she was comfortable and decent." Alas, what a change was here exhibited! She had passed from one degree of violence to another, in swift progress. There she stood, clinging to or beating upon the bars of her caged apartment, the contracted size of which afforded space only for increasing accumulations of filth, a *foul* spectacle. There she stood with naked arms and dishevelled hair, the unwashed frame invested with fragments of unclean garments, the air so extremely offensive, though ventilation was afforded on all sides save one, that it was not possible to remain beyond a few moments without retreating for recovery to the outward air. Irritation of body, produced by utter filth and exposure, incited her to the horrid process of tearing off her skin by inches. Her face, neck, and person were thus disfigured to hideousness. She held up a fragment just rent off. To my exclamation of horror, the mistress replied: "Oh, we can't help it. Half the skin is off sometimes. . . ."

Gentlemen, I commit you to this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands. In this legislation, as in all things, may you exercise that "wisdom which is the breath of the power of God."

from Dorothea Dix, "Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts," *Old South Leaflet,* No. 148 (Boston: Old South Meetinghouse, 1843).

Discussion Questions

1. According to Dix's report, how were the mentally ill forced to live?
2. Why do you think Dix took her findings to the Massachusetts Legislature?
3. Do you think the examples of abuse drawn from Dix's notebook and journal strengthened or weakened her case? Explain your response.