

America in Class<sup>®</sup> Lesson  
**THE CULT OF  
DOMESTICITY**

Text Selections

Online Lesson    Follow-Up Assignment

1. Fanny Fern, "How Husbands May Rule," short story, 1853, excerpts.
2. Catherine Beecher, "Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women," 1842, excerpt.
3. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, novel, 1852, ch. 9, excerpts.
4. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, narrative/memoir, 1860, ch. 10, excerpts.



"The Sphere of Woman," *Godey's Lady's Book*, March 1850

**Text #1: Fanny Fern, "How Husbands May Rule," 1853** (excerpts)

story in Fanny Fern [Sara Payson Willis], *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio*

"Dear Mary," said Harry — to his little wife, "I have a favor to ask of you. You have a friend whom I dislike very much, and who I am quite sure will make trouble between us. Will you give up Mrs. May for my sake, Mary?"

A slight shade of vexation crossed Mary's pretty face, as she said, "You are unreasonable, Harry. She is lady-like, refined, intellectual, and fascinating, is she not?"

*vexation:*  
irritation,  
annoyance

"Yes, all of that; and, for that very reason, her influence over one so yielding and impulsive as yourself is more to be dreaded, if unfavorable. I'm quite in earnest, Mary. I could wish never to see you together again." . . .

"Well," said the little wife, turning away, and patting her foot nervously, "I don't see how I can break with her, Harry, for a whim of yours; besides, I've promised to go there this very evening."

Harry made no reply, and in a few moments was on his way to his office. . . . Harry was vexed — she was sure of that; he had gone off, for the first time since their marriage, without the affectionate goodbye that was usual with him, even when they parted but for an hour or two. And so she wandered, restless and unhappy, into her little sleeping-room.

It was quite a little gem. There were statuettes, and pictures, and vases, all gifts from him either before or since their marriage; each one had a history of its own — some tender association connected with Harry. . . . Turn where she would, some proof of his devotion met her eye. But Mrs. May! She was so smart and satirical! She would make so much sport of her, for being "ruled" so by Harry! Hadn't she told him "all the men were tyrants," and this was Harry's first attempt to govern her. No, no, it wouldn't do for her to yield.

. . . Yes, she would go; she had quite made up her mind to that. Then she opened her jewel-case; a little note fell at her feet. She knew the contents very well. It was from Harry — slipped slyly into her hand on her birthday, with that pretty bracelet. It couldn't do any harm to read it again. It was very lover-like for a

year-old husband; but she liked it! Dear Harry! and she folded it back, and sat down, more unhappy than ever, with her hands crossed in her lap, and her mind in a most pitiable state of irresolution.

*irresolution:*  
indecision

Perhaps, after all, Harry was right about Mrs. May; and if he wasn't, one hair of his head was worth more to her than all the women in the world. He never said one unkind word to her — never! He had anticipated every wish. He had been so attentive and solicitous when she was ill. How could she grieve [sadden] him?

*solicitous:*  
attentive,  
caring

Love conquered! The pretty robe was folded away, the jewels returned to their case, and, with a light heart, Mary sat down to await her husband's return.

The lamps were not lit in the drawing-room, when Harry came up the street. She had gone, then! — after all he had said! He passed slowly through the hall, entered the dark and deserted room, and threw himself on the sofa with a heavy sigh. He was not angry, but he was grieved and disappointed. The first doubt that creeps over the mind, of the affection of one we love, is so very painful.

“Dear Harry!” said a welcome voice at his side.

“God bless you, Mary!” said the happy husband; “you've saved me from a keen sorrow!”

Dear reader — won't you tell? — there are some husbands worth all the sacrifices a loving heart can make!



**Text #2: Catherine Beecher, “Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women,” 1842** (excerpt) \_\_\_\_\_  
chapter in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*

It appears, then, that it is in America alone that women are raised to an equality with the other sex; and that, both in theory and practice, their interests are regarded as of equal value. They are made subordinate in station [inferior in status] only where a regard [concern] to their best interests demands it, while, as if in compensation for this, by custom and courtesy they are always treated as superiors. Universally in this country, through every class of society, precedence is given to woman in all the comforts, conveniences, and courtesies of life.

*precedence:* being considered more important, or higher in priority or rank, than something or someone else

In civil and political affairs, American women take no interest or concern, except so far as they sympathize with their family and personal friends; but, in all cases in which they do feel a concern, their opinions and feelings have a consideration equal or even superior to that of the other sex.

In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises [activities for the good of society], and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence. In such concerns, it would be impossible to carry a point contrary to their judgment and feelings, while an enterprise [undertaking] sustained by them will seldom fail of success.

If those who are bewailing themselves over the fancied [imagined] wrongs and injuries of woman in this Nation could only see things as they are, they would know that, whatever remnants of a barbarous or aristocratic age may remain in our civil [social-political] institutions in reference to the interests of women, it is only because they are ignorant of them or do not use their influence to have them rectified; for it is very certain that there is nothing reasonable which American women would unite in asking that would not readily be bestowed.

*rectified:* put right, remedied, corrected

*bestowed:* given, granted, awarded

The preceding remarks, then, illustrate the position that the democratic institutions of this Country are in reality no other than the principles of Christianity carried into operation, and that they tend to place woman in her true position in society, as having equal rights with the other sex, and that, in fact, they have secured to American women a lofty and fortunate position which, as yet, has been attained by the women of no other nation.



**Text #3: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1853, ch. 9** (excerpts)

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[Mrs. Bird serves tea to her husband, a senator in the state legislature.]

“Well,” said his wife, after the business of the tea-table was getting rather slack, “and what have they been doing in the Senate?”

Now, it was a very unusual thing for gentle little Mrs. Bird ever to trouble her head with what was going on in the house of the state [senate], very wisely considering that she had enough to do to mind her own. Mr. Bird, therefore, opened his eyes in surprise, and said,

“Not very much of importance.”

“Well, but is it true that they have been passing a law forbidding people to give meat and drink to those poor colored folks that come along? I heard they were talking of some such law, but I didn't think any Christian legislature would pass it!”

“Why, Mary, you are getting to be a politician, all at once.”

“No, nonsense! I wouldn't give a fig for all your politics, generally, but I think this is something downright cruel and unchristian. I hope, my dear, no such law has been passed.”

“There has been a law passed forbidding people to help off the slaves that come over from Kentucky, my dear; so much of that thing has been done by these reckless Abolitionists that our brethren in Kentucky are very strongly excited, and it seems necessary, and no more than Christian and kind, that something should be done by our state to quiet the excitement.”

“And what is the law? It don't forbid us to shelter those poor creatures a night, does it, and to give 'em something comfortable to eat, and a few old clothes, and send them quietly about their business?”

“Why, yes, my dear; that would be aiding and abetting [helping a person commit a crime], you know.”

Mrs. Bird was a timid, blushing little woman of about four feet in height and with mild blue eyes and a peach-blow complexion, and the gentlest, sweetest voice in the world — as for courage, a moderate-sized cock-turkey had been known to put her to rout [make her flee] at the very first gobble, and a stout house-dog of moderate capacity [size] would bring her into subjection [frighten her into inaction] merely by a show of his teeth. Her husband and children were her entire world, and in these she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument. . . .

*entreaty*: appeal,  
earnest request

On the present occasion, Mrs. Bird rose quickly, with very red cheeks, which quite improved her general appearance, and walked up to her husband with quite a resolute air [firm manner] and said in a determined tone,

“Now, John, I want to know if you think such a law as that is right and Christian?”

“You won't shoot me, now, Mary, if I say I do!”

“I never could have thought it of you, John; you didn't vote for it?”

“Even so, my fair politician.”

“You ought to be ashamed, John! Poor, homeless, houseless creatures! It's a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I'll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance; and I hope I *shall* have a chance, I do! Things have got to a pretty pass [sad point] if a woman can't give a warm supper and a bed to poor starving creatures just because they are slaves and have been abused and oppressed all their lives, poor things!”

*abominable*:  
horrible, dreadful,  
morally repulsive

“But, Mary, just listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn't suffer [allow] our feelings to run away with our judgment; you must consider it's a matter of private feeling — there are great public interests involved — there is such a state of public agitation rising that we must put aside our private feelings.”

*agitation*: unrest,  
uproar

“Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow.”

*desolate*: those who  
are comfortless  
and forlorn

“But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil — ”

“Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can’t. It’s always safest, all round, to *do as He bids us.*”

“Now, listen to me, Mary, and I can state to you a very clear argument to show — ”

“O, nonsense, John! you can talk all night, but you wouldn’t do it. I put it to you, John — would *you* now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door because he was a runaway? *Would you, now?*”

Now, if the truth must be told, our senator had the misfortune to be a man who had a particularly humane and accessible nature, and turning away anybody that was in trouble never had been his forte [strength]; and what was worse for him in this particular pinch of the argument was that his wife knew it and, of course was making an assault on rather an indefensible point. So he had recourse to the usual means of gaining time for such cases made and provided; he said “ahem” and coughed several times, took out his pocket-handkerchief, and began to wipe his glasses. Mrs. Bird, seeing the defenseless condition of the enemy’s territory, had no more conscience than to push her advantage.

“I should like to see you doing that, John — I really should! Turning a woman out of doors in a snowstorm, for instance; or maybe you’d take her up and put her in jail, wouldn’t you? You would make a great hand at that!”



**Text #4: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1860, ch. 10** (excerpts)

When my master said he was going to build a house for me and that he could do it with little trouble and expense, I was in hopes something would happen to frustrate his scheme, but I soon heard that the house was actually begun. I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it. I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail than drag on from day to day through such a living death. I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do anything, everything, for the sake of defeating him. What *could* I do? . . .

*blighted*: infected, impaired, badly damaged

And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it, but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. . . . I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure, and under the most adverse circumstances I tried hard to preserve my self-respect, but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery, and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken [abandoned] by God and man, as if all my efforts must be frustrated, and I became reckless in my despair.

*adverse*: harmful, against one's interests

. . . [I]t chanced that a white unmarried gentleman . . . expressed a great deal of sympathy and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old. . . . He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. Of course I saw whither all this was tending [where all this was leading]. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and

*eloquent*: well-spoken, vividly expressive

feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin [similar] to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. . . .

*degrading*: being treated poorly and without respect

*compulsion*: force, intimidation

When I found that my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I have described. Revenge, and calculations of interest [evaluation of an action's risks and benefits] were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. . . . I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel [slave/ property], entirely subject to the will of another.

You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares [traps] and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.

*ingenuity*: inventiveness, creativity, imagination

