

# Female Freedom Fighters

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On December 31, 1832, William Lloyd Garrison's groundbreaking abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* ran an article about the formation of the very first female antislavery society in New England. The editorial, which was written by an anonymous female author, vigorously put forth the idea that women living in the United States had been too complacent in allowing the practice of slavery to continue unchecked:

It appears to us that the females of this land are without excuse for their heartless indifference to the miserable condition of so many of their countrymen... They behold thousands of their sisters degraded, and terribly wretched, exposed to all the cruelties of capricious tyranny...yet still so many of them remain passive and indolent spectators, and, painful as it is, we fear we must add abettors, of this cruel oppression. ("Another Female Anti-Slavery Society" 189)

Like many of the *Liberator's* articles, this piece of writing was not simply meant to inform people about developments in the antislavery movement. Rather, it was a rallying call to readers, specifically women, to band together and work to end slavery. The female element of the abolitionist movement is an intriguing subject due to the fact that it revolved around a disenfranchised group of people working to help an even more oppressed faction of Americans. In her article on the contributions made by the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Sandra Petrulionis writes that Garrison himself believed "the destiny of the slaves is in the hands of the American women" (1). It was doubtlessly heartening for the publisher to learn that within five years of the aforementioned issue's printing, there were literally hundreds of female antislavery societies in the United States.

Though the numerous female abolitionist organizations in the United States varied in size, they all had a significant impact on the movement as a whole. Today, a great deal of research is being done on the specific contributions made by these societies. Surprisingly, very little work has been done on the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, despite the fact that Concord, Massachusetts was one of the centers of abolitionist activity in the North. What makes this deficiency all the more surprising is the fact that certain members of the Society played a role in inspiring some of the town's most famous citizens to take up the abolitionist cause. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two of Concord's greatest thinkers, eventually became committed abolitionists. Nevertheless, each one was somehow motivated and encouraged in this regard by the women in their lives. Emerson, who made the dramatic transition from a passive critic of the slave system to an assertive abolitionist, was urged to become more involved in the movement by his wife Lidian, his brother's fiancée Elizabeth Hoar, his friend and neighbor Mary Merrick Brooks, and his devoted aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Each of these women did what they could to speed along the lecturer's abolitionist evolution.

Thoreau did not undergo the exact same transition that his mentor did, as he was open to the more radical ideas of abolitionism early on in his life. Nevertheless, there was a certain progression in Thoreau's passionate views regarding the slavery question, as can be seen in his antislavery writings. Like Emerson, Thoreau was inspired in this line of thinking by the women to whom he was closest. His mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, along with his sisters, Sophia and Helen, were founding members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. They exposed him to a fairly extreme side of the movement while he was still a student. This laid the foundations for Henry's radical views on the subject.

Though the women in the lives of Emerson and Thoreau doubtlessly helped shape their roles as antislavery activists, it seems rather fitting that the essayists' fellow Concord writer Nathaniel Hawthorne did not fall into the same line of thinking. Like Emerson and Thoreau, there were several pro-abolitionist women in Hawthorne's life, most notably his wife Sophia's two sisters: Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Mann. Hawthorne never became an abolitionist, however. Instead, he viewed the antislavery activists as rabble-rousers intent on destroying the country. Though Peabody and Mann repeatedly tried to change his opinion, Hawthorne wanted nothing to do with the abolitionists and eventually grew fed up with his sisters-in-law. In addition, Sophia maintained the same views as her husband regarding the antislavery movement, thus creating a rupture in the relationship with her

sisters. In spite of Hawthorne's contradictory position on the subject, it is interesting to assess how the women in the lives of these three writers helped shape their views on the abolitionist movement.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's involvement in the abolitionist movement has repeatedly been seen as an enigmatic component of the transcendentalist's life. This is in part due to the fact that Emerson underwent a significant alteration regarding his views on the subject. Though he had always been turned off by the slave system, he was similarly disturbed by the blind fervor of the abolitionist movement. In *The Emerson Dilemma*, Michael Stryck assesses several of the factors that contribute to the conundrum of Emerson's social activism. Stryck claims that many academics have labeled the great lecturer's involvement with the abolitionists as "an anomaly inconsistent with his larger transcendental project" (139). To some, it is strange that Emerson became devoted to a cause advocating social change through group activism when the central part of his transcendental philosophy revolved around individual transformation via personal reflection and action. Emerson himself always seemed concerned about getting too involved with the abolitionists. Stryck claims that Emerson feared "becoming a single-issue thinker; he wanted to be no one's ideologue for it would transgress his emphasis upon self-reliance and...place too much emphasis upon the group" (160). The fact that several of the significant women in his life were devoted abolitionists doubtlessly played a part in his eventual loyalty to the cause, however. These zealous ladies kept Emerson exposed to the antislavery position even when he had doubts about the cause. Among these ladies was Emerson's aunt Mary Moody Emerson, the woman many scholars view as his philosophical mentor.

In Robert D. Richardson's exceptional biography *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, the author states that Mary Moody Emerson provided Ralph Waldo with "the single most important part of his education" (23). According to Richardson, Mary set the intellectual standards for her nephew, and the biographer asserts that, "Her correspondence with him is the single best indicator of his inner growth and development" (23). The fact that she held such an important place in Emerson's life is critical to the subject of his abolitionist development due to the fact that she was an ardent abolitionist herself.

It is somewhat ironic how committed Mary Emerson was to encouraging her nephew's participation in the abolitionist movement. Initially, she had an unfavorable view of the Garrisonian abolitionists as incendiary firebrands, a view that Ralph Waldo himself held with for many

years. A fateful meeting with antislavery lecturer Charles Burleigh in 1835 drastically changed her opinion on the subject, however. In her engrossing biography on Mary Moody Emerson, Phyllis Cole recounts the meeting between the two, which revolved mainly around the subject of Garrison himself. While Mary labeled the antislavery publisher as a dangerous radical, Burleigh vigorously defended his fellow abolitionist. Intrigued, Mary opened herself up to a new perspective on the founder of the *Liberator*, and her opinion of him changed almost instantly. The shift was remarkable; Cole states that a few years earlier, Mary “had written to her friends in Maine to have nothing to do with Garrison’s paper” (234), but she quickly decided to write them again and inform them of her conversion to his side. It was a true turning point for Miss Emerson. According to Cole, Mary “was taking on a public and communal cause for the first time in her life” (234). She became devoted to drawing others to the antislavery movement. The conversion of her nephew Ralph Waldo thus turned into an important undertaking for the eccentric Miss Emerson.

In Len Gougeon’s book *Virtue’s Hero*, the author recounts an amusing story of how Emerson’s aunt subtly tried to transform Ralph Waldo into an abolitionist sympathizer by organizing “a breakfast for George Thompson at the home of her nephew” (26). Thompson, a famous British abolitionist, had been speaking at various antislavery society meetings in the area, and Miss Emerson hoped that the meeting between him and her nephew would help stimulate a conversion in Ralph Waldo. Unfortunately, the plan backfired, as Waldo found his guest to be “unbearably egocentric and closed minded” (Gougeon 26). Emerson viewed many abolitionists in the same way, claiming that they were so consumed with changing society they failed to see the need to change their own hearts and minds first.

In spite of the Thompson debacle, Mary Emerson refused to give up on trying to sway her nephew to the abolitionist side. One of the more effective techniques she employed was to encourage her nephew’s wife Lidian, who became a passionate abolitionist long before her husband did. Cole states that although Thompson had no effect on Ralph Waldo, his visit to the Emerson household did not go wholly unnoticed. Rather, the abolitionist’s words resonated deeply with Lidian Emerson. This was a victory in itself for Mary. Miss Emerson knew that by strengthening Lidian’s abolitionist resolve, her nephew would be continually exposed to the views and actions of the antislavery movement. Cole writes that thanks to Mary’s encouragement, the abolitionist movement became “central to her [Lidian’s] life in Concord, guaranteeing that this reform would continue to cross her husband’s reform over the breakfast table” (236).

Emerson had married Lydia Jackson in 1835, though according to Gougeon, Ralph Waldo's beloved wife, whom he affectionately nicknamed "Lidian," "had been an abolitionist and civil rights activist all her life" (13). She thus remained several years ahead of her husband on the subject of ending slavery. In 1837, two years after the Thompson breakfast, provided lodgings for visiting abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimke. Their week in Concord was a momentous time in Lidian's life, as the sisters left her resolved not to "turn away my attention from the abolitionist cause till I have found whether there is something for me personally to do and bear to forward it" (Richardson 270). Lidian disagreed with Ralph Waldo's silent condemnation of slavery, and saw it as her duty to actively participate in various antislavery activities. Later that same year, she became a founding member of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. In her article, Petrulionis labels Lidian as one of the leading females in the movement, and describes how she hosted various anti-slavery meetings and entertained visiting abolitionists (10).

Even more striking than her various activities was her passionate devotion to the cause. Richardson captures this enthusiasm by documenting how disgusted Lidian became with the United States in the decades leading up to the war. In the early 1840s, "the proslavery tone of newspapers 'made her hate her country,' her daughter recalled" (396). A decade later, after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed, she went so far as to protest the celebration of the Fourth of July, decorating the outside of her house in black crepe instead of red, white, and blue (Gougeon 202). It was impossible for Ralph Waldo to ignore his wife's zealous views of the antislavery movement, and he doubtlessly felt her influence in the latter years of the ante-bellum period. Petrulionis claims that Lidian's stimulus was essential to Emerson's conversion, and goes so far as to state that her persuading Ralph Waldo to join the movement was "her most vital contribution to antislavery" (10). While this may seem like hyperbole, Emerson's position as America's foremost intellectual was undeniably helpful to bringing an air of legitimacy to the abolitionist movement. Had Lidian been less passionate on the subject, it is likely that Waldo would never have allowed himself to get so involved with the abolitionists.

Another critical female influence in Emerson's conversion was Elizabeth Hoar, his younger brother Charles' fiancée. Ralph Waldo and Charles had shared a close bond growing up, and his tragic death in 1836 left the great lecturer in anguish. In the period of mourning that followed, Emerson and Elizabeth turned to one another for comfort. Before his death, Charles had been the most vocal member of the Emerson family regarding

abolitionism. In 1835, he delivered a stirring lecture on the subject, and voiced his support for immediate emancipation, the most radical abolitionist ideal of the time period (Gougeon 27). Like her fiancée, Elizabeth was committed to Garrisonian Abolitionism, and became a leading female abolitionist in Massachusetts.

It was an injustice committed against Elizabeth and her father, Judge Samuel Hoar, that helped to further Emerson's abolitionist sympathies. In 1844, Judge Hoar and his daughter journeyed to South Carolina to probe complaints regarding the abduction of free black sailors who were being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Gougeon recounts that before Hoar could begin his investigation, "both he and his daughter were driven from Charleston by the threats of an angry mob, apparently acting with the implicit approval of the governor and legislature" (92). Petrulionis further examines the details of this scandal, claiming that, "Governor Hammond refused to meet with the Hoars and demanded that they leave the state on the grounds that he could not guarantee their safety" (11). Emerson was furious that one of his dearest friends had almost fallen victim to the violence of an angry mob. The incident turned him completely against the state of South Carolina, and this negative view of the people living there simultaneously evoked a greater sympathy for the plight of the marginalized abolitionists.

Given how influential his wife, aunt, and sister-in-law were in bringing about Emerson's conversion, it is somewhat surprising that the most significant female figure in the lecturer's transformation was someone outside his family: his friend and neighbor, Mary Merrick Brooks. Interestingly, Mary Moody Emerson loved Brooks so dearly that she considered her to be a part of the Emerson family. In letters to her family members in Concord, Miss Emerson always requested that her relatives give her regards to the fiery Mrs. Brooks, Concord's leading female abolitionist. According to Phyllis Cole, Mary expressed her esteem for Brooks "in the same breath with family salutations. The abolitionist principle created its own family" (Cole 237). Family member or not, the fact remains that Mary Brooks "carried more weight with Ralph Waldo Emerson than any other [woman]" and thus "pursued Emerson with a vengeance" (Petrulionis 11) in hopes of bringing him into the abolitionist fold.

As the first secretary of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Brooks was a dominant leader in the abolitionist movement. She was also a close friend of Lidian's and felt just as strongly about abolitionism as Mrs. Emerson (Gougeon 28). Their efforts to get Ralph Waldo more personally involved with the cause crystallized in August of 1844 when Brooks invited him to speak to the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. Lidian urged him

to go through with this endeavor, as the organization was celebrating the recent end of slavery in the West Indies. Gary Collison claims that the summer of 1844 marked a decisive moment for Emerson. Though six years had passed since the controversial “Divinity School Address,” Ralph Waldo was still feeling the sting of censure from the speech’s fallout. This had created a bond between him and the abolitionists whom he had once rejected. Collison claims that Emerson “was now linked with the abolitionists by the experience of being denounced and shunned by the same reactionary voices in American society that had been condemning abolitionism” (189). On August 1, 1844, Ralph Waldo gave his first truly successful abolitionist speech “An Address...on... the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies.” Though the conservative lyceum sexton refused to ring the bell announcing the lecture, Henry David Thoreau took matters into his own hands and rang the bell himself (Wagenknecht 112). The oration went over well with Concord’s abolitionists who finally began to view Emerson as one of them. It was a personal success for Brooks, Lidian, and Aunt Mary. Their beloved Waldo was seemingly making the decisive transition from silent protestor to vocal abolitionist. Mary Moody was particularly proud, and “wrote a warm letter of praise to her famous nephew on the day of the oration” (Gougeon 87).

Brooks was just as delighted, but still felt that there was work to be done regarding Emerson’s involvement. A year later, she convinced Waldo not to lecture at the New Bedford Lyceum by informing him that the lecture hall excluded free blacks. Gougeon writes that “on the basis of such information as he had received from Mrs. Brooks...Emerson made his decision, and was, for the first time in his career, prepared to refuse to lecture before a willing audience as a protest against their racial prejudice” (105). It was yet another milestone in Emerson’s progression. Most scholars agree that the ultimate turning point was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Sam Worley claims that the law was a double-blow for Emerson: it not only reduced his faith in his country, it completely damaged his admiration for leading politician Daniel Webster, a man whom Emerson had always admired (50). In the years that followed the Fugitive Slave Act, Brooks continued to get Lidian (and through her, Ralph Waldo) more involved in the movement. Together, they supported the Underground Railroad, protested the Anthony Burns trial, and donated money to back the anti-slavery forces fighting against the Border Ruffians in “Bleeding Kansas.” The change in Emerson was apparent, and just before the Civil War broke out, Ralph Waldo began supporting the most dangerous abolitionist in the United States, John Brown. Brown, who had organized

the Pottawatomie Massacre and butchered five Kansas slaveholders in cold blood, was labeled by Emerson as “a romantic character absolutely without any vulgar trait” (Emerson 122). While Emerson was most likely unaware of Brown’s murderous actions, he was definitely conscious of the fact that the radical abolitionist was willing and able to use violence in the fight against slavery. The lecturer’s transformation from an antislavery critic to a confrontational abolitionist was thus complete. Nevertheless, Emerson would probably not have gotten involved with the abolitionists if his aunt, wife, and female friends had not set such a positive example of what organized opposition to slavery could do. Thus, the women in his life played a significant role in his abolitionist evolution.

Whereas Emerson underwent a gradual and sweeping evolution from voiceless critic to vociferous abolitionist, Henry David Thoreau’s development was rather different, for Thoreau had always held to fairly extreme views regarding abolitionism. Nevertheless, there was a definite progression that took place, as can be seen by comparing his three major antislavery pieces: “Civil Disobedience,” “Slavery in Massachusetts,” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” “Civil Disobedience” is a warning against the injustices of the American government, and encourages reform through passive resistance. “Slavery in Massachusetts” is more extreme in its message, advocating that each citizen sever his or her ties to both state and country until slavery is eliminated. The most extreme essay is “A Plea for Captain John Brown” in which Thoreau praises Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry and condones the use of violent force in order to end slavery. Each one of these papers puts forth a fairly radical position, which is fitting as Thoreau was exposed to the most radical elements of the abolitionist movement at a young age. The women in his family were among the leading abolitionists in Concord and this gave the young Henry David a window into the most extreme side of the movement. Thus, just as Emerson was encouraged to take a more active role in the antislavery movement by his wife and aunt, Thoreau was motivated by the actions of the female members of his family. It was his mother and sisters who set the abolitionist standard so high for him.

In his biographical sketch of Thoreau, William Cain hints that Henry David had a great deal of his mother Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau in him. The biographer describes her as being “known for her firm opinions, sharp personality, and blunt tone” (12). She was a committed reformer as well, and her influence extended beyond her immediate family. In a biography on Thoreau, Edward Wagenknecht claims that it was actually Cynthia who inspired Emerson to write a “stinging letter to President Van Buren,



protesting the removal of the Cherokee Indians” (10). Years before abolitionism gained popularity, Cynthia “was aligned with the radical Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison” (Cain 12), and, like Lidian Emerson and Mary Merrick Brooks, she became one of the founding members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. In fact, the Thoreau home quickly became a headquarters for the organization. Various speakers sponsored by the organization including Garrison, Henry Wright, and even John Brown himself dined with the Thoreaus while in Concord (Petrulionis 7). Thus, Petrulionis’ claim that “abolitionist sentiment...overshadowed all other activities in the household” (6) seems plausible.

Cynthia was not the only member of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society living in the house: Thoreau’s sisters Helen and Sophia were also committed abolitionists. All three often found themselves appalled with the current status of the United States, which remained largely anti-abolitionist until the 1850s. In 1844, the three Thoreau women attended the New England Anti-Slavery convention in Boston “where they voted to approve a resolution calling for signers to ‘agitate for a dissolution of the Union’” (Petrulionis 7). Whereas moderate abolitionists believed in using the right to vote to try to end slavery, Garrison’s faction refused to do anything that would acknowledge the legitimacy of the United States government. For Thoreau’s mother and sisters, so long as slavery remained legal the United States government could never be recognized as a lawful governing body. Henry David himself espoused the same position in “Civil Disobedience,” where he describes voting as an oftentimes ineffective, almost frivolous practice. From 1838 onward, no one in the Thoreau family, including Henry David who had just come of age, exercised the right to vote (Sanborn 468).

Of his two sisters, Helen was the more active regarding the movement. In 1845, she worked tirelessly to resolve a controversy at the Concord Lyceum regarding a lecture by radical abolitionist Wendell Philips. Philips, who had publicly denounced both the United States Constitution and the Union as a whole, was viewed by conservatives as one of the most dangerous men in America. Leading lyceum curators Reverend Barzillai Frost and Squire Keyes tried to bar Philips from speaking, thus creating a significant controversy. Helen, along with the Emersons, and many leading figures in Concord, demanded that the subject be voted on. In his book on the history of the Concord Lyceum, Kenneth Walter Cameron describes the divisive incident, which saw the motion to allow Philips to speak “adopted by a vote of 21 to 15 as declared by the President” (160). Keyes and Frost immediately resigned from their positions in disgust, and their replacements

as curators were none other than “Messrs Ralph W Emerson...& David H. Thoreau” (Cameron 160). It was a significant victory for Helen, who proudly wrote of it to her friend and neighbor Prudence Ward. She described the dispute as “a hard battle—but victory at last; next winter we shall have undoubtedly a free Lyceum” (Sanborn 474). Henry David, who had also taken an active stand in the battle over Philips’ speech, found himself more drawn to the abolitionist cause than he had been previously. He wrote an article for the *Liberator* regarding the controversy and the subsequent victory. In her letter to the Wards, Helen proudly mentioned her brother’s editorial and encouraged Prudence to read it (Sanborn 474).

Helen’s involvement extended beyond the Lyceum controversy. In her article, Petrulionis describes Henry David’s elder sister as cultivating personal relationships with major abolitionists of the period, including Frederick Douglass and Garrison himself (7). It was Helen Thoreau who convinced Douglass to come and speak at an antislavery meeting in Concord in 1844. This was a particularly touching gesture for Douglass, who had met with racism within the abolitionist movement itself. Having been barred from speaking in certain towns, it was refreshing for the former slave to be extended an invitation by the gracious Miss Thoreau. Helen was also quite close with Garrison, so much so that after her untimely death in 1849, the publisher of the *Liberator* eulogized her in the abolitionist newspaper. Garrison proudly proclaimed her a true abolitionist and celebrated her patience, intelligence, and courage. The fact that this poignant tribute was published in the leading abolitionist newspaper of the time period illustrates just how significant Helen’s involvement in the movement was.

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 was another catalyst in Thoreau’s abolitionist involvement, as it had been for Emerson. Unlike Ralph Waldo, however, Thoreau had been presented with the extreme side of the abolitionist movement in his most formative years. The example set by his mother and sisters was essential in shaping his own antislavery activities and writings, particularly in the 1850s when he began advocating militant opposition to the South. Thoreau grew terminally ill just as the Civil War was starting, and while Emerson and his friends were horrified by the Union loss at Bull Run, Thoreau took heart in the fact that the war would bring about a moral rebirth of the United States (Sanborn 483). Just as Helen passed away before she could see her abolitionist activities come to fruition in the emancipation of the country’s slaves, Thoreau died before the war was won. Nevertheless, his antislavery writings served as an inspiration to many as the great conflict loomed over the United States. The abolitionists thus owed a great debt to the Thoreau women, not only for their

own contributions, but also for their role in introducing one of the greatest minds of the era to the movement. Nathaniel Hawthorne was in many ways a foil to both Thoreau and Emerson. All three were gifted writers who lived in Concord, Massachusetts. Conversely, Emerson and Thoreau were essayists while Hawthorne predominantly wrote fiction. Moreover, Emerson and Thoreau were transcendentalists, while Hawthorne was a more cynical, matter-of-fact individual. In her splendid biography on Hawthorne, Brenda Wineapple describes the author's aloofness regarding the transcendentalist movement: "The Dial put Hawthorne to sleep, and as to the recent religious controversies pitting Unitarians against transcendentalists, he couldn't have cared less" (166). The three writers' politics differed significantly as well. Whereas Emerson and Thoreau both became abolitionists, Hawthorne remained a steadfast Unionist for all of his life. He rejected the efforts of the abolitionists, as they seemed certain to split the country in two.

There were various factors that contributed to Hawthorne's denunciation of the abolitionist movement, one of which was his friendship with President Franklin Pierce. Pierce and Hawthorne had attended college together and become intimate friends. When the relatively young politician took office as President of the United States, he sided totally with the South, appointing pro-slavery governors in the West, using federal troops to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, and blaming all of the country's problems on the abolitionists. Just as Pierce stood with the South, Hawthorne stood with Pierce, and dismissed all of the severe criticism leveled against the President by various antislavery factions in the United States. Two of Pierce's most vocal critics were actually members of Hawthorne's extended family. While Sophia Hawthorne found her husband's devotion to Pierce admirable, her sisters were appalled that Nathaniel had chosen a pro-slavery president as his dearest friend. Hawthorne's two sisters-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Mann, were devoted to the antislavery cause. Just as Lidian Emerson and Cynthia Thoreau worked to instill abolitionist sympathies in Ralph Waldo and Henry David, Peabody and Mann made the conversion of Hawthorne an urgent project. For all of their efforts, however, they succeeded only in furthering his distaste for the abolitionists.

Mary Peabody Mann was connected to abolitionist politics through her husband, Horace. Elected to Congress to fill the seat of deceased Representative John Quincy Adams, Horace Mann was actually voted into a seat of his own in 1848. As a Whig devoted to ending the spread of slavery, he often found himself in conflict with Hawthorne on the subject of politics. Like her husband, Mary was fervent about stopping the advancement of the

slave system in the United States. She also took a very liberal view toward freed blacks living in the North. When an African American student named Chloe Lee was refused lodging in town, the compassionate Mrs. Mann invited her to stay in the Mann home (Wineapple 199). As if this were not enough, she bade her black houseguest to dine at the dinner table with her. Nathaniel and Sophia were both disturbed and uncomfortable, and their daughter Rose later claimed that dining with an African American caused the table to “lose its attractiveness” (Wineapple 199) for them.

The Hawthornes’ racist views concerned Mary significantly. Even more disconcerting than their prejudices, which correlated to many of the widespread viewpoints of the time period, was their intolerance for the abolitionist movement. Mann remained hopeful that they would gradually change their minds on the subject, but even as the conflict over slavery intensified, Nathaniel and Sophia remained committed to their Unionist viewpoints. Both Mary and Horace were particularly outraged when Hawthorne agreed to write Pierce’s biography in 1852. Mary believed that the only explanation could be that Hawthorne was an extremely devoted friend, and she refused to accept the idea that her brother-in-law actually thought Pierce’s policies acceptable (Wineapple 216). It was an action by Sophia that truly triggered her temper, however. In 1857, after the Supreme Court passed the abhorrent Dred Scott Decision, Sophia wrote her sister a letter praising Chief Justice Taney’s actions. Mann wrote back attacking her sister’s views, but Sophia shrugged off the criticism claiming that “the inferior race were designed to serve the superior—but not as slaves” (Wineapple 329). Hawthorne felt the exact same way, and for most of his life, clung to the belief that although slavery was a wicked practice, blacks’ inferiority to whites validated their subservience. When he actually bothered to think about abolitionism, he argued that if slaves were set free too quickly, they would inevitably find themselves in conflict with the poor whites living in the South. This casual view of the slave system was extremely disconcerting to his sisters-in-law, particularly Elizabeth Peabody.

Elizabeth was even more passionate regarding abolitionism than her sister Mary was. She was determined to see slavery ended as quickly as possible, and equally determined to bring Hawthorne and Sophia over to the abolitionist side. Like Mary, she was disturbed by Nathaniel’s devotion to Pierce. Nevertheless, she clung to the belief that the simpering politician “had warped Hawthorne’s judgment” (Wineapple 330) and that it was up to her to undo the damage that he had done to her brother-in-law’s reasoning. She doggedly pursued Sophia and Nathaniel, but her persistence served only to reinforce Hawthorne’s belief that the abolitionists were obsessive and

exasperating troublemakers. The closest he ever came to participating in the movement was in 1850 following the hated Fugitive Slave Act. Disturbed by the idea of the government pressing citizens to track down runaway slaves, he signed a Free-Soil petition in protest (Wineapple 243).

Having learned about Nathaniel's actions, Elizabeth grew hopeful. For her, it was a sign that her brother-in-law might actually come over to the abolitionist side with the proper motivation. While the Hawthornes were in England following Nathaniel's appointment to a government post by Pierce, Peabody sent them the abolitionist pamphlets she had written in hopes that they would convince her relations to join the cause. Hawthorne never even bothered to study them, and mailed them all back to his sister-in-law unread (Mather 310). Not one to be put off, Peabody shipped them back to England on the next available vessel. Edward Mather writes that Nathaniel wrote back to his sister-in-law "curtly; then rudely; and finally told her in plain unvarnished English what he thought of her" (311). Jean Yellin fleshes out this incident even further in her essay on Hawthorne's views of slavery. When Elizabeth decided to try and bring Sophia over to the abolitionist cause, Hawthorne began censoring his wife's mail by refusing to let her read the pamphlet that her sister had sent. He angrily sent the manuscript back to Elizabeth, along with a note which stated, "I do not choose to bother Sophia with it, and yet should think it a pity to burn so much of your thought and feeling" (Yellin 149). There was a significant rift between Nathaniel and Elizabeth at this time. His statements that the slavery problem would eventually take care of itself through passive inaction deeply offended her as an abolitionist, but Hawthorne took no notice. He later told her that "you, like every other Abolitionist, look at matters with an awful squint which distorts everything within your line of vision" (Yellin 148). Interestingly, this quote shows that Hawthorne's views on the abolitionists were akin to Emerson's early opinions on the subject. Unlike his friend, however, Nathaniel refused to be converted.

Ironically, Sophia used a similar censoring tactic against their daughter Una in 1860. Mrs. Hawthorne refused to let the girl read an antislavery booklet that Aunt Elizabeth sent her. Sophia angrily wrote to her sister telling her that the pamphlet's graphic depictions of naked slaves on the auction block had no place in Una's hands (Yellin 149). This story goes along with her early sentiments toward the abolitionists, particularly female abolitionists. Back in Salem, she had refused to join the local female antislavery society and labeled all of the women involved as troublemakers who did not know their proper place (Yellin 138). There was understandably a great deal of tension between Sophia and her sisters in the

years building up toward the Civil War, due mainly to the fact that Sophia stubbornly continued to use anti-abolitionist rhetoric in her letters on the subject of slavery. While she repeatedly claimed that she viewed slavery as an odious practice, she was unrelenting in her condemnation of the abolitionist movement as well, going so far as to attack Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in one letter (Wineapple 255).

Mann and Peabody were beginning to lose hope. It seemed that just as Pierce had brainwashed Hawthorne, so had Hawthorne programmed Sophia. For all of their efforts, they made absolutely no progress in the conversion of their sister and brother-in-law. Eventually, even Peabody recognized that she was fighting a losing battle. Wineapple states that both sisters ultimately realized "they could no longer speak candidly to Sophia," convinced that "Pierce had led [Hawthorne]...down a primrose path of moral obliquity" (264). Their determination to blame Pierce for the corruption of their relatives seems to indicate that the two sisters were blinded to the fact that Nathaniel and Sophia were freely prejudiced against both blacks and abolitionists.

It is fitting that one of the final clash between Nathaniel and his sisters-in-law regarding the movement to end slavery revolved around Pierce. In 1863, the Civil War was raging, and Hawthorne was making ready to dedicate his latest book, *Our Old Home*, to his dear friend Franklin Pierce. It was a bad time in the failed politician's life. His wife Jane had recently died, and his unrelenting condemnation of President Lincoln and the Civil War had made him one of the most hated men in the United States. Hawthorne seemed to be his one friend left in the entire country, and Nathaniel was determined to do the former President a good turn by dedicating his latest book to him. Elizabeth and Mary were horrified, and others outside the family began condemning Nathaniel as a "copperhead of the worst kind" (Wineapple 356). Peabody decided to take action and wrote her brother-in-law an emotionally charged letter, practically pleading with him to reconsider. It was her belief that Hawthorne's acknowledgement of Pierce as some sort of hero would hurt the antislavery cause, and moreover, the Union war effort. As usual, Hawthorne refused to listen. Nevertheless, the letter he sent back to his sister-in-law was more courteous and tender than many of the previous missives he had written to her regarding her abolitionist pamphlets. Nathaniel assured her that "the dedication can hurt nobody but my book and myself" (Hawthorne 253), and rejected the idea that many abolitionist newspapers at the time were labeling the former president a traitor. It was clear that for the bleakly romantic author, Pierce

could do no wrong, and Wineapple goes so far as to claim that “not even Pierce’s wife loved him as Hawthorne did” (354).

It is understandable why Hawthorne’s sisters-in-law wanted him to join the movement. As a celebrated novelist, his endorsement of the abolitionists would have added a certain sense of legitimacy to the antislavery movement. It is rather fascinating how extremely futile their efforts were. Hawthorne’s anti-abolitionist viewpoints revolved around two very different personal qualities. His unwavering loyalty to Pierce shows just how devoted a friend he truly was. Conversely, many of his letters prove he was extremely narrow-minded and prejudiced. This combination of his admirably steadfast friendship and his dreadfully racist views created an impenetrable barrier for his sisters-in-law to try and break through. Nathaniel’s racism was not uncommon in the time period. Emerson himself had been given to racist speculations about the inferiority of blacks. His abolitionist conversion at the hands of Lidian, Brooks, Hoar, and Mary Moody caused him to do a great deal of soul-searching regarding the true nature of African Americans, and he eventually realized that the alleged inferiority of blacks was a fabrication. Hawthorne never opened himself up to the other perspective, however. Just as Pierce never second-guessed his unswerving devotion to the South, Hawthorne never considered the slavery problem from the abolitionist point of view. His refusal to bother reading Elizabeth’s antislavery pamphlets is representative of his dogged resolution not to be connected with the abolitionists in any way.

The fervor with which many women approached the antislavery cause was startling to Americans living in the antebellum period. An 1837 *Liberator* article reveals just how taken aback many were with the women’s antislavery movement. The following remarks are from the last National Enquirer:

But ‘a Convention of Females’ exclaims the mere book-taught reformer...‘it is a new thing under the sun!’ Very well: The magnitude of the object in view, the stupendous mountain of evil that we have to remove, the transcendent importance of the reformation we seek to accomplish requires a newness of life, activity, and energy; new plans and modes of proceeding. (“Female Anti-Slavery Convention” 45)

For certain, the women that became involved in the abolitionist movement brought a bold new perspective to the antislavery cause. The leading members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society took this one step further. Not only did they bring their own perceptions and ideas to the

abolitionist movement, they simultaneously succeeded in bringing two of the greatest minds of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century into the fold as well. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were inspired by the examples set by the women in their lives. In converting Emerson to abolitionism and strengthening Thoreau's resolve, the women of Concord significantly changed the abolitionist movement in New England. Petrulionis claims that "the influence they brought to bear on some of America's most noted antislavery speakers and writers had a pronounced and far-reaching impact" (6), and that the movement truly began to gain momentum after Emerson and Thoreau touted it. Though Nathaniel Hawthorne never became an abolitionist, his sisters-in-law showed the same indomitable persistence that characterized Cynthia Thoreau, Lidian Emerson, and Mary Merrick Brooks. Thus, William Lloyd Garrison's contention that women would determine the fate of the abolitionist movement was not an exaggeration. The proof can be found by examining how tirelessly the women of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society pursued their goals. Such determination was essential in the movement to end slavery and bring freedom to all Americans.



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