

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) From *Mariana*

Like many other New England writers, Margaret Fuller kept diaries and wrote lengthy letters. She also wrote a very important book in the history of feminism, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and a very good travel book, *Summer on the Lakes* (1844), about a trip to the Middle West in 1843. But as autobiography none of these writings seems as original as the following romantic sketch, which she included in *Summer on the Lakes*, introducing it as about “an old schoolmate” back East. By using such a frame and such other fictional devices as the third-person narration and the Shakespearean name (Mariana was Angelo’s rejected but forgiving betrothed in *Measure for Measure*), Fuller managed to talk about her adolescent anguish without seeming to be morbidly self-conscious or self-pitying.

Today the bildungsroman is a common form. Fuller, however, had only one example to follow, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and upright Americans looked askance on it, just as they disapproved of Fuller’s feminism and thought her interest in Goethe and German philosophy an affectation. So, “Marina” is in some ways primitive: a sketch rather than an intensely written short story or confessional essay. But the story of Mariana’s misery at boarding school, arising from her ardor and her friends’ conformity and cruelty, is archetypal. Nothing in “Mariana” is better drawn than the moment at dinner when she looks up and sees all the other girls wearing her rouge!

Fuller thus opened the way for countless later stories of adolescence, and in the process extended our very concept of individual uniqueness and the necessity for freedom of self-expression. The romantic individual is like (and partially derived from) the plight of a bright adolescent in a company of peers who are all boorish and mean.

The story is taken from *Summer on the Lakes*, in 1843 (Boston and New York, 1844), and omits the less autobiographical ending about Mariana’s marriage. For more on Fuller, see Bell Gale Chevigny, *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller’s Life and Writings* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1976).

Reading

Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli. v.1 1852. Fuller, Margaret, 1810-1850.

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044009687435;page=root;view=image;size=100;seq=6;num=v>