

The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism

by Megan Marshall

Houghton Mifflin Company

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Massachusetts
Award Winner
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An additional reading guide is available from Houghton Mifflin at: <http://tinyurl.com/oov95>

SUMMARY:

Megan Marshall's prizewinning book tells a lively and fascinating tale of three brilliant sisters who lived in nineteenth century New England: Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia Peabody. Elizabeth, the eldest, was a philosopher, teacher, and publisher. She exercised a powerful influence on the greatest thinkers of her age, and helped men like Horace Mann, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson put their ideas into print. Mary, the middle child, was as beautiful and quiet as Elizabeth was bold. An innovative and nurturing educator, she co-founded Antioch College with her husband, Horace Mann. The youngest of the sisters was Sophia, petite, prone to illness, and a celebrated artist and romantic. She brought to her husband, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the love and peace he needed to become a successful author.

The Peabody sisters overcame daunting obstacles to accomplish what they did in an era when women were discouraged, if not excluded, from most educational and religious arenas. Without garnering the fame of their male counterparts, they nevertheless made enormous contributions to intellectual movements such as Transcendentalism, to education, and to the arts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What factors in the Peabody sisters' upbringing might have contributed to their intellectual achievements? How did these influences differ from most other girls of their time?
2. What effect did the rise of Unitarianism, as put forth by the liberal William Ellery Channing in his "Baltimore Sermon" (p.94-100), have on the Peabody household, and on Elizabeth in particular?

3. What factors contributed to Elizabeth's leaving Lancaster for Boston (p. 114-117)? What was the significance of such a move in the early nineteenth century, particularly for a woman?
4. The sisters' mother, Eliza Palmer Peabody, spent a good deal of her childhood and adult life fighting poverty (p. 28-38). Why did so many women encounter financial difficulties in post-revolutionary war New England?
5. Discuss Elizabeth's and Bronson Alcott's teaching methods at the Temple School (p. 296, 326). What kind of impact did they have at the time and with what audience? Do their methods resonate today?
6. What reasons does the author propose for Sophia's migraines? Do you agree? How did her illnesses figure in her intellectual and social life? Discuss how illness may have played an important role in the lives of nineteenth century women.
7. Hawthorne purportedly kept his engagement secret from his mother and sister and put off his marriage to Sophia. Discuss other possible, less obvious, reasons for Hawthorne's postponement and what they tell us about the secretive author.
8. Elizabeth published her Transcendentalist manifesto, *Record of a School*, in 1835. What impact did this work have on her colleagues at the time? Discuss Elizabeth Peabody's role in the Transcendentalist movement in general. What did Transcendentalism mean to her and to nineteenth century New England?
9. How did Mary's teaching philosophy and style compare with Elizabeth's (p. 380-381)?
10. How did Elizabeth's bookstore contribute to the Boston cultural scene of the mid-nineteenth century (p. 390-398)? Discuss whether or not her gender interfered with the reception of the store.
11. Describe the nature of the influence Elizabeth had over Hawthorne, Mann, Parker, and Emerson.
12. If Elizabeth were alive today, what do you imagine her doing? Can you think of a woman living today with similar personality, intellect, and ambitions?
13. Elizabeth had strong relationships with both of her brothers-in-law-to-be long before the marriages of her sisters. Discuss the nature of Mann's and Hawthorne's relationship with Elizabeth, whether or not it changed after the weddings, and Elizabeth's feelings about being the only unmarried sister.
14. The nineteenth century was a time when women could not attend college or patronize libraries, and teaching was one of the only professions open to them. How did each Peabody sister approach such restrictions? Discuss the methods and levels of success of each sister.

15. "...there was that in each of us which might fully satisfy the wants of the other." "...there were few sisters who had so much union as we--so much sympathy--& so much affection & respect for each other" (p. 299). Do you agree with Elizabeth's assessment of the Peabody sisters' relationship? Give examples that support or detract from these statements.
16. Discuss whether or not you feel the three sisters received fair treatment in the book, both in the amount of space given to each, and in the way their lives and work were depicted.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Megan Marshall worked for two decades on her award-winning biography *The Peabody Sisters*, spending many years tracking down the sisters' letters and journals. Her work was supported by fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She has written for the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Slate* and other publications. She is now at work on a biography of Ebe Hawthorne, sister of Nathaniel, for which she has received a Radcliffe Institute fellowship.

Interview with Megan Marshall (podcast): <http://tinyurl.com/rnpd5>

HELPFUL LINKS:

<http://www.transcendentalists.com>: *Transcendentalists*

"...original content and links to other material on the internet for study of the Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and others."

<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism>: *The Web of American Transcendentalism*

"...first created in Spring 1999 by Virginia Commonwealth University graduate students studying in Professor Ann Woodlief's class in *Studies in American Transcendentalism*."

http://www.transcendentalists.com/brook_farm.htm: *Brook Farm*

Online sources of information about Brook Farm, a mid-nineteenth century transcendentalist communal living experiment. Nathaniel Hawthorne was briefly involved with the farm and based his novel *Blithedale Romance* on the experience.



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