

Catharine Maria Sedgwick, 1789 – 1867

(<https://archive.org/details/meansandendsors01sedggoog>)

Recognized as one of the writers who helped create an indigenous American literature, Sedgwick was a popular novelist in the nineteenth century. She was sympathetic to women's rights and abolition although she never actively participated in those reforms. Her novels continuously emphasized a need for political and personal liberty and independence. In *Means and Ends, or Self-Training* (1840), Sedgwick writes specifically to young women between the ages of 10 and 16 encouraging them to take advantage of the privileges and opportunities available to them that enable them to "acquire the domestic knowledge that will make the humblest home comfortable." However, believing that women's roles were rapidly changing, she also challenged young women to become ladies who deserved "the increased respect of the other sex, and you will surely receive it; to qualify yourselves for more various employments, and you will certainly obtain them." Education was a privilege and a tool that should be used to become the best wives and mothers possible.

Chapter II: Forethought

To my Countrywomen,

I HAVE written the following pages to aid you in your self-education. They are intended for girls from ten to sixteen years of age. I am aware there are girls of ten years whom I can scarcely hope to interest, and I rejoice to believe there are many, between the ages of ten and sixteen, so blessed in their characters and condition, that really do not need any aid I can give them. I earnestly beg, of you who read the book, your attention, for it depends on yourselves whether it do you any service. It has been written with a deep interest in your welfare and improvement, and I should be sorry if it proved a total failure. It is not written exclusively for those who are termed young ladies. I do not believe in any such fixed class in our country. Whatever there is that characterizes a young lady, which is important to a rational being, may be attained by every thinking and reading young woman in our land. I therefore address rich and poor; you, my young friends, who are conveyed in your fathers' coaches to the spacious apartments of a city boarding-school, and you, my dear little girls, who trudge up and down the rugged steps of our country to the secluded district school house. You have, my young friends, duties and privileges that are peculiar to you as American girls. The females of the Eastern world have been kept in a depressed and helpless condition. They have been looked upon as merely to serve men, and in various ways to minister to their pleasure. They have never enjoyed an independent and individual existence, and have only been allowed to live as part and parcel of men; the subjects of their love, and their domestic slaves. Mohammed did not, as has been maintained, deny to them immortality, but the institutions of his religion deprived them of all means of preparing for it. The consequence of this abject condition has been, that they have remained children all their lives. The favorites of the Sultan at Constantinople amuse themselves with blind man's buff, hide the slipper, and other sports of our nursery-children. The women of the highly-civilized countries of Europe are divided into distinct ranks. They are separated by boundary lines that are seldom passed. Those of the upper ranks are exempted from manual labor. Those of the lower order are wholly confined to it, so that they have neither time nor opportunity to cultivate their minds, and refine their manners. There is, it is true, a middling class, whose occupations are multifarious like those of our women. But their condition differs from ours in one material respect. There is a rank above them with which they never associate; therefore their qualifications for business, and

their acquaintance with domestic services will appear to be the attributes of an inferior caste, and will, on that account, be branded with vulgarity. There are no distinctions in America which are certain and permanent, but those of education and character. The tenant of a log house in the western wilderness acquires independence, and becomes a representative to Congress, and his wife and daughters figure in the drawing-rooms of Washington. The merchant of New York fails in business, and removes his family from Broadway to a prairie-home. You should look forward to these possible vicissitudes, and be prepared for them. You have it in our own power to fit yourselves, by the cultivation of your minds and the refinement of your manners, for intercourse, on equal terms, with the best society in our land; and whatever may be your present condition, you should acquire the domestic knowledge that will make the humblest home comfortable. But it is not only these rare and striking changes that make this various preparation the duty of American women. The condition of our country calls for more enlarged powers in our women. The northern mother and housewife need them. The southern matron eminently needs them. Old prejudices and old abuses are fast melting away from among us. Here, generous-minded men are allowing women's claim to a more independent existence, and more various employments, than they have enjoyed elsewhere. I ask you, then, my young friends, to deserve the increased respect of the other sex, and you will surely receive it; to qualify yourselves for more various employments, and you will certainly obtain them. As Christian young women, well informed of your responsibility to God, and of his good gifts to you, you are bound to cultivate and use all your faculties. As American young women, you are bound to understand your extended privileges, and to qualify yourselves for your better position in social life. At the risk of addressing you on a subject for which you are not yet deemed quite old enough, I shall, before you enter on my book, refer to a circumstance in your future lives. Young, very young girls, are often talking, and oftener thinking of love and marriage. If they chance to speak on these subjects before their elders, they are met with such rebuffs as "how ridiculous, child! as if you would ever be married." "My dear! put such thoughts out of your head as soon as possible." Now it is impossible that you should drive away such thoughts. God has appointed marriage. He designed you for it. It is the great circumstance of your lives. The part of true wisdom then, is, not to make a useless effort to expel the subject from your mind, but to turn your forethought to some good purpose. Do not look forward to your marriage as merely an occasion, to be preceded by fears, and hopes, and lover's stratagems, by love-letters, passionate vows, sudden crosses, and intense joys — to be marked by gay bridals and bridal gifts, and all the eclat that youth and beauty lend to the most interesting circumstance of woman's life. But look at it as it really is, as an event that is to invest you with new responsibilities and duties, whose consequences extend far beyond this world; and educate yourselves with reference to these responsibilities and duties. If you were told that you were to remove to a certain place, would not your first inquiries be, "how shall I be situated there." — "what shall I want." And is it not wise now to ask, "for what am I to prepare myself?" It is not enough, believe me, to get hard lessons in arithmetic, grammar, and geography, French, Italian, and music, or even to go on to algebra, astronomy, &c. &c. More than all this is required to make you a good wife and mother. Look at the condition of your mothers. Do they not need, every day, resolution, fortitude, firmness, self-control? Do they not require the knowledge that will enable them to unfold the minds, and preserve and fortify the health of their children? Ought they not to know the value of labor and the uses of property? Is not an acquaintance with domestic economy essential to the comfort and prosperity of their families? If your mothers know something of the constitution, laws, and institutions of their country, are they not the better qualified to instruct you, and your brothers, and do you not

respect them the more for this knowledge? Perhaps, my young friend, your mother is a widow, and was qualified by her education to take care of the estate which your father, knowing her so qualified, committed to her care. Investment and Income are not to her, as to most women, terms as unintelligible as ^Abracadabra. What your mothers now are, you may be. Now, therefore, so educate yourselves, that it may be said of you, in the language of scripture, "Her children arise up and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praiseth her." A happy wife and mother is undoubtedly the happiest of all womankind; but do not, therefore, my dear girls, fall into the common error of bereaving that marriage makes happiness or is necessary to it, or that, as a single woman, you must, of course, be discontented and despised. It is not in the power of circumstances to make you either. Women, by their defective educations, have been left helpless and dependent on men for support and protection. This has been the most effective cause of those marriages, (the curse of woman, and man too,) without affection on the one side, and respect on the other. Be sure to be so educated that you can have an independent pursuit, something to occupy your time and interest your affections; then marriage will not be essential to your usefulness, respectability, or happiness. Then you will not be the old maids touched by every ill word, and dependent on every chance kindness, but you will secure an independent existence, and the power of dispensing to others. God has not given you powers for one sphere only. He has not bestowed upon you affections to be uprooted and thrown away, unless they grasp husband and children. Those affections, well nurtured, may be a rich stream, enriching and blessing, though flowing out of its natural channel. Educate yourselves well, my dear children, and then you will be "equal to either fortune;" wives or single women, you will be blessings and blessed."