

The Ghost of Margaret Fuller

A One Act Play by Fred Keefe

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

Margaret Fuller

Bronson Alcott

Woman

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Henry David Thoreau

Caroline

Horace Greeley

Edgar Allan Poe

Henry James

Timothy Fuller

Lidian Emerson

Seaman

Jackie,

Should I use this email address for you now or use the SWUW one?

I will send these plays one by one until you have the set.

Patty

pnjantho@gmail.com

THE GHOST OF MARGARET FULLER

A One Act Play by

FRED KEEFE

(As the responsive reading ends, Margaret Fuller gets up from her seat in the congregation and walks slowly to the podium. When she reaches it, Bronson Alcott gets up from his seat, comes forward, and faces the congregation, standing below the podium.)

BRONSON ALCOTT

Good morning, everyone. I'm Bronson Alcott — Amos Bronson Alcott (*looks around congregation hopefully for signs of recognition*). I was a well-known educator and had a great influence on people like Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne. You may remember the progressive school I started in Boston? The Temple School? It didn't last long, I'm sorry to say. Well, (*shrugs resignedly*) you may probably remember my daughter, Louisa May.

VOICE FROM CONGREGATION

You mean Louisa May Alcott, the author of “Little Women”?

BRONSON ALCOTT

Yes, the author of “Little Women.”

VOICE

I love that book! I’ve read it at least a dozen time. I think of those March girls as my own daughters—really, I do — and what’s more — (*She is interrupted by Margaret Fuller, ringing a bell at the podium and addressing herself to Alcott*).

MARGARET FULLER

Please correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Alcott, but I was under the impression that this gathering was to be a tribute to me, Margaret Fuller.

BRONSON ALCOTT

Of course, Margaret, of course. And quite a gathering it is, too. (*Looks around congregation.*) Many of your friends are here, you’ll notice.

ANOTHER VOICE

And a few enemies too.

ALCOTT

Yes, all. Let me see. There’s Ralph Waldo Emerson over there

EMERSON (*genially*)

Waldo Emerson, please, Bronson. Never cared for the name Ralph, you know.

ALCOTT

Waldo, of course. And there’s Henry David Thoreau, close to Waldo as always.

THOREAU

Just call me Henry.

ALCOTT

Let me see who else is here. Aha! There’s Caroline Sturgis.

CAROLINE STURGIS

I’m so happy to be here. Margaret was one of my dearest friends. I can’t praise her enough.

ALCOTT

And there’s our good friend, the founder and published of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley himself.

HORACE GREELEY

Margaret Fuller was the first woman I hired for my newspaper. She was the first woman book-reviewer in the country you know.

MARGARET FULLER

And the first woman foreign correspondent, too, Horace. Don't forget that!

ALCOTT

And who is that gentleman sitting back there? Is that really Edgar Allan Poe?

POE

It is indeed, Mr. Alcott. All I have to say is there are three kinds of humanity. Men, women and Margaret Fuller.

ALCOTT

I assume that is a compliment, Mr. Poe.

POE

It certainly is. I consider Margaret Fuller a true genius.

ALCOTT

(Looks around congregation) Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Henry James over there?

JAMES

I really don't belong here, you know. I was only seven years old when Margaret Fuller died. But I'd heard so much about her before I went to live in England, I felt as though I'd actually known her, and for the rest of my life I felt her ghostly presence in almost everything I wrote. She literally haunted me.

ALCOTT

And other writers, too, Mr. James. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance.

JAMES

Of course — Zenobia in "The Blithedale Romance."

ALCOTT

And James Russell Lowell.

JAMES

"A Fable for Critics."

ALCOTT

And Oliver Wendell Holmes.

JAMES

"Elsie Venner," of course. I'm glad to see that I'm not the only writer who was haunted by Margaret Fuller.

MARGARET FULLER (*ringing bell*)

Enough of ghosts and hauntings, Mr. Alcott. What about my parents? Especially my father. I wouldn't be standing here today if it weren't for him.

ALCOTT

Yes, of course, of course. Timothy Fuller. Good morning to you sir.

TIMOTHY FULLER

Good morning. My wife is sorry she can't be here with me, but there were too many household things to take care of. And the garden also needed tending.

MARGARET FULLER

My mother was an angel, and I loved her dearly, but she chose to be a maid-servant to her home and husband, instead of fulfilling herself.

TIMOTHY FULLER

I loved her every bit as much as you did, Margaret, and you can take my word for it — she felt fulfilled. I was the one who — (he pauses, grasping for words).

MARGARET FULLER

The one who *what*, Father?

TIMOTHY FULLER

The one who felt unfulfilled. I'd always wanted my first-born to be a son — I guess you knew that.

MARGARET FULLER

Yes, I knew.

TIMOTHY FULLER

And I determined to make the best of it. If it was a girl, I swore I was going to make her the best-educated girl in New England. That's why I was your teacher until you went to boarding school.

MARGARET FULLER

And a hard task-master you were, too.

TIMOTHY FULLER (*to congregation*)

By the time she was five, I had her learning Latin, German, Greek and other languages.

MARGARET FULLER

At the age of nine I translated Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" into Latin.

TIMOTHY FULLER

Don't forget Caesar's Commentaries. And before you were twelve years old, you had read Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" and all of Bacon's essays.

MARGARET FULLER

It was Shakespeare I loved — but you wouldn't let me read him.

TIMOTHY FULLER

Not on Sundays!

MARGARET FULLER

You punished me once for reading him on Sunday, I remember. Kept me up that night until long past my bedtime mastering Greek verbs.

TIMOTHY FULLER *(to congregation)*

It was good discipline for her. Nothing succeeds like discipline. I always told her that.

MARGARET FULLER

And it was my ruination. I used to have violent nightmares every night. Herds of wild horses trampling over me, night after night.

And splitting headaches, too. They stayed with me for the rest of my life. Father meant well, I know, but he did me more harm than good. Children shouldn't taste the fruits of reflections and observation too early. They should expand in the sun and let thoughts come to them. With me, much of life was devoured in the bud.

TIMOTHY FULLER *(to congregation)*

But she could hold her own with any adult, male or female.

MARGARET FULLER

Yes, I could do that, all right. And as an adolescent, I wrote letters to Lafayette, Beethoven, Goethe, and Thomas Carlyle. By the time I was sent to school, I knew more than my teachers did. I remember telling Miss Peabody at the age of fifteen that I was determined on distinction. But what could a mere woman do, other than teach? With the death of my father, the job of taking care of my sisters and brothers, as well as my mother, was thrust upon me, and so I became a teacher. I taught at your Temple School, Mr. Alcott, then at a school in Rhode Island.

ALCOTT

And you were a fine teacher, Margaret.

MARGARET FULLER

I know I was. But that wasn't why I wanted to do. I wanted to meet a mind that would not only challenge my own, but would nourish it and enrich it. One of the people I was determined to meet was Waldo Emerson. I had heard him speak several times on Transcendentalism, about finding that divine harmony between the self and the universe. Who could hear him and not be carried away by what he had to say? It took months of effort, but with the help of friends who were acquainted with him, I maneuvered an invitation to visit him and his wife, Lidian, in Concord in July, 1836. Once there, I was determined to make both of them my friends. I would be as impressive as I knew I could be.

Emerson

She *was* impressive, I admit, but not in the way she thought she was.

MARGARET

I knew he was interested as soon as I started talking with him.

EMERSON

I found her physically irritating at first. Her over forcefulness, the way she had of constantly opening and shutting her eyelids annoyed me and I said to myself, we shall never get far.

MARGARET

I knew by his manner that we would get on well together. He was really impressed by my knowledge of European literature. And he enjoyed by comments on the foibles of mutual friends.

EMERSON

Actually, I disapproved of her comments.

MARGARET

He laughed, even through he disapproved.

EMERSON

It was an exhausting conversation.

MARGARET

I could tell I'd won him over. And Lidian, being a woman, was an even easier conquest. When she invited me back for a three-week visit, I knew I had been successful.

EMERSON

Much as I resented her overbearing manner during the three-week stay with us, I had to admit that she was a very accomplished and a very intelligent person.

CAROLINE STURGIS

And a very unselfish person, too. Margaret loved to share her friendships, and it was through her that I met Mr. Emerson.

EMERSON

Persons were Margaret's game, and in every house where she came as a guest, she seemed like the queen of some parliament of love. She wore her friends like a necklace of diamonds about her neck.

CAROLINE STURGIS

I like to think of Margaret as a battering ram for other women. She wanted us to transcend ourselves, to become more than what we were. That was why she started her "Conversations." We women would meet each week at Miss Peabody's house to discuss some topic or other. No need to say who did most of the talking.

WOMAN

Margaret was our whole reason for coming. We wanted to hear what *she* had to say. She was a real spellbinder. Always raised our spirits. Ask any woman who heard her.

MARGARET

I did make an impression, I know, but I wanted more than that. Mesmerizing a few women in the Concord area wasn't enough for me. There were bigger fish to fry. When the Transcendental Club decided that the time was ripe for a new literary periodic and Waldo Emerson suggested that I be its editor, I saw it as a chance to widen my influence and gladly accepted the job. The magazine was called *The Dial*.

Emerson

It was intended to be an antidote to the conservatism of nearly all the current periodicals, and we knew it would leave us open to charges of heresy. It seemed we all wanted the magazine to come into being, but nobody wanted to be in any way responsible for it.

MARGARET

So I stepped in where angels feared to tread.

CAROLINE STURGIS

I shouldn't say this perhaps, but I think Margaret regarded *The Dial* as a chance for her to see more of the man she idolized. After all, what could be better than staying with the Emersons in Concord while she and Waldo put together each issue of the Magazine.

THOREAU

I was boarding with the Emersons then, and must say that Margaret did tend to take over. After all, it was Lidian's home, not hers.

MARGARET

I did wonder now and then if Lidian resented the attention I got from Waldo.

LIDIAN

Of course I did, although I tried not to show it. I was used to Waldo's coldness, goodness knows. Did you know that when he married me he added an "n" to my name, Lydia, because he said a first name shouldn't end with a vowel when the last name began with a vowel. I didn't object, but I suppose I should have. What a crazy thing for him to insist on.

THOREAU

I tried to do special chores for Lidian to make her feel better.

MARGARET

Henry Thoreau never did trust me. He always resented my rejecting a few of his poems for *The Dial*. He had nothing to complain about — Waldo always saw that the poems were published anyway, in spite of my objections.

THOREAU

She always saw to it that something of her own appeared in every issue.

MARGARET

Someone had to fill in when nothing was submitted. After all, we made no payment for material we used. Remember that. And while we're at it, remember, too, that I was supposed to be paid for what I was doing, and at the end of two years I hadn't received a penny. Not a single penny.

THOREAU

Yes, Waldo kept reminding me of that. You were a dedicated worker, he said.

MARGARET

Thank you for remembering that, at least. I'm sorry we didn't get along as well as we should have. But I knew making real contact with you was a hopeless cause that night you took me rowing on Walden Pond.

THOREAU

Yes, I remember. It was a beautiful night — the kind of early summer evening I relished, and I was looking forward to a relaxing row across the pond when you asked if you could come along.

MARGARET

I was only trying to be friendly.

THOREAU

I know you were. But you wouldn't stop talking.

MARGARET

I wanted to communicate with you.

THOREAU

Sometimes silence is the best form of communication. I wanted to hear the sound of the oars in the water, the birds calling to each other in the twilight, the barking of a dog, the soft hum of the insects, but instead you insisted on asking me question after question.

MARGARET

I remember the full moon rising.

THOREAU

Yes, but you drowned out the music it made.

MARGARET

You were a hard man to reach.

THOREAU

I marched to a different drummer.

MARGARET

So did I, Henry.

CAROLINE STURGIS

The only thing they had in common really was their connection to Waldo. It was what we all had in common. Margaret, Anna Barker, Sam Ward and myself. But Margaret, in particular. She was like a wave hurling herself against a rock — an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. No wonder Waldo had to draw a line.

EMERSON

Let us not be too acquainted, I told her.

MARGARET

I said there was an inhospitable of soul in you. You count and weigh, I said, but you do not love. And it was true.

EMERSON

You always wanted more than you said you wanted. You push friendship to the brink of passion.

MARGARET

Perhaps I did, but I ended up accepting friendship on your terms, didn't I?

EMERSON

I loved your mind, your courage, your enterprise. Wasn't that enough?

MARGARET

It had to be. Two years of editing *The Dial* was enough, too, I decided. It was time for me to move on. I wanted to embrace a larger world than Puritanical New England. I had made a trip to what was then the western portion of the country, the region of the Great Lakes — and I reported on what I had seen in a book called "Summer on the Lakes," and it was published in New York. Horace Greeley seemed to like it.

GREELEY

I certainly did, I considered that book one of the clearest and most graphic delineations ever given of the Great Lakes and the prairie regions, and I still consider it unequalled in its depiction of pioneer life. When I heard that Miss Fuller was planning to expand one of the *Dial* articles — a fine piece on the role of women in America—into a book, I decided she was someone I needed on the staff of the *New York Tribune*, so I offered her a job.

MARGARET

I was to write three columns a week — two devoted to book reviews, one to commentary with a social theme. It was like a dream come true.

GREELEY

She was a slow writer, but she always met her obligations of three pieces a week. What impressed me most was her honesty. Whether she was writing a piece against slavery or against the Mexican War or against the treatment of women in prisons, I always knew that her opinions would be forceful and true. She never asked how this would sound, or whether that would do, but simply "Is it the truth? Is it something the public should know?" If her judgment answered "Yes," she spoke it no matter what turmoil it might excite. I respected her for that.

MARGARET

He respected me enough to publish my book, "Woman in the Nineteenth century." In it I argued that to restrain the self-development of women would inhibit the growth of the whole human race. It was time for women to break loose from the power that men had over them, time for them to be put on an equal footing with men, time for them to assert themselves. Why shouldn't a woman be a sea-captain?

GREELEY

I knew the book would arouse great interest — and it did, much of it hostile. Personally I was delighted with it. I told her critics that Margaret Fuller was in some respects the greatest woman in America.

MARGARET

I agreed with Mr. Greeley, of course, and now that I was a celebrity, I decided it was time to move on again. Even though I had much more freedom in New York than in cold, narrow-minded New England, I wanted a bigger theater for personal development. So I asked Mr. Greeley to send me to Europe as a foreign correspondent

GREELEY

Go ahead, I said. Send in a column every week.

MARGARET

So I went forth, fortified with letters of introductions to various writers from Waldo Emerson. In England I had tea with William Wordsworth at Rydal Mount, went down into a coal mine at Newcastle, inspected the blast furnaces in Sheffield, visited a so-called model prison in Pentonville, and brooded over the agonizing contrast between the luxury and squalor of London. In Scotland I walked the moors with Thomas Carlyle.

EMERSON

I had a feeling they'd get along.

MARGARET

He let me talk now and then — enough to free my lungs and change my position, so that I wouldn't get tired. On a second visit with him, I met Guiseppe Mazzini, who had been exiled from Italy for revolutionary activities. A few words from him and I was filled with a desire to see Italy. But first I visited Paris, where I met George Sand, a woman I had admired. We got on splendidly, and her lover Chopin played a piece especially for me. I also met Adam Mickiewicz, the exiled Polish poet who was teaching in France. He urged me to visit Italy. "You are too bound up with your mind," he said. "What you feel is just as important as what you think. Give yourself to Italy." I knew what he meant. It was a problem I had dealt with all my life. Perhaps the nurturing warmth of Italy would solve it for me.

CAROLINE STURGIS

I could tell by her letters to me that Margaret Fuller had found a new sense of freedom for herself in Europe. How pleased she was to meet George Sand and her lover Chopin. The mind and the body merged more easily in Europe, she said. I am not sure what she meant by that.

EMERSON

Italy was on the verge of revolution, Margaret knew, but she had no idea of the Italian experiences that were in store for her.

GREELEY

It was perfect timing. A revolution about to begin, and we had a reporter in Rome.

MARGARET

I loved Rome the minute I saw it. As for the revolution, I could see at once that the situation was far more complicated than I realized. The country at the time was broken up into states, a few under control of Austria, a few under the control of France, all of them under control of the Vatican in one way or another. It was bewildering, but I put my faith in Mr. Mazzini and his vision of a united Italy. He was my mentor, and I stayed caught up in his vision until the end.

GREELEY

The dispatches she sent to us kept improving in power and insight. The bite she put into her conversation began to manifest itself in her writing. She's coming into her own at last, I thought.

CAROLINA STURGIS

And Margaret's passion for making friends was a big help to her. One friend in particular, the Marchesa Constanza Arconati, introduced her to political activists and leading writers. I wonder if it was the Marchesa who arranged the meeting with Ossoli?

MARGARET

No, it wasn't arranged by anyone. I'd been out walking with friends one spring day. We had gone to St. Peter's Cathedral where we became separated. I must have looked lost because a young man approached me and offered to help me find my companions. His name was Giovanni Angelo Ossoli, and he was a great admirer of my writing, he said. There was something sweet and melancholy, and I let him lead me home. When he asked if he could see me again, I hesitated. He was, after all, much younger than I — a good ten years — and he spoke no English. But there was something about his sincerity that was irresistible. I remembered what my friend, the Polish poet Mickiewicz, had told me in Paris. "Saturate yourself with Italian life," he said. "Breathe life through your pores." When I asked the Marchesa Arconati about Ossoli, she said he came from a family of nobility and would make a fine guide for me in Italy. Still I hesitated. He was too immature, and his mind was in no way a match for my own. I decided to visit other parts of Italy and soon immersed myself in the political situation, which was growing in intensity day by day.

CAROLINE STURGIS

Margaret continued to send me letters, but they struck me as being more and more evasive. Something was happening, I felt.

MARGARET

Mickiewicz kept writing to me. He knew, of course, that I had never had an intimate physical relationship with a man. "I have seen you," he said, "with all your knowledge, and all your imagination, and all your literary reputation, living in a bondage harder than that of a servant. You have pleaded the freedom of women in a masculine and frank style. Live and act as you write. Free yourself." I had to remind myself that it was a man talking to a woman who was still a virgin at the age of thirty-six, and he was saying only what a man would say. Still, his words affected me, and I found myself drawn back to Rome and soon became Ossoli's lover. I neither rejoiced nor grieved over my decision. For bad or good, I felt I had acted out my character.

EMERSON

From what I'd been told about young Ossoli, he was in no way a match for Margaret. But I wished nothing but the best for them when I wrote to her. I assumed they had had no difficulty in arranging a marriage.

CAROLINE STURGIS

I received no letter from Margaret that even mentioned marriage, and nothing was ever said about the pregnancy until after the baby was born.

GREELEY

I was glad to see that Margaret wasn't letting this relationship with Ossoli interfere with her dispatches. And when she said she was writing a book about the Italian upheaval, I told her to go ahead, I would see that it was published.

MARGARET

All of you know how I felt about marriage. Becoming pregnant did not alter my feelings in any way, nor were they altered with the birth of little Angelo. My only worry was for the baby's safety. French

forces were marching toward Rome from the west, Austrian forces from the north. Before long the city would be under siege. As a captain in the civil guard, Ossoli, I knew, would be in danger.

EMERSON

We all urged her to leave Italy before it was too late.

MARGARET

But it was already too late. I was trapped in Rome running a hospital for the wounded, while Ossoli commanded his troops on the Pincian hill. Our baby Angelino was being taken care of by a nurse in a village north of the city. We survived the siege, but the Roman Republic did not. My hopes for a unified Italy fell with the fall of Rome. The only good aspect of the awful defeat was that now Ossoli, Angelino and I could be together again, and we spent the happiest days of our lives in Florence before going back to America.

CAROLINE STURGIS

We were all delighted to hear that Margaret — along with Ossoli and their baby — would be returning home at last. But we still wondered — were she and Ossoli married? Her letters to me were frustrating. It seemed to me that she was more afraid of submitting to a marriage ceremony than she was for omitting it.

MARGARET

How I felt about marriage didn't matter. There were other obstacles to contend with. His family objected to me because I was not of noble birth. Ossoli was a Catholic and I was not. Finding a priest who would marry us was next to impossible.

Emerson

I began to have second thoughts about Margaret's plan to return home. She was not the same woman who had left for Europe a few years ago, and no matter how rosy a picture I tried to fix in my mind, I knew that the welcome she would get in the Concord area would be a cold one. I advised her to consider carefully before making a decision.

MARGARET

Nobody encouraged me to return. Going back to strait-laced New England would, I knew, present problems, but I thought New York City would be more welcoming. Certainly Ossoli would be more comfortable there than he would in Concord. Telling him this didn't help to ease his mind, and I was full of apprehension myself about the long sea voyage. I had always been a believer in omens, but I felt we had no other choice. Omens or not, we had to leave Italy. As revolutionaries, we were no longer welcome. The American consul in Rome arranged for our passage on the ship, *Elizabeth*, leaving from Leghorn

Everything went wrong from the start. Within a few days the ship's captain died of smallpox. His second in command took over. Then the baby Angelino, having caught the infection, struggled nine days for his life before recovering. Then as the long voyage neared its end, a storm of hurricane proportions struck the ship. It was the last straw. Death seemed to be closing in on us. I began to feel — — —

(She stops, staring blankly at the congregation for a moment, then resumes briskly.)

I'm sorry, Bronson. I can't go through it all again. You'll have to excuse me. *(She leaves the podium and goes back to her seat in the congregation. As she does so, a seaman comes forward.)*

SEAMAN

I was a member of the crew on that ship, and the hurricane was one of the worst I'd ever seen. It didn't hit us until the night before we were going to dock, and in a matter of minutes the ship was swept onto a sandbar off Fire Island. We were carrying a cargo of Carrera marble, and with the rocking of the ship in the gale-force winds, the marble broke through the hold, and the sea washed in. For twelve hours the ship stayed where it was, slowly falling to pieces. The passengers were all on deck, hanging on to whatever they could get hold of. In the early morning light, we could see the beach — it was only a few hundred yards away — and some passengers jumped overboard and tried to get to shore. Only one or two that I could see, made it. There was this woman on the deck with a baby in her arms and a man holding on to both of them. The small boats we started out with had been washed away, and a seaman was trying to persuade them to jump overboard before the ship fell apart. I ran to get a plank to use in keeping them afloat, but when I came back, the man was gone, washed overboard. I tried to get the woman to move, but she wouldn't budge. Then the ship's steward grabbed the baby from her arms and jumped overboard. I thought they'd make it, but they were both drowned, and so, a little later, was the woman. Last I saw of her, she was hanging on to the foot of the foremast, more dead than alive. The baby's body was washed ashore the next day, but the bodies of the man and the woman were never found.

VOICE

It was like some terrible punishment.

LIDIAN

God moves in mysterious ways.

EMERSON

As soon as I heard the news of the shipwreck, I asked Henry Thoreau to go to the scene right away and look for any of Margaret's papers that might have been washed ashore. She had mentioned that she was bringing the manuscript of her book with her, and I was hoping it had somehow survived intact.

THOREAU

I didn't expect to find anything; and I didn't. One of Horace Greeley's reporters came across a few water soaked letters Margaret had written, butthat was all.

(He looks around the congregation, his face slowly brightening.)

It was a beautiful day and I enjoyed walking along the dunes, taking in the freshness of the sunlit sea. It was strange, butsomehow I felt closer to Margaret in her death than I had ever felt before.....I'm sure I would have liked Ossoli.

* * *

Written by Fred Keefe, Palm Beach Unitarian Church, FL who had retired as a staff member of THE NEW YORKER magazine, probably in the late 1980's or early 90's. Given to Patty Jantho who was then a member of the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, MD. Jantho's sister was a member of the Palm Beach Church.

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