

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Lydia Sigourney** (1791-1865) From *Letters of Life*

Lydia Sigourney was born in Norwich, Connecticut, where her father, Ezekiel Huntley, was the head gardener for a wealthy widow who set the social and moral tone for the town. She published her first book in 1815, *Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse*, and went on to write over fifty-more histories, biography (many honoring Revolutionary War patriots), a long descriptive poem on American Indians, children's books, travel sketches, and religious verse. Nevertheless, what she later was known for was the writing of lugubrious funeral verses, in the manner of Huckleberry Finn's Emeline Grangerford, who was said to be modeled after her. New research in women's literature is reassessing her work.

*Letters of Life* (1866) is especially important because it was "the first full-dress autobiography written by an American author of either sex whose primary vocation was creative writing."<sup>1</sup> Before Sigourney, American poets, novelists, and essayists-however autobiographical their work-did not write autobiographies at least not in the sense of a full-length biography written about one's self. *Letters of Life*, therefore, is a landmark in the history of American autobiography and the remote forerunner of works like Henry James's *A Small Boy and Others* or Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*.

One justification of her project, which she notably refuses to make herself, is that she was in her time an extremely popular writer. Her meticulously correct grammar and diction and unassailable character were models for genteel women. In England, she was compared to the popular Mrs. Felicia Hemans: in America she deluged with fan mail, and an Iowa town was even named after her. (In response she donated fifty volumes to the town library and directed the planting of trees around the courthouse square.) So she could presume interest in her life. But her declared strategy in the autobiography was to write "letters" to a "dear friend" who had requested "A particular account of my own life." Her goal was to be instructive and, as in all her writing, "not to interfere with the discharge of womanly duty, and to aim at being an instrument of good."<sup>2</sup> In these ways, she nominally placed autobiography within a kind of personal writing which women had already published (letters and travel narratives) and also made it line up with the kinds of didactic literature she had already written.

The *Letters* is about evenly divided between a narrative of her childhood and education, leading up to her first experiments in writing (chapters 1-8) and (chapters 9-14), a record of her experiences as a teacher of young ladies, her marriage to Charles Sigourney (a Hartford, Connecticut, hardware merchant and banker) their happy life together till his death in 1854, and an account of her other books. Throughout, she presents herself as extremely cognizant of social proprieties, pious, frugal, hard-working, self-disciplined, and eager to educate and improve herself. In some ways she seems like a terrible prig, just as her language seems insufferably polished. But she also seems highly aware that all these virtues are expected of her and that, having acquired them, she has the authority to play.

In this chapter, "Letter V," subtitled "Removal—Household Employments," she describes the responsibilities she had at age fourteen when her parents moved from Mrs. Lathrop's mansion to their own "new abode." A confident young lady, she supervises the moving in of the furniture and then resumes her domestic occupations, the ultimate of which is making clothes for her father. In addition to telling about being a dutiful, loving daughter, however, the author also has a little fun, as in her riddling description of the "quadruped member of our establishment...scarcely mentionable to ears polite." In this playfulness she might be compared to Franklin, Caroline Kirkland, or Fanny Fern. She is also very aware of her responsibility as a social historian: *Letters of Life* is a veritable time capsule of her culture.

The text of "Letter V," given here in its entirety, is from *Letters of Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866). An important critical essay is Nina Baym's "Reinventing Lydia Sigourney," *American literature* 62 (September 1990): 385-404.

1. Lawrence Buell, "Autobiography in the American Renaissance," in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 60.
2. Lydia Sigourney, *Letters of Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866), pp. 5, 324.

### Reading

Letters to Young Ladies

<http://www.librarycompany.org/women/portraits/sigourney.htm>