

# ADVANCED READING

## PASSAGE 1

During the Victorian period, women writers were measured against a social rather than a literary ideal. Hence, it was widely thought that novels by women should be modest, religious, sensitive, guileless, and chaste, like their authors. Many Victorian women writers took exception to this belief, however, resisting the imposition of nonliterary restrictions on their work. Publishers soon discovered that the gentlest and most idyllic female novelists were tough-minded and relentless when their professional integrity was at stake. Keenly aware of their artistic responsibilities, these women writers would not make concessions to secure commercial success.

The Brontes, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and their lesser-known contemporaries repudiated, in their professional lives, the courtesy that Victorian ladies might exact from Victorian gentlemen. Desiring rigorous and impartial criticism, most women writers did not wish reviewers to be kind to them if kindness meant overlooking their literary weaknesses or flattering them on their accomplishments simply because of their sex. They had expected derisive reviews; instead, they found themselves confronted with generous criticism, which they considered condescending. Elizabeth Barrett Browning labeled it “the comparative respect which means... absolute scorn.”

For their part, Victorian critics were virtually obsessed with finding the place of the woman writer so as to judge her appropriately. Many bluntly admitted that they thought *Jane Eyre* a masterpiece if written by a man, shocking or disgusting if written by a woman. Moreover, reactionary reviewers were quick to associate an independent heroine with carefully concealed revolutionary doctrine; several considered *Jane Eyre* a radical feminist document, as indeed it was. To Charlotte Bronte, who had demanded dignity and independence without any revolutionary intent and who considered herself politically conservative, their criticism was an affront. Such criticism bunched all women writers together rather than treating them as individual artists.

Charlotte Bronte’s experience served as a warning to other women writers about the prejudices that immediately associated them with feminists and others thought to be political radicals. Irritated, and anxious to detach themselves from a group stereotype, many expressed relatively conservative views on the emancipation of women (except on the subject of women’s education) and stressed their own domestic accomplishments. However, in identifying themselves with women who had chosen the traditional career path of marriage and motherhood, these writers encountered still another threat to their creativity. Victorian prudery rendered virtually all experience that was uniquely feminine unprintable. No nineteenth-century woman dared to describe childbirth, much less her sexual passion. Men could not write about their sexual experiences either, but they could write about sport, business, crime, and war—all activities from which women were barred. *Small wonder no woman produced a novel like War and Peace. What is amazing is the sheer volume of first-rate prose and poetry that Victorian women did write.*

## PASSAGE 2

Agricultural progress provided the stimulus necessary to set off economic expansion in medieval France. As long as those who worked the land were barely able to ensure their own subsistence and that of their landlords, all other activities had to be minimal, but when food surpluses increased, it became possible to release more people for governmental, commercial, religious and cultural pursuits.

However, not all the funds from the agricultural surplus were actually available for commercial investment. Much of the surplus, in the form of food increases, probably went to raise the subsistence level; an additional amount, in the form of currency gained from the sale of food, went into the royal treasury to be used in waging war. Although Louis VII of France levied a less crushing tax burden on his subjects than did England's Henry II, Louis VII did spend great sums on an unsuccessful crusade, and his vassals—both lay and ecclesiastic—took over spending where their sovereign stopped. Surplus funds were claimed both by the Church and by feudal landholders, whereupon cathedrals and castles mushroomed throughout France.

The simultaneous progress of cathedral building and, for instance, vineyard expansion in Bordeaux illustrates the very real competition for available capital between the Church and commercial interests; the former produced inestimable moral and artistic riches, but the latter had a stronger immediate impact upon gross national product. Moreover, though all wars by definition are defensive, the frequent crossings of armies that lived off the land and impartially burned all the huts and barns on their path consumed considerable resources.

Since demands on the agricultural surplus would have varied from year to year, we cannot precisely calculate their impact on the commercial growth of medieval France. But we must bear that impact in mind when estimating the assets that were likely to have been available for investment. No doubt castle and cathedral building was not totally barren of profit (for the builders, that is), and it produced intangible dividends of material and moral satisfaction for the community. Even wars handed back a fragment of what they took, at least to a few. Still, we cannot place on the same plane a primarily destructive activity and a constructive one, nor expect the same results from a new bell tower as from a new water mill. Above all, medieval France had little room for investment over and above the preservation of life. Granted that war cost much less than it does today, that the Church rendered all sorts of educational and recreational services that were unobtainable elsewhere, and that government was far less demanding than is the modern state—nevertheless, for medieval men and women, supporting commercial development required considerable economic sacrifice.

### PASSAGE 3

For years scholars have contrasted slavery in the United States and in Brazil, stimulated by the fact that racial patterns assumed such different aspects in the two countries after emancipation. Brazil never developed a system of rigid segregation of the sort that replaced slavery in the United States, and its racial system was fluid because its definition of race was based as much on characteristics such as economic status as on skin color. Until recently, the most persuasive explanation for these differences was that Portuguese institutions especially the Roman Catholic church and Roman civil law, promoted recognition of the slave's humanity. The English colonists, on the other hand, constructed their system of slavery out of whole cloth. There were simply no precedents in English common law, and separation of church and state barred Protestant clergy from the role that priests assumed in Brazil.

But the assumption that institutions alone could so powerfully affect the history of two raw and malleable frontier countries seems, on reexamination, untenable. Recent studies focus instead on a particular set of contrasting economic circumstances and demographic profiles at significant periods in the histories of the two countries. Persons of mixed race quickly appeared in both countries. In the United States they were considered to be Black, a social definition that was feasible because they were in the minority. In Brazil, it was not feasible. Though intermarriage was illegal in both countries, the laws were unenforceable in Brazil since Whites formed a small minority in an overwhelmingly Black population. Manumission for persons of mixed race was also easier in Brazil, particularly in the nineteenth century when in the United States it was hedged about with difficulties. Furthermore, a shortage of skilled workers in Brazil provided persons of mixed race with the opportunity to learn crafts and trades, even before general emancipation, whereas in the United States entry into these occupations was blocked by Whites sufficiently numerous to fill the posts. The consequence was the development in Brazil of a large class of persons of mixed race, proficient in skilled trades and crafts, who stood waiting as a community for freed slaves to join.

There should be no illusion that Brazilian society after emancipation was color-blind. Rather, the large population of persons of mixed race produced a racial system that included a third status, a bridge between the Black caste and the White, which could be traversed by means of economic or intellectual achievement, marriage, or racial heritage. The strict and sharp line between the races so characteristic of the United States in the years immediately after emancipation was simply absent. With the possible exception of New Orleans, no special "place" developed in the United States for persons of mixed race. Sad to say, every pressure of society worked to prevent their attaining anything approximating the economic and social position available to their counterparts in Brazil.