

# Florence Nightingale

Excerpted from: Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra: An Essay* (New York: Feminist Press, The City University of New York, 1979).

**WHY HAVE WOMEN PASSION,** intellect, moral activity—these 3—and a place in society where no one of the 3 can be exercised? Men say that God punishes for complaining. No, but men are angry with misery. They are irritated with women for not being happy. . . .

“Suffering, sad” female “humanity!” What are these feelings which they are taught to consider as disgraceful, to deny to themselves? What form do the Chinese feet assume when denied their proper development? If the young girls of the “higher classes,” who never commit a false step, whose justly earned reputations were never sullied even by the stain which the fruit of mere “knowledge of good and evil” leaves behind, were to speak, and say what are their thoughts employed upon, their *thoughts*, which alone are free, what would they say? . . .

When shall we see a life full of steady enthusiasm, walking straight to its aim, flying home, as that bird is now, against the wind—with the calmness and the confidence of one who knows the laws of God and can apply them? . . .

Women often strive to live by intellect. The clear, brilliant, sharp radiance of intellect’s moonlight rising upon such an expanse of snow is dreary, it is

true, but some love its solemn desolation, its silence, its solitude — if they are but *allowed* to live in it; if they are not perpetually baulked and disappointed. But a woman cannot live in the light of intellect. Society forbids it. Those conventional frivolities, which are called her “duties,” forbid it. Her “domestic duties,” high-sounding words, which, for the most part, are but bad habits (which she has not the courage to enfranchise herself from, the strength to break through) forbid it. What are these duties (or bad habits)?— Answering a multitude of letters which lead to nothing, from her so-called friends—keeping herself up to the level of the world that she may furnish her quota of amusement at the breakfast-table; driving out her company in the carriage. And all these things are exacted from her by her family which, if she is good and affectionate, will have more influence with her than the world.

What wonder if, wearied out, sick at heart with hope deferred, the springs of will broken, not seeing clearly *where* her duties lies, she abandons intellect as a vocation and takes it only, as we use the moon, by glimpses through her tight-closed window-shutters?

The family? It is too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit, be that spirit

male or female. The chances are a thousand to one that, in that small sphere, the task for which that immortal spirit is destined by the qualities and the gifts which its Creator has placed within it, will not be found. . . .

At present we live to impede each other’s satisfactions; competition, domestic life, society, what is it all but this? We go somewhere where we are not wanted and where we don’t want to go. What else is conventional life? *Passivity* when we want to be active. So many hours spent every day in passively doing what conventional life tells us, when we would so gladly be at work.

And it is a wonder that all individual life is extinguished?

Women dream of a great sphere of steady, not sketchy benevolence, of moral activity, for which they would fain to be trained and fitted, instead of working in the dark, neither knowing nor registering whither their steps lead, whether farther from or nearer to the aim. . . .

How different would be the heart for the work, and how different would be the success, if we learnt our work as a serious study, and followed it out steadily as a profession! . . .

In every dream of the life of intelligence or that of activity, women are accompanied by a

phantom—the phantom of sympathy, guiding, lighting the way—even if they do not marry. Some few sacrifice marriage, because they must sacrifice all other life if they accept that. That man and woman have an equality of duties and rights is accepted by woman even less than by man. Behind *his* destiny woman must annihilate herself, must be only his complement. A woman dedicates herself to the vocation of her husband; she fills up and performs the subordinate parts in it. But if she has any destiny, any vocation of her own, she must renounce it, in 9 cases out of ten. Some few, like Mrs. Somerville, Mrs. Chisholm, Mrs. Fry, have not done so; but these are exceptions. The fact is that woman has so seldom any vocation of her own, that it does not much signify; she has none to renounce. A man gains everything by marriage: he gains a “helpmate,” but a woman does not. . . .

The intercourse of a man and woman—how frivolous, how unworthy it is! Can we call *that* the true vocation of woman—her high career? Look round at the marriages which you know. The true marriage—the noble union, by which a man and woman become together the one perfect union—probably does not exist at present upon earth. . . .

And then it is thought pretty to say that “Women have no passion.” If passion is excitement in the daily social intercourse with men, women think about marriage much more than men do; it is the only event in their lives. It ought to be a sacred event, but surely not the only event of a women’s life as it is now. . . .

Women dream until they have no longer the strength to dream; those dreams against which they so struggle, so honestly, vigorously, and conscientiously, and so in vain, yet which are their life, without which they could not have lived; those dreams go at last. All their plans and visions seem vanished, and they know not where; gone and they cannot recall them. And they are left without the food either of reality or of hope. . . .

Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of man, raised them by this sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave them moral authority. But the Age, the World, Humanity must give them the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action. . . .

The ideal life is passed in noble schemes of good consecutively followed up, of devotion to a great object, of sympathy given



**IMAGE 1—Florence Nightingale (1820–1910).**

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and received for high ideas and generous feelings. The actual life is passed in sympathy given and received for a dinner, a party, a piece of furniture, a house built or a garden laid out well, in devotion to your guests—a too real devotion, for it implies that of all your time—in schemes of schooling for the poor, which you follow up perhaps in an odd quarter of an hour, between luncheon and driving out in the carriage—broth and dripping are included in the plan—and the rest of your time goes in ordering the dinner, hunting for a governess for your

children, and sending pheasants and apples to your poorer relations. Is there anything in *this* life which can be called an Incarnation of the ideal life within? . . .

Was Christ a complainer against the world? . . . Christ, if He had been a woman, might have been nothing but a great complainer.