

Introduction

Fanny Seward, born 1844, lived throughout one of the most turbulent time periods in American history, and witnessed firsthand the social and political changes brought about by the Civil War. Her father, William Henry Seward, served as Secretary of State during this time, and Fanny visited her father in Washington, D.C. several times during this period. In this lesson students will read along with the author of the piece, Reagan Graney, and will then answer a series of questions about the section to check for understanding.

Objective

By reading the historical fiction story about Fanny Seward, students will understand that the 19th Century was a time of radical social, political, and economic change, which was shaped by several important historic actors. Students will also continue developing their reading comprehension, while learning how to think from the viewpoint of others, building empathy.

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4-5.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-5.10

By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 4-5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Directions

1. Provide students with a copy of “Chapter 2”, along with the “Fanny Seward: Activity 1” worksheet.
2. Access the video of the author reading, and have students read along with their copy of “Chapter 2”
3. Once complete, ask students to complete the “Fanny Seward: Activity 2” worksheet, and check for understanding.

Chapter Two: Martha's Visit

Fanny sat in the drawing room one evening, a few days after her conversation with Will and Jenny. She was on the floor, focused intently on the items sprawled out across the carpet in front of her: a paper theater set, and little paper figures of actors and actresses. Here and there, Fanny mumbled to herself, grabbing up a man and placing him at stage right, or making two characters waddle toward stage left, before scribbling something down in her diary.

Though Will sometimes made fun of her for playing with the theater (“Talking to your dolls again, little sister?” he’d ask with a sneer), Fanny adored the set. Her mother had given it to her for Christmas some years ago, and since then, she’d used it not just as a toy, but as a tool. Fanny wrote elaborate plays and stories in her diary, using the paper people as a guide for her productions. And when she completed a play, she’d show it to her family using the set, often receiving a bout of compliments that greatly boosted her spirits and confidence.

On this particular day, Fanny was working on a new play, called *Laura*. She was unsure where exactly it was headed, but she had created the characters: a brave, witty man called Robert, who prepares for a country on the brink of war; Robert’s widowed mother, sickly and tough; and Laura, the lead, a creative woman with a heart of gold.

Fanny’s attention was suddenly disrupted by a knocking at the front door. She turned her head, glancing around the corner of the drawing room and into the main hallway of the house.

A servant opened the front door, and Fanny heard a few words of greeting exchanged between him and the guest. Then, Fanny saw the brief whirl of a large skirt, as the visitor was shuffled through the doorway and into the parlor.

Fanny turned back to her paper theater set, wondering only faintly who might have arrived. The Swards were constantly receiving visitors—from across the state, the country, and even the world. This rotation of guests did not stop when Mr. Seward was away in Washington; guests also came to speak with the Secretary of State’s wife, Mrs. Seward, who was considered one of the most powerful women in Auburn.

Normally, Fanny wasn’t bothered by the steady flow of people through her home. They were brought swiftly into the parlor, stayed for a few minutes (or a cup of tea), and were then sent back through the front door at the conclusion of their visit.

A few minutes later on this day, however, Fanny’s mother came into the drawing room.

“Fanny, dear,” Mrs. Seward said, “there’s a visitor here I’d like you to meet.”

Fanny looked up at her mother. A stern woman, Mrs. Seward always seemed to have a grave, serious air about her. She might have been considered beautiful by some, especially in her youth: she was slim and tall, with a very straight nose, a sharp face, and eyes that were as black as her hair. But atop this charming appearance were wrinkles, trembling hands, dark circles, and a thin-lipped frown, all caused by years of stress, exhaustion, and poor health.

But despite it all, Fanny loved her mother dearly.

“Who’s here?” she asked.

“A friend of mine,” Mrs. Seward said. She walked out of the room. Fanny sighed, and stood up.

She followed her mother into the parlor—a bright, sunny room at the front of their home, lavishly furnished with sparkling decor. And in the middle of the room was a woman, modestly dressed in a navy gown, with dark hair curled into a knot behind her head. She was likely in her mid-fifties, Fanny thought, but her eyes looked young and vibrant, and she sat with a straight back and raised chin that gave the impression of sprightly energy.

When Fanny and her mother entered the room, the woman stood up, and a playful smile broke out across her face.

“Frances, dear, how lovely to see you!” she said, extending an arm to Mrs. Seward.

Mrs. Seward took her hand. “And you, Martha, it’s always a treat. Fanny,” she said, “I’d like you to formally meet Mrs. Martha Coffin Wright.”

Something stirred in Fanny’s mind. She had heard her parents talking about Martha Wright for years—the staunch advocate for women’s rights, who helped to organize and lead the Seneca Falls convention in 1848. She smiled. “How are you, Mrs. Wright? It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“And you, darling,” Martha said. “Your mother has told me so much about you. I’ve heard that you’re quite the writer.”

Fanny blushed, looking up at her mother, who smiled proudly. “My dream is to become a writer, yes. Thank you.”

“Excellent,” Martha said, glowing. “Our world certainly needs more female writers. And it just takes one young woman with your talent to show all of the others that they can do it too.”

Fanny nodded. Just then, Jenny walked into the parlor as well.

“Mrs. Wright, hello!” she said. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“And you, dear! You look just as beautiful as you did on your wedding day,” said Martha. Jenny beamed.

“What brings you here today, Martha?” Mrs. Seward asked, pouring her a cup of tea on the small table in the center of the parlor. “Please tell me you’re planning another meeting soon, I’d really love to attend one of these days.”

Martha sighed. “Unfortunately not, Frances,” she said. “While women’s rights activism is certainly not going to disappear any time soon—not until equality between men and women is finally won, that is—we’ve decided that there are simply more pressing matters to deal with in the present day.”

“Understandable,” Mrs. Seward said. “My husband has been very busy down in the capital, as well. Have you been corresponding with him?”

“Here and there,” said Martha. “But sometimes he takes ages to reply! You’d think he’d get his priorities straight... I mean, who’s more important: me, dearest friend of 20 years, or the President?” She scoffed, and Fanny suppressed a giggle.

“You, of course, Martha,” Mrs. Seward said, handing her a cup of tea. “Always you!”

Martha nodded. “That said, I would love for your girls—yes, Jenny, you too—to potentially help out with organizing our next convention, whenever that might be. It would be brilliant to have the Seward women on our side.”

“Well, of course, Mrs. Wright,” Jenny said. “It would be an honor.”

Fanny nodded in agreement.

“Wonderful,” Martha said. “And we can only hope that our next convention will come at a time when *all* women, regardless of race, can consider such rights as suffrage, land ownership, and—believe it, ladies—freedom!”

“Indeed,” said Mrs. Seward.

“This is actually the matter I’m here to discuss with you, Frances,” Martha said. She lowered her voice. “Is anyone else home?”

Mrs. Seward shook her head, but then looked at Fanny and Jenny. “Girls,” she said, “would you mind leaving us? There’s a matter Mrs. Wright and I have to discuss.”

Fanny and Jenny exchanged a glance, and then nodded.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Fanny said to Martha.

“The pleasure is mine,” Martha said, bowing her head. “And I look forward to working with you in the future!”

Fanny and Jenny exited the parlor and walked into the main hall. Mrs. Seward closed the large oak doors behind them. The girls looked at each other, and then swiftly ran through the halls and into the library, which had another door attached to the parlor. They crept up to the door and placed their ears against it, Fanny on her knees, and Jenny on her tiptoes.

“Have you had any more passengers come through?” they heard Mrs. Seward ask hushedly.

“Two more last night,” Martha replied. “And you?”

“We have a couple downstairs now, as well.”

“From Harriet, too?”

“Yes.”

Fanny listened eagerly. Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist who escaped slavery?

“Have you spoken any more with your husband, dear?” Martha asked cautiously.

Mrs. Seward sighed. “Of course, Martha. I try to bring it up in my letters whenever possible.”

“And has he shown any more inclination to—?”

“Mr. Seward has seemingly adopted President Lincoln’s tendency to speak wholly of the *Union*,” Mrs. Seward interrupted.

“Ugh. These men!” Martha said, exasperated. “Don’t they understand? This war is about *abolishing slavery*. If this conflict ends and slavery still exists, we shouldn’t consider it a victory whatsoever.”

“I agree, Martha,” said Mrs. Seward. “But we must trust that the end of slavery *is* on the horizon.”

Martha laughed. “Sometimes, with Lincoln, I’m not so sure. He worries me, that one... I fear that he does not have the courage to end this abhorrent institution. He is too willing to compromise.”

There was a pause. Then, Mrs. Seward spoke. “My husband has faith in him,” she said, “and I have faith in my husband. I believe that they will fight for freedom.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Martha. There was the clink of an empty teacup on its saucer. “At the end of the day, though, I do wonder what might be different if it was your husband in that Mansion rather than Lincoln. He was always more outspoken... more trustworthy in his passion.”

“All I know is that if my husband were the President, I would be in Washington, and I wouldn’t have you dropping in on me every week,” Mrs. Seward said playfully.

“Oh, and what a boring life that would be!” Martha said.

The woman laughed together, and eventually exchanged their goodbyes. Fanny and Jenny walked away from the door.

“Any idea what that was about?” Fanny asked her sister-in-law, brushing off her dress after having been on the floor. “What did they mean by ‘passengers?’”

“I’m not sure,” Jenny said. But Fanny noticed that her eyes shifted away, and her cheeks flushed. Jenny hurried out of the library.

Fanny sat down in a chair, and looked up at the shelves and shelves of books that surrounded her in the library. Her mind was swimming with questions: who was downstairs in the basement? What was her family’s connection with Harriet? And, perhaps most significantly, was Martha Coffin Wright correct about President Lincoln? Should they trust him with the fate of their nation?