

# Catharine Maria Sedgwick

1789–1867



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Catharine Maria Sedgwick was an important novelist in the 19th century. Her writing helped establish a national literary voice for America.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Catharine Maria Sedgwick's outspoken novels reflected a new style of writing.*

As the United States was finding a national identity, writers of the time were creating a distinctive American literature. Catharine Maria Sedgwick was a novelist who contributed greatly to the new American writing of this age.

Sedgwick was born into a wealthy Massachusetts family. Her father served in various high political positions, including the Massachusetts Supreme Court and the state legislature. Sedgwick's parents believed in a formal education for their children. She read all of the classic books available to her and attended boarding school as well.

When her father died in 1813, Sedgwick became more interested in religion. It was not her parents' strict Calvinist faith that she clung to, but rather the Unitarian faith. Sedgwick was aware of the religious **intolerance** that existed in most of the stricter religions. In 1822 she published a pamphlet arguing against this intolerance. Her friends urged her to expand on this pamphlet. The longer version became her first novel, *A New England Tale*.

Sedgwick wrote more novels, including *Redwood* (1824), *Hope Leslie* (1827), *Clarence* (1830), and *The Linwoods* (1835).



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## VOCABULARY

**intolerance** unwillingness to allow other opinions

**trilogy** series of three works on the same theme

**stereotype** oversimplified, and sometimes wrong, view

In her later works Sedgwick's writing was aimed at children and the working classes. The novels *Home* (1835), *The Poor Man and the Rich Man* (1836), and *Live and Let Live* (1837) form a **trilogy** on the subject of social reform. Her last novel, *Married or Single?* (1857), ridiculed negative **stereotypes** about "old maids." Sedgwick herself never married.

Sedgwick became famous for her works, which describe the beauty of the American landscape in great detail. Most importantly, her novels capture American ideals. Sedgwick portrays the early Puritans' treatment of the American Indians as barbaric. Her leading characters are usually strong, self-reliant women. Later female writers built upon many of the themes presented in Sedgwick's novels.

During her time, Sedgwick was well respected among her fellow writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. While her writing is not as well known today, Sedgwick is remembered as a pioneer of American literature and an early voice for equal rights for women.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Contrast** How do you think today's writing differs from the writing of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's time?

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- 2. Make Judgments** Do you think it was important for the early Americans to have a literary style different from the British style? Why or why not?

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### ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are an early American writer. Write a list of ideas for a novel that would reflect the American society of the 19th century.