Women and the Sea–The Reality of Female Figureheads

By Mary-Lou Brockett Devine
Subject: English
Grade Level: 8-12
Timeframe: 90-120 minutes depending on the depth of study and/or how many prompts the teacher wants the students to complete

Introduction: Many men believed that it was bad luck to have women aboard ships, and yet many ships had figureheads portraying female figures. This lesson asks students to choose a particular female figurehead in the Mystic Seaport Museum collection, and look at what it could have symbolized for the ship and compare that to writings by women who were aboard ships. What are the similarities between real-life experiences of women and the figureheads? Where does the “romance” of having a figurehead to protect a ship fail to match up with the actual experiences of women on ships? Options for writing include explanatory writing as well as creative writing.

All figureheads for this lesson can be found at: http://educators.mysticseaport.org/sets/figureheads/

Common Core Standards (note, the term “text” includes documents and objects. Thus the figureheads themselves are considered a text under the standards when studied)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2
Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Lesson Plan:

The following figureheads can be used for this lesson and are paired with relevant text and questions. Students can work alone or in small groups to view a figurehead and examine the text. Questions that fit all of the figureheads in this group as well as specific questions for each are included in each lesson sheet.
Sheet One: Iolanda
http://educators.mysticseaport.org/artifacts/1959_212/

1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors  
   b) The facial expression  
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.) 
   d) The clothing and hairstyle 

What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and her presence on the ship? What was her "purpose" for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Iolanda’s figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read the following excerpts from the whaling journals of Mary Brewster—a Stonington woman who sailed regularly aboard the whaling ship, Tiger, captained by her husband.

From the trip June: 1848-May:1851…(pages 352-353 and 355)

   Saturday, December 9th: A long time has passed since I penned a line about the weather which has been very rough most of the time with no change save from bad to worse, heavy gales and bad seas. Today we have had a succession of squalls with hail and rain. Ship rolling so that one can hardly keep their seat, though it may be lased very secure. I long for fine weather.

   Sunday, December 10th: Fresh gales with hard squalls both night and day, which the hard rolling of the ship gives me but little rest. I am weary and tired of such rough weather. During the day, I read and sew and try to amuse myself which is hard work. Ends dreadful rugged–

   Tuesday, December 19th: The last week has been very lonesome and unpleasant, a gale of wind continually with heavy seas. Today has been the most unpleasant day of all, during the night wind breezed up to a hard gale, got in the sails and the ship rolled the waist boat under breaking her to pieces. At 4 in the morning I got up and dressed as I could not lie in bed, ship rolled so heavily which with the seas which would break over the house made me feel that the house was not a safe place The middling of the day it moderated, so some sails was made. Today we have been jogging along under easy sail and hope to see better times.

   Sunday, December 31st: Last day of the year has been pleasant with light breezes from SSW. All drawing sail out steering N. Have read most of the day and written a letter to send home the first chance. One year today I was
nearing my native land with every breeze that came, today am far, far from it and not the least expectation of seeing it till 2 more years have passed–

I am as happy perhaps as I was then My home is here and though I am deprived of society and many of the enjoyments of home I willingly resign them and feel no vain longing for such blessings as are to be found there and on the land.

I long to see my husband free from this vexatious business and away from such ragamuffins as are on board of this ship, whose only business is to get on board of ships to be well kept and fed for a few months, plan all the mischief possible, make men that would be good because naturally they know so little that they cannot be very bad uneasy, then run away the first chance. Such is more than half of the number who start on a voyage like this with no character nor principle.

Explain/Explore

1) The excerpt describing this figurehead says it was “no doubt inspired by the romantic notions of a glorious, seagoing past.” Knowing that this figurehead is the second to be placed on this boat (the first removed due to “significant damage”) how does Mary Brewster’s journal contradict Morton F. Plant’s ideas about his female figurehead?

2) The excerpt describing this figurehead says that the style of the Iolanda’s figurehead reflected “those mounted on hulking Spanish galleons [used for both shipping and war] and majestic British naval ships.” Knowing the challenges faced by Mary Brewster aboard a whaling ship, what additional challenges would men aboard a shipping or warship face that would contradict the “romance” of this particular figurehead?

Reflect/Create

1) The descriptive excerpt explains that the Iolanda was named after a real Italian family and that the princess visited the yacht in 1910. Imagine that this princess actually sailed aboard the ship for a month-long journey. How would she feel about her likeness being at the bow during the voyage? What might she think about the voyage itself? Create two or three journal entries explaining her experiences as you imagine them.

2) Imagine you are the original figurehead that was placed on the Iolanda. Write your reflections on the “work” you did for the ship and your feelings about being replaced by a younger, newer version.
1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle
   What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and her presence on the ship? What was her “purpose” for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Woman with Roses figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read these excerpts from an article Belva A. Lockwood wrote for Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine in February of 1888 which describes her “Efforts to Become a Lawyer.” (full article found at http://likelincoln.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Belva-Lockwood-Article.pdf) Lockwood was a teacher and worked in many schools, but found work was frowned upon once a woman was married and also found that a widow (her husband died early) was similarly unable to find work easily. When she became determined to become a lawyer, she found the road extremely rocky—even after she remarried and her second husband encouraged her to receive her law degree. She also supported abolition (the ending of slavery) and prohibition (the banning of alcohol).

An ardent student of history, I soon discovered that most of the great men of the country had received a collegiate education. I also discovered that the colleges of the country were closed to women. What could a simple country-girl do against the prejudices of centuries? There was only one avenue open to her, and that the one for which the American girl had been educated all of the years of the past century,--- marriage. The daughter of a poor farmer, I followed the same well-trodden road, and was soon united in marriage to a promising young farmer of my neighborhood. Marriage to the ordinary woman is the end of her personality, or of her individuality of thought and action. Forever after, she is known by her husband’s name, takes his standing in society, receives only his friends, is represented by him, and becomes a sort of domestic nonentity, reflecting, if anything, her husband's religious, moral, and political views, and rising or falling in the world as his star shall go up or down. I had not even noted this phase of society, and directly adopted the unwomanly habit of pursuing my studies after my marriage, writing theses for literary gatherings, and sometimes for the public press.
A babe soon gladdened my household, but my married life was short, as my husband sickened soon after our marriage and died of a lingering consumption during the fifth year, leaving me, without fortune, to make my way in the world.

Not yet twenty-three years of age, a mother and a widow, with poor parents, with not even a liberal education as a reliance for support, the outlook was gloomy. Gathering together my little means, I soon began to attend school again in a neighboring academy, in order to fit myself for some active employment whereby I could earn a livelihood for myself and child. Here I was reminded that "married women were not supposed to attend school, even though widowed," --- that it was "an unheard-of and an unusual thing!" "What did I expect to make of myself?" and other impudent questions, were asked me; but I kept on my course and completed the academic term. I now had the hardihood to ask of the trustees the privilege of teaching the winter school in my neighborhood, but was promptly told that the trustees had determined to employ "a man" for the winter months; and so I concluded to make my second term in the academy. The woman teacher was not as popular in that day as she has become in this, and was only employed by sufferance, and for the further reason that her wages, which were then raised by a direct tax on the parents of the pupils, were expected to be much less.

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In my college course I had studied and had become deeply interested in the Constitution of the United States, the law of nations, political economy, and other things that had given me an insight into political life. I had early conceived a passion for reading the biographies of great men, and had discovered that in almost every instance law has been the stepping-stone to greatness. Born a woman, with all of a woman's feelings and intuitions, I had all of the ambitions of a man, forgetting the gulf between the rights and privileges of the sexes. In my efforts to discover new avenues of labor I met with some ludicrous and some serious experiences, --- many of which were known only to myself. Andrew Johnson was at this time President of the republic, and William H. Seward Secretary of State. There was a vacancy in the consulship at Ghent. Conceiving that I could fill this position, I had the audacity to make application for it. Preparatory to a prospective appointment, I reviewed my German, read all the authors that I could find on International Law in the United States Supreme Court Library, and, procuring through my member of Congress a copy of the Consular Manual, made myself quite familiar with its contents, so that I fully believed that I was competent to perform the service required of a consular officer, never once stopping to consider whether the nation to which I should be accredited would receive a woman. To my disappointment and chagrin, no notice was ever taken of my application, and I was too weak-kneed to renew it. The fact that Andrew Johnson soon afterwards became involved in many complications with Congress, which ended in his impeachment by that
body, may account in a measure for the lack of interest taken by him and by the public at large in my humble aspirations.

In the autumn of 1869, on the opening of the Columbian College Law Class, I attended with my husband, by invitation of its President, Dr. Samson, the opening lecture of the course, delivered by him. I also went to the second lecture, and before the third presented myself for matriculation in the class and offered to pay the entrance-fee. This was refused, and I was thereupon informed that the question of my admission would be submitted to the faculty. One week, two weeks, elapsed, when one day I received a letter running thus: "Columbian College, Oct. 7, 1869. "Mrs. Belva A. Lockwood: "Madam,---The Faculty of Columbian College have considered your request to be admitted to the Law Department of this institution, and, after due consultation, have considered that such admission would not be expedient, as it would be likely to distract the attention of the young men. "Respectfully, "Geo. W. Samson, Pres." I was much chagrined by this slap in the face, and the inference to be drawn from it, that my rights and privileges were not to be considered a moment whenever they came in conflict with those of the opposite sex. My husband counselled that I should keep silence about it, as his relations with Dr. Samson, as ministers and co-laborers in the same church, had hitherto been friendly. But the truth would out. The newspaper men got hold of it, as newspaper men will, and came to me and demanded to see the letter, declaring that the action of Dr. Samson was a matter of public interest. My husband protested; but I read them the letter, retaining the original, which I still have.

Note: In 1870, the National University Law School was opened and intended to allow women to take classes. Lockwood attended this school. However, the women were not granted diplomas or allowed to be on the stage with the graduating men.

I now grew a little bolder, and to a certain extent desperate, and addressed the following letter to President Grant, then President ex officio of the National University Law School: "No. 432 Ninth Street., N.W., "Washington, D.C., September 3, 1873. "To His Excellency U.S. Grant, President U.S.A.: "SIR,---You are, or you are not, President of the National University Law School. If you are its President, I desire to say to you that I have passed through the curriculum of study in this school, and am entitled to, and demand, my diploma. If you are not its President, then I ask that you take your name from its papers, and not hold out to the world to be what you are not. "Very respectfully, "Belva A. Lockwood." This letter contained about as much bottled-up indignation as it was possible for one short missive to conceal under a respectful guise. I received no direct answer, but the next week I was presented by the Chancellor of the University, W. B. Wedgewood, with my diploma duly signed, and a few days after I was admitted to the
On my admission, the clerk remarked, "You went through to-day, Mrs. Lockwood, like a knife. You see the world moves in our day." Justice Carter said, "Madam, if you come into this court we shall treat you like a man." Justice Arthur McArthur remarked, "Bring on as many women lawyers as you choose: I do not believe they will be a success." These comments did not affect me, as I already had my hands full of work, and cases ready to file in anticipation of my admission. My friends had confidence in my ability; and the attention that had been called to me in the novel contest I had made not only gave me a wide advertising, but drew towards me a great deal of substantial sympathy in the way of work. Besides this, I had already booked a large number of government claims, in which I had been recognized by the heads of the different Departments as attorney: so that I was not compelled, like my young brothers of the bar who did not wish to graduate with a woman, to sit in my office and wait for cases. I have [225] been now fourteen years before the bar, in an almost continuous practice, and my experience has been large, often serious, and many times amusing. I have never lacked plenty of good paying work; but, while I have supported my family well, I have not grown rich. In business I have been patient, painstaking, and indefatigable. There is no class of case that comes before the court that I have not ventured to try, either civil, equitable, or criminal; and my clients have been as largely men as women. There is a good opening at the bar for the class of women who have taste and tact for it.

Note: Lockwood did not stop at receiving her law degree, she also argued that she should be allowed to make arguments in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. This battle required her to argue that she should not need her husband’s permission to practice her profession. She was accepted and wrote that she was also proud of her work with the U.S. Congress and Senate.

Explain/Explore
1) Often figureheads were considered “protectors” of a ship—the superstition held that the woman at the bow would please the gods of the sea and cause them to look favorably on the ship. Other sailors considered the figurehead to be the “personality” or “muse” of the ship. What kind of muse would Belva A. Lockwood be? How do you believe the figurehead was intended to “interact” with the sea and/or with the gods that controlled the oceans, weather, etc.?

2) If, indeed, this figurehead represents Belva A. Lockwood, why do you think the owners of this ship chose her for their figurehead? What does it say about the outlook these men had?

3) If a current-day woman were to be chosen as a figurehead for a contemporary ship today, who would you choose and why?
Reflect/Create

1) Imagine this figurehead “arguing” her case with the gods of the sea to protect this particular ship from bad weather or other dangers. How might her arguments be different from other images of women that are more “traditional” to the roles of women and the sea?

2) A slight irony of this figurehead is that she was likely on board a ship with many men who held extremely traditional views of women and would not want their wives or sisters having a career in law or other “male” employments. Write a letter or journal entry in the voice of this figurehead commenting on the behavior of the crew aboard “her” ship.
Sheet Three: Woman with Beads

http://educators.mysticseaport.org/artifacts/1958_1290/

1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle

   What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and her presence on the ship? What was her “purpose” for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Woman with Beads figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read the following excerpts from the whaling journals of Mary Brewster—a Stonington woman who sailed regularly aboard the whaling ship, Tiger, captained by her husband.

From the trip June:1848-May:1851…

   Saturday, July 22nd (page 339): Made the Island of Flores yesterday. The boat went ashore at a small settlement and returned by dark, a number of the inhabitants came off during the evening to trade…Went into one of their buildings where they worship. A large stone building with a tower of considerable height.

   As you approached the altar it is formed in 3 great arches each space filled with a representation of our Saviour on the cross, the Virgin Mary, and several saints all surrounded with angels of various sizes and shapes and what space was left filled up with feather flowers and various colored paper cut in every fantastic shape. Altars covered with pink blue and yellow cambric with trimming of the same. A lamp was burning in the front and is never suffered to go out. The building was very ancient and very much out of repair.

   A degree of solemnity was visible on entering with those who came with me and no sooner had they reached the middle of the chapel in front of the image of Mary than they were all on their knees for a few moments engaged in prayer, children of a few years’ age with them. The scene was solemn and not without interest to me. A lesson from them I could learn and I had no reason to doubt but that prayer was heard and their devotion sincere.

   Sunday, November 5th (page 350): At 2 this morning one of the kanakas [a Pacific Island worker] died, having been sick the last two weeks, supposed it was the quick consumption [Tuberculosis]—At 10 AM his body was
committed to the deep—A prayer was read, also an appropriate chapter. The
ship was brought to, sails all clewed up—All hands assembled aft—The body was
sewed up in Canvass with sufficient weight to make it sink, placed on a board
at the gangway and after prayer plunged in the deep.

It has been a lonesome day. The weather cloudy and rainy which with
the solemn occurrence made much more dreary—Death in any form has its
terrors but on ship board it is much more solemn and gloomy—We are
constantly reminded that in the midst of life we are in death, but how little
impression it makes on our minds. The dreaded day is put far off and we look
forward to years which we hope to enjoy, knowing not that we shall live to
behold them. Lord, prepare us for the grim messenger and grant that when
death is stamped on our brow we may all be prepared to meet it with the
blessed hope of reigning with Thee—

Monday, January 1st, 1849 (page 356) …How fast the New Year
comes round! And we are startled when we stop and think how far we have
swept down the River of life and we know of no better
time than the present
with the knell of the departed Year still trembling on the air while we stand at
the open portals of the New—Yes, another has gone with its hopes and joys, its
trials and pleasures, its faults and follies, its love and hates, its good and its
evil. The New Year has come with new plans and enterprises, new schemes
and hopes, which spring from the ashes of their predecessors, and before us
are new duties, new pleasures and trials, the measure of which we know now,
and shall not know, till they come and find us perhaps prepared, perhaps
unprepared.

It is well then that at this point we should review the past, and make
ready, so far as possible, for the future. Wherein we have erred in purpose, in
thought or act, in the year which has gone, let us resolve that the present year
shall witness nothing against us in the principles which we know are right, with
a firm trust in God, persuaded that only in this way shall we come to the close
of the year in peace or, if called upon from our places before it end, be able to
leave our house in order and with a cheerful and resigned heart walk down in
the valley of shadows.

Explain/Explore

1) This artifact is described as “clutching Catholic rosary beads to her chest” and
certainly religious faith was an important part of many people’s lives in the days
of sailing ships. With people from all over the world on board, whaling ships
often carried crews of varying faiths and beliefs. People of New England in the
18th century were widely Protestant in their beliefs and did not understand the
rituals and beliefs of those who followed Catholicism. In the excerpts taken from
Mary Brewster’s journals, it is clear that she has a strong Protestant Christian faith. When she visits the Island of Flores, she sees a more Catholic-styled chapel and service. What surprised her about the chapel/service. What is her overall view of this different faith?

2) The description of Joan of Arc on History.com says: “At the age of 13, Joan began to hear voices, which she determined had been sent by God to give her a mission of overwhelming importance: to save France by expelling its enemies, and to install Charles as its rightful king.” It also says she wore men’s clothes when she went into battle. What about the symbolism of Joan of Arc do you believe inspired this ship’s owner to make her a figurehead?

3) Joan of Arc is quoted as saying “I was admonished to adopt feminine clothes; I refused, and still refuse. As for other avocations of women, there are plenty of other women to perform them.” (https://www.azquotes.com/author/501-Joan_of_Arc). Why do you believe the ship’s owner had this figurehead carved in traditionally female clothing? Do you believe there is any underlying reason for the carver to use clothing that would have been worn by actresses playing the role of Joan of Arc?

Reflect/Create
1) A slight irony of this figurehead is that she was likely on board of ship with many men who held extremely traditional views of women and would not want their wives or sisters going to battle or wearing clothing normally associated with men. Write a letter or journal entry in the voice of this figurehead commenting on the behavior of the crew aboard “her” ship.

2) There is no indication to tell us what kind of ship this figurehead would have been on. How would a figurehead of Joan of Arc feel about being on a warship that was not part of the French fleet? What if she was on a boat of people who were not all Catholic? Or on a ship that carried only trade for the purpose of making its owners money? What if she was on a whaling ship? What if she saw the dependent role Mary Brewster was placed in aboard her husband’s whaling ship? Write a letter or journal entry in the voice of this figurehead taking one of these perspectives. What would Joan of Arc have to say about being asked to protect and lead such a ship?
Sheet Four: Two Sisters
http://educators.mysticseaport.org/artifacts/1957_358/

1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle

What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and their presence on the ship? What was their "purpose" for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Two Sisters figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read the following documents. One—Martha's Vineyard Museum's “Girl on a Whaleship” http://www.girlonawhaleship.org/journal/journaltext.html—is the journal of Laura Jernegan, a young girl talking about her life with her little brother on her parents on a whaleship.
   The other—“Maud Maxon’s Letter”--https://educators.mysticseaport.org/documents/maxson_letter/?page=&aug=a&q=maxson&sa=t--is a letter home from a young girl traveling by sailing ship.

Explain/Explore

1) This artifact's description focuses mainly on its uniqueness as a double figurehead. It points out that the girls have “sweet, plump faces” and “lace that trims their dresses and pantaloons.” We can infer that this figurehead was carved to reflect the name of the ship itself. However, knowing that figureheads are often considered by the crew as protective figures and symbols of their relationship with the sea, do you think the figurehead was satisfactory to the crew?

2) The image of the two girls dancing may give the impression that children delight in being aboard ship. Based on the journal and letter you read by children aboard ship, what do you think the day-to-day experience of being aboard ship was like?

3) Children aboard ship—especially whaling ships—likely saw the same events the adults experienced, including incredible storms, sickness, and death. Why do you think these moments of ship life are not reflected in their writing?

Reflect/Create

1) Laura Jernegan describes her brother cutting his foot and that it bled. It is the only injury she mentions in her journal. Create a list of other injuries a child
might suffer while on a whaling ship and create a journal entry that reflects a child’s real concerns about such events.

2) Laura Jernegan list many pets they have had on board the whaling ship—birds, kittens, and a puppy. Write a journal entry in which a child explains what it is really like to have a pet on board ship—the joys, responsibilities, and concerns.
1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle

What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and their presence on the ship? What was their “purpose” for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Eunice Adams figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read the following excerpts from the whaling journals of Mary Brewster—a Stonington woman who sailed regularly aboard the whaling ship, Tiger, captained by her husband—and the editor’s notes.

**From the trip October: 1846-March: 1847**

**Monday, November 30th (pg 167):** Commenced with strong sea breezes which lasted through the day with clear weather. At 5 a ship hove in sight. Mr. Brewster immediately manned a boat and went to her fearing if they attempted coming in they would get ashore. I watched the boat till dark then ate my supper. This evening it is really lonesome. Two of the mates absent up the bay which with husband leaves only one boat’s crew on board. Brother James has been in my room all the evening has just left as it is his watch on deck. It is 11, and I suppose husband will not be back till morning. The wind is blowing hard and I feel desperate. Oh dear—

[editor’s note on this entry: The captain’s wife was in such a peculiarly vulnerable situation—for if anything went wrong it was a “long weary way from home and friends,” as Eliza Underwood put it—that it was little wonder if she became worried and fearful when her husband was away from the ship for very long. “Today is the first time James has left me to go out in the boat. And did not calculate to do so at all when he left port. But as the four boats have been gone longer than he gave them orders for and whales are coming out of the lagoon very fast he feared something was wrong with the men so has gone to investigate affairs,” wrote Susan McKenzie on 22 January 1870, “in a quiet harbor in Scammon’s Lagoon Lower California.” If the truth be told, James McKenzie was more worried about the men having got hold of whisky from the salt factory—but that was not calculated to soothe Susan’s understandably apprehensive state of mind.

The boats returned “about 6 ½ o’clock with a whale,” having been quite innocently about their proper business, but the memory did not comfort Susan on 1 March, when she penned “this has been a long lonely day for me as James went away...
about 4 o’clock AM And did not return till after dark.” Whaling was a dangerous business, and the wives feared more than loneliness: a widow’s lot was bad at any time, but particularly grim if she had been bereaved at sea.

That lonely female, that lone wife
Cut off from ev’ry friend & all her own sex
With no kindred breast
In which to lodge her woes
Lonely she treds the deck…
Pitying heave have mercy on her.
–Eliza Underwood

The editor describes another captain who gave his wife some worry on page 191: Captain Underwood, who had been drinking, lectured deckhand Buckly who then talked back to his captain. Underwood went into a “drunken frenzy” and challenged Buckly to a fight.

Mrs. Underwood was sensible enough to realize that her husband, gouty and choleric as he was, was scarcely likely to win such a contest, even though his rage might “for while overcome his lameness and enable him to beat most any man in the ship.” …Eliza Underwood abandoned reticence and took part in the quarrel, rushing to her husband’s side to protect him from his opponent.

Also, predictably, Captain Underwood did not appreciate this interference in the slightest. “As he endeavored to put me back to reach the man I exclaimed no, you cannot fight, an Englishman would not fight within the presence of his wife in England, much more here where she is alone and helpless.” And indeed, for a while it looked as if this ploy would work: “this appeal to their feelings was perhaps well timed,” she wrote; “for my sake one of them [the crew] said they would go forward, which they did instantly.”

Underwood, however, was still thirsting for battle. He ordered Eliza down to her cabin, and the moment she obeyed him he rushed forth to grapple with Buckly again, “and restraining my feelings I continued below,” she penned, “hearing only he distant uproar, till Mr. U call’d loudly for his pistols.”

This was too much for her self-control—or, indeed, any ladylike inhibitions—for Mrs. Underwood forgot propriety altogether, and rushed up on deck and forward, to the common seamen’s quarters, “to afford better protection, since so active and powerful is true affection that no stroke could reach him but through me [i.e., she would shield him], but I knew I could guard him [still] more safely as my presence would prevent the groser abuse which so much exasperates him, which compassion to my terrors would prevent some from joining in and then making the matters worse.”

Again her ploy worked. Captain Underwood pranced up and down, daring the men to insult him again, but “though urged to do it no one spoke but Buckly…and
having in vain urged the [men]...to come up and take what else he had to say...[Captain Underwood] came aft and myself below...and hearing no more of the people I retired to rest, thankful it had all ended well.”

[Other dangers a captain was exposed to mentioned in Mary Brewster's journals include:

- **Nearly being crushed** by a whale jaw (page 72)
- **Illness**—one captain, Capt. Beck, is described by Brewster on page 154—"The night seemed very long and lonesome. He slept a great part of the time, when awake was in great distress both in body and mind. He truly was a sick man and death was visible in his features. He could not see and his eyes uttered with every evidence of the most intense feeling." Her own husband was ill in January of 1847…Saturday the 23rd: Was up during the night, husband sick and vomiting. All the cooks and stewards were abed so I went and made a fire in the galley and made some herb tea. Today I have been engaged in making gruel and waiting upon him. Monday the 25th: Was up the past night a number of times, Mr. Brewster sick, vomiting. He took an Emectic which did not help him. This morning I gave him another which helped him. All day I have been making messes and drinks. Tonight he feels better for which I feel very thankful.
- **Native peoples**—Whaleships were not welcomed in all places where they landed for supplies. In some cases, this was because previous ships had stolen from or otherwise harmed the native people.

**Explain/Explore**

1) The description of this artifact simply notes that it is likely an image of the owner’s wife—for whom the ship was named. Knowing that figureheads were often considered by the crew as protective figures and symbols of their relationship with the sea, what kind of woman do you think Eunice Adams was? What qualities would she need to have to make the men feel safe to have her as their guardian? What is it about the way the figurehead looks that would support your ideas about Eunice’s personality?

2) Captains aboard ship faced many threats to their lives including illness, injury, mutiny, and dangers from native peoples on islands the ships visited for supplies. Mary Brewster, Susan McKenzie, and Eliza Underwood all worried about the safety of their husbands (and of their own safety if something should happen to their husbands). Why do you believe they still continued to sail with their husbands knowing that they would be vulnerable without their husbands on board?
Reflect/Create

1) Mary Brewster never really puts into words what her real worries are when her husband does not return quickly from the other ship. Write a journal entry in which she is more clear about her concerns.

2) A captain’s actual log book from the *Eunice H Adams* is very factual—weather, location, whales caught, or repairs made. One log book can be found at this address—though it is written in cursive hand writing and may be difficult for some modern people to read. [https://archive.org/details/logbookofeuniceh00euni_2/page/180/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/logbookofeuniceh00euni_2/page/180/mode/2up)

The log was kept for the sake of the entire ship, and so captains rarely wrote the kind of in-depth, emotional entries their wives or the crew would have kept in their personal journals. Imagine that a captain kept his own personal journal outside the ship’s log and write an entry that reflects his concerns for having his wife aboard the ship.

3) By placing his wife’s image on the bow of the ship named after her, the owner of the *Eunice H Adams* was basically sending his wife to sea without him there to protect her. Imagine this figurehead could speak. Have her write about being on the open sea without her husband—is she excited? Annoyed? Angry? Confused?
1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle

   What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and their presence on the ship? What was their “purpose” for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Woman with Binoculars figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what you saw?

3) Finally, read the following excerpts from Mary Brewster’s Whaling Journals and the editor’s notes.

From the trip May-October: 1846

On a stop in Hawaii, Mary Brewster visits a volcano (pages 132-133).

   Thursday, September 14th: What was most remarkable about the volcano is a short distance from it there is no appearance of it being near and I could but be astonished on approaching the edge to see it so near. From every part it is a wonderful sight but the Northern [aspect] is much the best as it can be seen at one view. The wind was very favorable and blowing the gas and heat from us. We were separated only by a slight ledge of lava which had cooled and formed a rim some two feet high all round it. In amazement and wonder I stood and gazed, feeling riveted to the spot. It is beautiful, but [an] awful grandeur I never saw and probably never shall behold again. The bowels of the earth throwing up a liquid fire several feet high and in any direction we might look, boiling and rolling in one great mass–like the waves of the sea, looking as if it would rush over the narrow brink and be upon us. The guide had been here 27 times and only once had seen it so active. I could have stayed for hours and never felt weary or afraid [but] the guide said it was not safe so reluctantly I came away.

From the trip October: 1847-March: 1848

   Saturday, January 29 (page 309) At 9 AM made the land and by noon was at anchor in Pernambuco roads [near Brazil], about 5 miles from the land. In the afternoon husband went ashore and by dark was here as he could not get what he wished till Monday. He bought a late newspaper which I soon perused with a shipping list, but no letters, well we are not disappointed as we thought it improbable. I have passed the day
very pleasantly in looking at the shore and watching the little catamarans as they are called, which appear like logs fasted together with a seat raised at one end or at each, where they set. A number of these have passed the ships and are as far as I can see with the glass beyond in the distance fishing. These tiny things are supplied with a large three-cornered sail and sail very fast. They are owned by the poorer class of people, whose chief employment is fishing. I expect to go ashore in the morning to stay till Monday with Mr. Davis family to spend time. They are Americans and have lived here 5 yrs.

**Tuesday, February 1st (page 310)** Monday we…went out to ride on horseback with Mr. Davis & wife with husband. We rode some 8 miles back in the country which gave us a good chance to see some of the beauties of the place. The merchants and nobility have country seats which are fine-looking buildings surrounded with trees and shrubbery and live out of town–

These are delightful and some of them very beautiful. The river runs up a number of miles which with the naturally fertile soil adds much to the prospect. It was about sunset when we turned to go back. The evening was charming, and the fragrance from the Orange trees flowers and bushes was wafted in the breeze and the air was full of the perfume which I wished I could always inhale, it was so sweet. We had a very pleasant ride. When we reached the city we rode through the principal streets which were well lighted and had quite a singular appearance, each side was lined with the black population who were seated with stands around them with fruits, cakes, and whatever they had to dispose. Some had fires built and were cooking fish and all were busy. These fires and stands are kept till 12, when they all retired.

Pernambuco from ship looked like a handsome place--but when I landed the vision was vanished and a near view shewed that appearances are deceitful. The houses are built of stone, are unusually high but narrow in width, with tiles made of clay for roof. They make no improvement in their style but are confined to the forms and customs of their forefathers and seem to think no one should judge of their practices—that there could be no other way. Their wealth consists in slaves who are easily told from the free blacks as they have a law that no slave shall wear shoes—I was quite struck with the heavy loads which they carry on their heads, large wooden trays with fruit which was very heavy and would take two persons to lift it off seems to them as light as a few pounds weight and they walk along as fast and with as little difficulty as can be imagined. They have a small cushion which is worn next to the head on which the burden is placed which when once nicely fitted they can carry and be able to keep a perfect balance–

**From the trip June: 1848-May 1851**

**Friday, January 26th (page 361)** [in the Samoa Islands, some crew members, tired of whaling, have abandoned ship on the tropical island of Tutila] The natives are a fine looking race with good features, pleasant countenances and large stout frames.
The Island was covered with trees and green to the water’s edge. Coconuts, bananas, pineapples are quite plenty, pigs, tarro, yams are the chief food of the inhabitants and the most needed by ships and can be procured usually in large quantities.

During the last 2 yrs. Upolu the nearest island to Tutuila have been engaged in grievous wars amongst themselves and the inhabitants have not had time to attend to the land which has caused famine and they are dependent on Tutuila for a large part of their food. For this reason we were not able to procure as much as we wished.

At four word came that the men had been caught and had arrived. They had walked some 10 miles in the hot sun and must have felt rather weary with their day’s amusement. As we had obtained all we could get and the coming day was their Sunday it was thought best to proceed on—and not loose a couple of days. When coming down to the Boat we met some two hundred of natives all marching with their war implements singing and acting out the numerous parts of their battles. They kept excellent time and made a manly appearance. I never saw such a large stout athletic company before. They were headed by a chief of very old appearance who took part in the exercises. A great meeting was to be held on Monday and they had all been summoned to attend from every part of the Island. The object was to pass laws that none of the inhabitants of Tatuila should engage with those Upolu or take sides either way. The chief thought if they did that it would get them into difficulty and they would make war with his Island which he did not want. They have been at peace a long time and are in a flourishing condition.

Saturday, June 30th (page 382–location somewhere near the Bearing Straits). A very pleasant day, plenty of native company. We have had callers from the whole coast I believe, a chief by name Notocken with his wife and child, then another chief who is the greatest man of the nation I expect. We were caressed, touched noses together, and as near as we can understand they are to be our friends. They were well dressed in seal skin trousers and a coat made from deer skin made loose and belted around them. The women dressed the same save their hair is long and braided. Two of the women were very pretty, their skin which had not been exposed was as white as mine blackeyes and red cheeks. I supposed their parents were russians as there is a settlement in the country 200 miles back–They brought presents of their garments and walrus teeth for which we paid them for with tobacco–they are all smokers & chewers even the children and are extravagantly fond of it–

Their chief food is seal’s flesh–walrus and blubber–with fish, the blubber is cut up in slits and I could not help laughing to see a chid about 6 month old in the bottom of one of their canoes lying on its back with a strip of blubber as much as it could hold in both hands sucking it and apparently very happy–

They stopped nearly all day, we gave them bread, combs, needles, thread, and knives and at 4 they left all pleased with their visit. Their canoes are light, covered with
walrus skins and balanced with a stone and skins inflated with air which are light and are used to buoy up the whales they fasten to—by getting several attached to them the whales cannot go down and they soon worry [weary] themselves out, kill, and if it is not near the shore they all meet and peck off what blubber they can easily get and then leave the rest.

Their houses are pitched tent fashion and covered with skins, in winter they are imbedded in snow a passage kept clear every day and as the days are very short they spend most of their time asleep, they have no fire save an earthen dish which is kept full of oil with a wick in the centre which keeps up a steady flame. This keeps the room so warm that it is said to be summer heat within, it serves as a fire and light. They all seem very happy and more civilized than one would expect to find them—

**Explain/Explore**

1) Many people do not realize how often whale ships landed in foreign ports to get supplies and news. A captain’s wife would have many opportunities to see cultures that people at home would have never imagined existed. What evidence do you see in Mary Brewster’s journal that she had an open mind when it came to meeting these new people? What evidence shows that her personal cultural bias causes her to judge these people?

2) The description of this figurehead notes that binoculars were a popular personal item in the mid-1800s. However, the wives of ship captains would have access to telescopes. In the January 29 excerpt, Mary Brewster mentions looking at the catamarans through the “glass.” This was the term used for a telescope. Considering her entries as a whole, what is the difference between seeing these locations from the deck of the ship through the “glass” and visiting these places in person? How do you think this would change Mary Brewster’s view of other cultures and, perhaps, of her own?

**Reflect/Create**

1) Imagine seeing your own town from the perspective of a complete outsider—someone who knew nothing of our culture. Pick a normal celebration or day in the life of your town and create a journal entry for that visitor—what does he/she see and how does he/she interpret what is going on?

2) Mary Brewster sees all the people she meets on her journeys as “others.” Imagine that you are one of the people being visited by the wife of a ship’s captain. What about her presence (her physical appearance and her actions) would stick out to you and make her an “other.” Write the journal entry of that person describing the encounter with the captain’s wife.
You can see a picture of Mary Brewster from the Mystic Seaport Museum’s website here:

http://mobius.mysticseaport.org/detail.php?term=mary+brewster&module=objects&type=keyword&x=7&y=6&requireimage=yes&kv=122659&record=1&module=objects
1) First, look at the figurehead closely. What do you notice about it? Consider…
   a) The colors
   b) The facial expression
   c) The body language (position of arms, angles, etc.)
   d) The clothing and hairstyle

   What can you determine, assume, infer from just looking at the artifact? What would
   the sailors aboard this ship believe about their figurehead and their presence on the
   ship? What was their “purpose” for their journeys?

2) Next, read the “About this Artifact.” What in the description and history of the Woman
   with Comb figurehead confirms what you saw in the artifact? What contradicts what
   you saw?

3) Finally, look at this dress from the Mystic Seaport Collection
   and read the following excerpts from Mary Brewster’s Whaling Journals and the editor’s
   notes.

   From the trip December: 1845-April: 1846
   Monday, December 15: (page 19) During the night had quite a breeze. Saw a
   ship ahead supposed to be the Charles. The first part of the day rainy. Latter pleasant
   but calm. Oh for a breeze, I hear reported all over the ship. William feels as though he
   should never get anywhere. A dull ship and calm days is quite discouragement when
   one has not much time to spare. I have been busy in cutting work for the week and
   when tired of plying the needle read for an hour or so. Have done but little work as the
   weather is so warm I dislike to touch anything like flannell till it gets cooler. Have written
   a letter or two to have in readiness when a chance occurs to send.

   (Here, and editor’s note says: the petticoats and heavy long skirts that the wives wore
   on board ship as well as on shore did not make for comfort in the torrid zones. On 11
   September 1865 aboard the Nautilus, Harriet Bliven “commended to make me a
   Bloomer suit.” this loose combination of tunic and trousers—introduced by Amelia
   Bloomer in 1951, too late for Mary Brewster—proved much more comfortable, it seems,
   for she wore it the next day. “I finished my Bloomer suit, I think I shall want all Bloomers
   if it continues to grow warm.” )

   Tuesday, March 3rd: (page 43) Pleasant weather. Busy all day in washing and
   regulating my things and begin to look much more natural and clearly.

   Wednesday, March 4th: (page 43) employed all the forenoon in ironing my
   clothes. I have now got settled and all ready for company.
[Note: Captain Brewster left Mary in Hawaii as the ship went on to fish more dangerous waters.]

**Tuesday, April 21st: (page 57)** Arose early this morning and after breakfast took a walk to see the country. Concluded I was an object of curiosity to the natives, a large number had collected and followed me every step. So I thought best to retrace my path, but the number kept increasing till I could bear it no longer for to me they are very disagreeable. I have expected to see them much further advanced or sufficiently so to be covered but instead of that not more than half seemed to think dress is of importance. I saw a number of men with nothing but a piece of cloth around the middle of the body.

**Tuesday, June 30th: (page 100)** Pleasant weather, sun shining and light breeze. Whales in sight all day, boats have been off but did not get fast. I just being to see some of the beauties of a whaleman’s life, dirt and grease all the go. I keep below nearly all the time and in my room as the decks are getting rather soiled and the try-smoke very disagreeable to my olfactory senses. I keep busy and improve the fine weather in fixing up my clothes and various small jobs.

**Friday, August 21st: (page 117)** Should say from the noise I have heard today All kinds of work carried on here. Coopering, boiling, stowing down, and eating particularly attended to. Foggy all day with light weather. One sail in sight boiling. Completed my dress this afternoon and passed the morning in reading, have got work enough to last the whole voyage.

**From the trip October: 1846-March: 1847**

**Tuesday, December 22nd: (page 174)** A spanish lady and her husband has been to see me today...She appeared well, was dressed in a light calico dress made with short sleeves, short plain waist, a small shall round her neck, a long shawl of worsted trimmed with lace...Some of the spaniards which have been on board were dressed extremely well and their fashion is both becoming an elegant looking. Frequently see them with silk velvet pants the seams open from the knee down and laced with silk cord with tassels with scarlet, yellow or green for a lining underneath. Shirt ruffles and worked bosoms and wristbands in profusion with scallops. Loose sleeves and a serapa, a covering for the shoulders.

**Friday, February 12th (page 189):** Have been employed all day in fixing up Mr. B– clothes which will be needed for another northwest season. He thinks I shall remain at the Islands though I should prefer accompanying him. So I wish to have everything ready and in order...

**From the trip March-September: 1847**

**Saturday, June 26th (page 246):** Busy this morning in fixing our clothes. Here we are nearly ready to start and have not got our clothes yet. Miss Ogden in Mrs. Conde’s dresses and the children in the little Conde’s frocks. Doctr borrowing as occasion requires, my shoes so loose I could not keep them on, have changed with
Miss Ogden, she being provided with a pair which was too tight. I have 3 dresses with plenty of stockings and make out very well. Not so with my companion, she had not a change, only as she borrows.

(Editor’s note on the “gam”—a woman going to another ship to visit with a captain’s wife—page 282) It took some courage to get into one of the boats to be rowed from one ship to the other…[Jesse Hawes recorded a story of a man falling into the ocean while returning from a gam.] They rescued him, but the thought of falling into the water in corsets and petticoats must have been somewhat sobering.

From the trip June: 1848-May: 1851

Monday, August 13th (page 394): [After a terrible storm that filled the captain’s cabin—“the house—½ full of ocean water] After they got the water out. Put our trunks below—but they were soaking wet but I could not take them out as it was so wet and dirty above. Charts all wet. Then we fixed up and finding a few bed clothes spread out our wet bed and tried to make ourselves comfortable—

Tuesday, August 14th (page 395): Did not sleep much during the night and at an early hour was up and commenced regulating. Had the floor scoured up cleaned the dirt from the sides of the house had a great fire made in the stove—then up came the trunks &c.—oh sad array of dresses, gloves, ribbons hardly a garment but what wanted drying, come completely saturated with salt water—I could have cried but made out to keep quiet—stretched a line and hung up the things. …I felt very uncomfortable for several hours to see my things so spoilt and in such a condition till better feelings prevailed and I think at the close of the day I felt thankful we had been kept from the danger which the sea might have done us, for had it not been broked before it struck the house they all said it would have swept the decks taking the house and perhaps some of our number. As it was we were all spared and what was a few paltry clothes in comparison.

Explain/Explore

1) It may seem strange to 21st Century people that women aboard ships would bother to dress in their full dresses—sometimes with several layers that reached all the way to the deck. Why do you think women attempted to dress in the appropriate styles for their time while on board ship?

2) Aside from falling over and sinking quickly in the ocean because of the weight of their clothing, what other dangers might a woman on a whaleship face as a result of her manner of dress?

3) Mary Brewster mentions working on her husband’s clothing and sewing her own dresses. She also created clothing for the cabin boy and other sailors while aboard ship. Why do you think she would use her sewing skills for people other than herself and her husband?
Reflect/Create

1) The women who kept journals while aboard ship were often hesitant to tell the “real” truth about events at sea. The editor of Mary Brewster’s journals often points out when she has softened an argument aboard ship or the severity of a storm. Imagine if Mary Brewster did feel burdened by the need to keep dressing as the women were on shore. Write a journal entry that would say what she really felt about clothes aboard ship.

2) Mary Brewster often commented on the attire of the people she visited on foreign lands—sometimes with approval and sometimes with some disgust. Imagine you are a visitor to our country—from a place where you do not know the ways we dress (you might have to imagine yourself an alien) and comment on the clothes you would see people wearing on an average day.