

Sample Reading Passage

Here is an excerpt from an autobiography published in 1922. Although the author calls herself Mary in the passage, the full identity of the author is never revealed.

The Log-Cabin Lady: An Anonymous Autobiography

I was born in a log cabin. I came to my pioneer mother in one of Wisconsin's bitterest winters.

The first thing I remember is being grateful for windows. I was three years old. My mother had set me to play on a mattress carefully placed in the one ray of sunlight streaming through the one glass window of our log cabin. Baby as I was, I had ached in the agonizing cold of a pioneer winter. Lying there, warmed by that blessed sunshine, I was suddenly aware of wonder and joy and gratitude. It was gratitude for glass, which could keep out the biting cold and let in the warm sun.

My father was a schoolteacher from New England, where his family had taught the three Rs and the American Constitution since the days of Ben Franklin. My mother was the daughter of a hardworking Scotch immigrant. Father's family set store on ancestry. Mother's side was more practical.

The year before my birth, these two young people had started West in a prairie schooner to stake a homestead claim. Father's chest held a dictionary, Bancroft's *History of the United States*, several books of mathematics, *Plutarch's Lives*,^[1] a history of Massachusetts, a leather-bound file of Civil War records, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*,^[2] Shakespeare in two volumes, and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. My mother took a Bible.

5 I can still quote pages from every one of those books. Until I was fourteen, I saw no others, except a primer, homemade, to teach me my letters. Because *Vanity Fair* contained simpler words than the others, it was given me first, so at the age of seven I was spelling out pages of the immortal Becky.^[3] My mother did not approve, but father laughed and protested that the child might as well begin with good things.

After mother's eighth and last baby, she lay ill for a year. The care of the children fell principally on my young shoulders. One day I found her crying.

^[1] a collection of biographies of famous Greeks and Romans, originally written in Latin during the late first century

^[2] a satirical and very popular British novel, first published in 1848

^[3] Becky Sharp, the heroine of *Vanity Fair*

“Mary,” she said, with a tenderness that was rare, “if I die, you must take care of all your brothers and sisters. You will be the only woman within eighteen miles.”

I was ten years old.

10 That night and many other nights I lay awake, trembling at the possibility of being left the only woman within eighteen miles.

But mother did not die. I must have been a sturdy child, for, with the little help father and his homestead partner could spare, I kept that home going until she was strong again.

Every fall the shoemaker made his rounds through the country, reaching our place last, for beyond us lay only untamed forest and wild beasts.

His visit thrilled us more than the arrival of any king today. We had been cut off from the world for months. The shoemaker brought news from neighbors eighteen, forty, sixty, even a hundred and fifty miles away. Usually he brought a few newspapers too, treasured afterward for months. He remained a royal guest, for many days, until all the family was shod.

Up to my tenth birthday, we could not afford the newspaper subscription. But after that, times were a little better, and the *Boston Transcript* began to come at irregular intervals. It formed our only tie with civilization, except for the occasional purely personal letter from “back home.”

By the time I was fourteen, three tremendous events had marked my life: sunlight through a windowpane, the log-rolling on the river when father added two rooms to our cabin, and the night I thought mother would die and leave me the only woman within eighteen miles.

15 But there was a fourth event that was the most tremendous. One night father hurried in without even waiting to unload or water his horses. He handed my mother a letter. Our Great-Aunt Martha had willed father her household goods and personal belongings and a modest sum that to us was a fortune. Someone back East “awaited his instructions.” Many discussions followed, but in the end my mother gained her way. Great-Aunt Martha’s household goods were sold at auction. Father, however, insisted that her “personal belongings” be shipped to Wisconsin.

After a long, long wait, one day father and I rose at daybreak and rode thirty-six miles in a springless wagon, over ranchmen’s roads to the nearest express station, returning with a trunk and two packing cases. It was a solemn moment when the first box was opened. Then mother gave a cry of delight. Sheets and bedspreads edged with lace! Real linen pillowcases with crocheted edgings. Soft woolen blankets and bright handmade quilts.

Two heavy, lustrous tablecloths and two dozen napkins, one white set hemmed, and one red-and-white, bordered with a soft fringe.

What the world calls wealth has come to me in after years. Nothing ever equaled in my eyes the priceless value of Great-Aunt Martha’s “personal belongings.”

I was in a seventh heaven of delight. My father picked up the books and began to read, paying no attention to our exclamations over dresses and ribbons, the boxful of laces, or the little shell-covered case holding a few ornaments in gold and silver and jet.

We women did not stop until we had explored every corner of that trunk and the two packing boxes. Then I picked up a napkin.

20 “What are these for?” I asked curiously.

My father slammed his book shut. I had never seen such a look on his face.

“How old are you, Mary?” he demanded suddenly.

I told him that I was going on fifteen.

“And you never saw a table napkin?”

25 His tone was bitter and accusing. I didn’t understand—how could I? Father began to talk, his words growing more and more bitter. Mother defended herself hotly. Today, I know that justice was on her side. But in that first adolescent self-consciousness, my sympathies were all with father. Mother had neglected us—she had not taught us to use table napkins! Becky Sharp used them. People in history used them.

From that time on, we used napkins and a tablecloth on Sundays.