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 Abigail Smith Adams: Letter to her husband, John Adams

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**Assignment:** In groups of no more than three, please read Abigail Adam’s letter to her husband, John Adams, from March 31st, 1776. As you read be sure to be annotate the text and take notes in the margins. When you are finished, please answer the questions that follow and be prepared to defend your answers to the class.

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| *Abigail Adams to John Adams:*Braintree March 31, 1776 1 I wish you would ever write me a letter half as long as I write you, and tell me, if you may, where your fleet are gone; what sort of defense Virginia can make against our common enemy; whether it is so situated as to make an able defense. Are not the gentry lords, and the common people vassals?  |
| Are they not like the uncivilized vassals Britain represents us to be? I hope their riflemen, who have shown themselves very savage and even blood- thirsty, are not a specimen of the generality of the people. I am willing to allow the colony great merit for having produced a Washington—but they have been shamefully duped by a Dunmore. 2 I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow-creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain, that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principle of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. 3 Do not you want to see Boston? I am fearful of the smallpox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our house and  |
| see what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the doctors of a regiment; very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few things which were left in it are all gone. I look upon it as a new acquisition of property—a property which one month ago I did not value at a single shilling, and would with pleasure have seen it in flames. 4 The town in general is left in a better state than we expected; more owing to a precipitate flight than any regard to the inhabitants; though some individuals discovered a sense of honor and justice, and have left the rent of  |
| the houses in which they were, for the owners, and the furniture unhurt, or, if damaged, sufficient to make it good. Others have committed abominable ravages. The mansion house of your President is safe, and the furniture unhurt while the house and furniture of the Solicitor General have fallen a  |
| prey to their own merciless party. Surely the very fiends feel a reverential  |
| awe for virtue and patriotism, whilst they detest the parricide and traitor. 5 I feel very differently at the approach of spring from what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether where we had tilled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own cottages or whether we should be driven from the seacoast to seek shelter in the wilderness but now we feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are returning to their deserted habitations.  |
| 6 Though we felicitate ourselves, we sympathize with those who are trembling lest the lot of Boston should be theirs. But they cannot be in similar circumstances unless pusillanimity and cowardice should take possession of them. They have time and warning given them to see the evil and shun it. 7 I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any  |
| laws in which we have no voice or representation. 8 That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex; regard us then as beings placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our  |
| happiness.  |

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| 9 I want to hear much oftener from you than I do. March 8th was the last date of any that I have yet had. You inquire of me whether I am making  |
| saltpetre. I have not yet attempted it, but after soap-making believe I shall make the experiment. I find as much as I can do to manufacture clothing for my family, which would else be naked. I know of but one person in this part of the town who has made any. That is Mr. Tertius Bass, as he is called, who has got very near a hundred-weight which has been found to be very good. I have heard of some others in the other parishes. Mr. Reed, of Weymouth, has been applied to, to go to Andover to the mills which are now at work, and he has gone.  |
| 10 I have lately seen a small manuscript describing the proportions of the various sorts of powder fit for cannon, small arms, and pistols. If it would be of any service your way I will get it transcribed and send it to you. Every one your friends sends regards, and all the little ones. Adieu.  |

***Part 2:*** Please answer the questions below—circle the best possible answer.

1) In paragraph 7 of the letter to her husband, Abigail Adams states that “all men would be tyrants” and in paragraph 8 she states that men are “naturally tyrannical.” Which statement defines the word **tyrannical** correctly using the context of the letter?

* 1. Tyrannical can be defined as formal and ceremonious, as indicated by the words “laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make.” (paragraph 7)
	2. Tyrannical can be defined as considerate and nurturing, as indicated by the words “more generous and favorable.” (paragraph 7)
	3. Tyrannical can be defined as overbearing and oppressive, as indicated by the words “cruelty and indignity with impunity.” (paragraph 8)\*
	4. Tyrannical can be defined as vigilant and possessive, as indicated by the words “under your protection.” (paragraph 8)

2) Why does Abigail Adams **most** likely use this specific language about men?

* 1. to show that she believes her husband likely will not be able to convince lawmakers to include rights for women as part of the fight for independence
	2. to emphasize that men have an obligation to ensure rights for women as dictated by a Supreme Being
	3. to indicate that she is grateful that John Adams is fighting for independence from a government that she believes treats people, especially women, unfairly
	4. to point out the similarities between the Colonies’ fight for freedom from unjust domination and women’s fight for freedom from unjust domination\*

3) How does paragraph 2 of Abigail Adam’s letter to her husband **most strongly** contribute to the text as a whole?

* 1. It introduces Abigail’s main argument for independence, which is discussed more thoroughly in later paragraphs.
	2. It identifies the religious principles Abigail believes the Colonies are fighting for, which are discussed more thoroughly in later paragraphs.
	3. It establishes Abigail’s belief that the colonies are losing the fight for independence because those fighting do not truly understand the importance of winning, which is discussed more thoroughly in later paragraphs.
	4. It demonstrates that Abigail is certain that the Colonies will be a strong country if they win the war, which is discussed more thoroughly in later paragraphs.

4) In which **two** paragraphs of the letter are the ideas in paragraph 2 discussed more thoroughly?

* 1. paragraph 3
	2. paragraph 4
	3. paragraph 5
	4. paragraph 6
	5. paragraph 7
	6. paragraph 8

5) Which two statements best summarize Abigail’s ideas regarding the occupation of Boston, based on the letter to her husband?

* 1. Disease wiped out many of the residents of Boston during the occupation of their town.
	2. Many of the homes that were occupied in Boston were left in better condition than expected.
	3. It is likely that another town in the Colonies will be similarly occupied in the near future.
	4. Only the President’s and solicitor general’s homes were left unharmed by those who occupied Boston.
	5. The people of Boston do not know whether or not they should return to their homes.
	6. As long as citizens of other towns take steps to avoid what led to the occupation in Boston, they should be safe from a similar fate.

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