

Impact Statement

Vera McClellan, Grade 11

***The Unacknowledged Mary Anning*, 2026**

Digital Art

Tallgrass Sudbury, Cook County, Illinois, USA

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

Growing up as a girl all too aware of the fact that I was being berated for being too loud while boys bit and screamed, I took notice of every offhand comment and indiscretion. As someone who would transition medically and socially, I see both sides of the coin, man and woman, seeing the ways in which the boys and men of this generation speak of women who dare to be anything but submissive to their presumed roles or refuse to be a mother, wife and servant to any meanwhile they themselves complain of the oppression men face at the hands of unjust underserved equality of the so-called inferior sex. Experiencing this stark contrast firsthand as a young person revealed a painful truth: the school system and the world hadn't suddenly changed; the moment a woman first became a semblance of a person instead of a womb attached to a doll. But the gendered lens through which people viewed my intellect had.

This instilled in me since birth a mentality where a person's authority and right to speak are still weighed against their gender identity, a historical erasure that dates back centuries. No one embodies the tragedy of this institutional refusal to see women as equals more profoundly than Mary Anning. Mary Anning is one of the most significant figures in the history of paleontology, yet history spent decades treating her as a mere footnote. Born into poverty in Lyme Regis, England, Anning possessed an extraordinary talent for discovering and identifying prehistoric remains, fundamentally shaping early scientific understanding of Earth's history. However, the rigid patriarchal structures of nineteenth-century science systematically erased her contributions. The systemic refusal to view women as intellectual equals not only robbed Anning of the professional recognition and financial security she rightfully deserved during her lifetime, but the institutional sexism of the era ultimately contributed to her tragic, premature death.

Anning's life was defined by both profound hardship and an almost miraculous resilience from its very beginning. Born in 1799, she grew up in a working-class dissenting family, meaning they faced both economic struggles and social marginalization. When she was just fifteen months old, a sudden lightning strike killed the neighbor holding her and two other women. Incredibly, baby Mary survived. Her childhood was further altered by her father, a

cabinetmaker who took Mary and her brother into the dangerous cliffs of Lyme Regis to look for "curiosities" to sell to tourists. When her father died unexpectedly in 1810, eleven-year-old Mary was left to help support her destitute family. What began as a desperate childhood hustle for survival quickly evolved into a self-taught scientific career.

Despite having no formal education, Anning developed an unparalleled expertise in anatomy and geology. She discovered the first complete Ichthyosaur skeleton when she was only twelve, followed by the first two Plesiosaur skeletons, and the first Pterodactyl skeleton found outside of Germany. She didn't just dig up these bones; she meticulously cleaned, sketched, and scientifically analyzed them. Eminent male scientists traveled from London to consult her, relying heavily on her sharp eye and deep anatomical knowledge to make sense of the burgeoning field of paleontology.

Yet, because of her gender and lower social class, the scientific establishment utterly refused to accept her as an equal. The Geological Society of London barred women from attending meetings, presenting papers, or becoming members. Consequently, wealthy male academics purchased Anning's groundbreaking discoveries, published academic papers about them, and took full credit. Her name was routinely scrubbed from the official scientific record. While men built their careers and reputations on her labor, Anning remained in Lyme Regis, struggling constantly to pay rent and keep food on the table. She was acutely aware of this exploitation, once writing bitterly to a friend, "The world has used me so unkindly, I fear it has made me suspicious of everyone."

This institutional sexism did more than just starve Anning of recognition; it directly contributed to her early death at the age of forty-seven. Because she was denied professional status and financial stability, Anning had to hunt for fossils well into her adulthood, enduring decades of grueling labor in freezing, wet conditions on treacherous mudslides. When she developed breast cancer in the mid-1840s, her lack of financial resources restricted her access to high-quality medical care. Furthermore, the male-dominated scientific community offered no institutional safety net for a dying woman they viewed as a mere vendor rather than a peer. By the time the Geological Society finally granted her a small annuity toward the very end of her illness, it was far too late. She died in pain and relative obscurity in 1847.

Inspired by a common thread by Thomas Blackshear, Mary is pictured shielding a candle's flame, the fire of everything Anning dedicated her life to, despite every attempt to extinguish the flame the refusal of society to let her enter as an equal still the flame remains lit her work continues. An ammonite acts as a halo, a divine surrounding in honor of Anning's dedication to her church and challenges what was known about creation. I hope this drawing depicts her and the strong and resilient Mary Anning's legacy should be remembered. Mary Anning was a visionary whose brilliance broke through the limitations of her era, but she could not break the glass ceiling of Victorian science. The refusal to see women as intellectual equals allowed wealthy male scientists to exploit her labor, erase her name, and leave her to a life of poverty

that ultimately shortened her lifespan. Recognizing Anning today ensures the continuation of women of the past being celebrated, creating a hopeful future in which it will not matter where a person came from man or woman, but what difference they made in their life and actions.

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Annings

<https://www.lymeregismuseum.co.uk/collection/mary-annings/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/26/did-lightning-strike-change-course-of-mary-annings-life>

<https://www.artera.ae/artworks/7e83df85-4596-4a54-8309-d6782b2e8efa>