Native Frenchman and liberal political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville was born in 1805 to an aristocratic family. He practiced law in Paris until 1831 when, curious about American democracy and disillusioned by the new constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe, Tocqueville and his friend, fellow French jurist Gustave de Beaumont, embarked for the United States. The two young men spent the majority of their sojourn in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In 1833, they published their much acclaimed findings, *The U.S. Penitentiary System and its Application in France*, a study based on interviews with prisoners and prison officials; influential among European prison reformers, the text won the French Academy’s Montyon Prize. Tocqueville also recorded his observations of American social customs and political institutions, culminating in his most famous work, *Democracy in America*, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840 and also winning the French Academy’s Montyon Prize. *Democracy in America* remains a mainstay of courses in 19th-century United States history. Prominent in French politics later in his life, Tocqueville died from complications from tuberculosis in 1859.

“Some Reflections on American Manners,” taken from *Democracy in America*, compares and contrasts the manners of democratic America with those of aristocratic society, surmising that the fluidity of the American class structure is not conducive to the establishment of a firm code of behavior for its citizens.

Nothing, at first sight, seems less important than the external formalities of human behavior; yet there is nothing to which men attach more importance. They can get used to anything except living in a society which does not share their manners. The influence of the social and political system on manners is therefore worth serious examination.

Manners, speaking generally, have their roots in mores; they are also sometimes the result of an arbitrary convention agreed between certain men. They are both natural and acquired.

When some see that, without dispute or effort of their own, they stand first in society; when they daily have great aims in view which keep them occupied, leaving details to others; and when they live surrounded by
wealth they have not acquired and do not fear to lose, one can see that they will feel a proud disdain for all the petty interests and material cares of life and that there will be a natural grandeur in their thoughts that will show in their words and manners.

In democracies there is generally little dignity of manner, as private life is very petty. Manners are often vulgar, as thoughts have small occasion to rise above preoccupation with domestic interests.

True dignity in manners consists in always taking one’s proper place, not too high and not too low; that is as much within the reach of a peasant as of a prince. In democracies everybody’s status seems doubtful; as a result, there is often pride but seldom dignity of manners. Moreover, manners are never well regulated or well thought out.

There is too much mobility in the population of a democracy for any definite group to be able to establish a code of behavior and see that it is observed. So everyone behaves more or less after his own fashion, and a certain incoherence of manners always prevails, because they conform to the feelings and ideas of each individual rather than to an ideal example provided for everyone to imitate.

In any case, this is much more noticeable when an aristocracy has just fallen than when it has long been destroyed.

New political institutions and new mores then bring together in the same places men still vastly different in education and habits and compel them to a life in common; this constantly leads to the most ill-assorted juxtapositions. There is still some memory of the former strict code of politeness, but no one knows quite what it said or where to find it. Men have lost the common standard of manners but have not yet resolved to do without it, so each individual tries to shape, out of the ruins of former customs, some rule, however arbitrary and variable. Hence manners have neither the regularity and dignity frequent in aristocracies nor the qualities of simplicity and freedom which one sometimes finds in democracies; they are both constrained and casual.

But this is not a normal state of things.

When equality is complete and old-established, all men, having roughly the same ideas and doing roughly the same things, do not need to come to an understanding or to copy each other in order to behave and talk in the same way; one sees a lot of petty variations in their manners but no great differences. They are never exactly alike, since they do not copy one pattern; they are never very unlike, because they have the same social condition. At first sight one might be inclined to say that the manners of all Americans are exactly alike, and it is only on close inspection that one sees all the variations among them.

The English make game of American manners, but it is odd that most of those responsible for those comic descriptions belong themselves to
the English middle classes, and the cap fits them very well too. So these ruthless critics generally themselves illustrate just what they criticize in America; they do not notice that they are abusing themselves, to the great delight of their own aristocracy.

Nothing does democracy more harm than its outward forms of behavior; many who could tolerate its vices cannot put up with its manners.

But I will not admit that there is nothing to praise in democratic manners.

In aristocracies, all within reach of the ruling class are at pains to imitate it, and very absurd and insipid imitations result. Democracies, with no models of high breeding before them, at least escape the necessity of daily looking at bad copies thereof.

In democracies manners are never so refined as among aristocracies, but they are also never so coarse. One misses both the rude words of the mob and the elegant and choice phrases of the high nobility. There is much triviality of manner, but nothing brutal or degraded.

I have already said that a precise code of behavior cannot take shape in democracies. That has its inconveniences and its advantages. In aristocracies rules of propriety impose the same demeanor on all, making every member of the same class seem alike in spite of personal characteristics; they bedizen and conceal nature. Democratic manners are neither so well thought out nor so regular, but they often are more sincere. They form, as it were, a thin, transparent veil through which the real feelings and personal thoughts of each man can be easily seen. Hence there is frequently an intimate connection between the form and the substance of behavior; we see a less decorative picture, but one truer to life. One may put the point this way: democracy imposes no particular manners, but in a sense prevents them from having manners at all.

Sometimes the feelings, passions, virtues, and vices of an aristocracy may reappear in a democracy, but its manners never. They are lost and vanish past return when the democratic revolution is completed. It would seem that nothing is more lasting than the manners of an aristocratic class, for it preserves them for some time after losing property and power, nor more fragile, for as soon as they have gone, no trace of them is left, and it is even difficult to discover what they once were when they have ceased to exist. A change in the state of society works this marvel, and a few generations are enough to bring it about.

The principal characteristics of the aristocracy remain engraved in history after its destruction, but the slight and delicate forms of its manners are lost to memory almost immediately after its fall. No one can imagine them when they are no longer seen. Their disappearance is unnoted and unfelt. For the heart needs an apprenticeship of custom and education to appreciate the refined pleasure derived from distinguished and fastidious manners; once the habit is lost, the taste for them easily goes too.
Thus, not only are democratic peoples unable to have aristocratic manners, but they cannot even conceive or desire them. As they cannot imagine them, from their point of view it is as if they had never existed.

One should not attach too much importance to this loss, but it is permissible to regret it.

I know it has happened that the same men have had very distinguished manners and very vulgar feelings; the inner life of courts has shown well enough what grand appearances may conceal the meanest hearts. But though the manners of an aristocracy by no means create virtue, they may add grace to virtue itself. It was no ordinary sight to see a numerous and powerful class whose every gesture seemed to show a constant and natural dignity of feeling and thought, an ordered refinement of taste and urbanity of manners.

The manners of the aristocracy created a fine illusion about human nature; though the picture was often deceptive, it was yet a noble satisfaction to look on it.