

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): Ain't I A Woman?

Delivered 1851, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

Questions

1. Which two groups does Truth refer to in the first paragraph?
2. What rights are those groups fighting for?
3. Why do you believe the man she is referring to in the second paragraph uses the examples that women need special treatment?
4. Why does she say "Ain't I a woman"?
5. How many children has Truth had?
6. In the third paragraph she blasts the notion that intelligence and rights are linked; why do you believe she felt that was important to point out?
7. How does she prove that women are entitled to equal rights in the 4th paragraph?
8. What example does she use to close her argument in the 5th paragraph?
9. Summarize her arguments in your own words as much as possible.

Answers

1. Negroes in the south and women in the north.
2. Voting
3. He portrays women as a weaker sex, a frequent argument made against giving women the right to vote.
4. Because she has never gotten that special treatment and yet she is definitely a female; she is trying to point out the absurdity that gender is a cause for special treatment.
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6. Because she is pointing out that fairness is of utmost importance, regardless of one's intellect.
7. Because Jesus was created with God and Mary, no human males were involved; therefore women are powerful and deserve equal treatment.
8. Eve, the first woman according to Christianity, had enough power as a single woman to alter the future of humanity; therefore a group of women that get together ought to be able to fix the imbalance between the sexes.
9. Answers will vary but ought to include the ideas that she rejects that women should be treated differently and more gently, that in her experience she has never been treated that way and she's turned out fine, and that women are in fact quite powerful as evidenced in her Christian faith.

First recorded version of the speech:

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart – why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, – for we can't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

Questions

1. How does Truth compare herself to a man?
2. Why does she claim that men shouldn't fear women getting rights?
3. How will men feel if they give women rights?
4. What example does she cite from the Bible?
5. How does she use the birth of Jesus to prove her point?
6. Does she seem angry or bitter towards men in the last sentence? Why or why not?
7. Compare the tone of this speech to the first; is the message the same? Why or why not?
8. Is the dialect the same or different? How?

Answers

1. She has done all of the same jobs and labor that men do, like plowing, reaping, etc
2. Because women have a smaller "pint" so to speak, in other words they will never have as many rights as a man even if they are given suffrage.
3. Better
4. Eve brought humankind down, and she was simply one person.
5. Men had no place in that event, according to the Bible, it was God and Mary.
6. No she seems to empathize that they are in a tough position.
7. Answers will vary but ought to address the fact that the famous "Ain't I a Woman" phrase is never even mentioned in the second version. She does argue however that men and women are equal and that in fact if you analyze Eve and Jesus women might actually be more powerful.
8. The dialect of the first version is southern; she was born and raised in New York and spoke only Dutch as a young child.