“Ain’t I a Woman?”

By Sojourner Truth

May 28-29, 1851

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) was an African-American women’s rights activist and abolitionist. Truth was born into slavery, but escaped to freedom in 1826. “Ain’t I a Woman?” is her most famous speech. She delivered it without preparation at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. As you read, pay attention to the methods Truth uses to build her argument.

[1] “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 of 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 could 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 them 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? [Intellect, somebody whispers] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negro’s 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.

[5] If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone¹, 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.”

¹ Here Truth is referencing Eve, from the Book of Genesis, who takes a bite of fruit from the forbidden tree, and shares that fruit with Adam. Both Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden by God, which is what Truth alludes to when she says the first woman “turn[ed] the world upside down.”
Text-Based Questions: “Ain’t I A Woman?”

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes Sojourner Truth’s argument in “Ain’t I A Woman?”
   a. Women are superior to men.
   b. All women deserve the same rights as all men.
   c. The black community should begin fighting for women’s rights.
   d. Black women deserve the same rights as white women.

2. PART B: Copy a piece of evidence from the speech that supports your answer to Part A.
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

3. Sojourner Truth most likely included paragraph 2 in order to:
   a. Illustrate the injustices against black women in the South.
   b. Show that women need help from men.
   c. Emphasize how slavery dehumanizes people.
   d. Demonstrate how polite men behave in the South.

4. Explain the following line from paragraph 3: “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?”
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

5. PART A: Which of the following best describes Truth’s tone in “Ain’t I A Woman?”
   a. Defensive
   b. Encouraging
   c. Demanding
   d. Serene

6. PART B: Copy a sentence from the speech that supports your answer to Part A.
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
7. What is the effect of repetition in this speech? Explain your answer.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

8. As it is used in paragraph 6, “obliged” most nearly means:
   a. thankful
   b. in need of
   c. morally bound to an action
   d. disappointed
Discussion Questions: “Ain’t I A Woman?”

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What is Sojourner Truth’s argument? How does she make her argument? Explain your answer.

2. How do you think the audience responded to this speech at the time it was delivered? Explain your answer.

3. What can you conclude about the roles of men and women in the 1850s based on this speech?

4. Why do you think this speech became so famous? How will Sojourner Truth be remembered in history? Explain your answer.
For Teachers

Suggested Text Pairings:

“Learning to Read” by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper (Poem)
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was the child of free African American parents. She attended the Academy for Negro Youth until she was 13 years old. In her adult life, Harper helped slaves escape through the Underground Railroad (a network of routes and safe houses used by slaves in the 19th century) and wrote for anti-slavery newspapers. In “Learning to Read” (1872) Harper describes what it was like to have been discouraged from learning how to read. Pair “Ain’t I A Woman” with “Learning to Read” to build historical context and to continue discussing the theme of prejudice and discrimination in America. Find “Learning to Read” at CommonLit.org. (Prejudice & Discrimination ➔ What are the effects of prejudice and discrimination? ➔ 5th-6th Grade)

Address to Congress on Women’s Suffrage by Carrie Chapman Catt (Speech)
Until the early 20th century, women in America were denied suffrage (the right to vote) in political elections. It wasn’t until June 4, 1919 that Congress passed the 19th Amendment, which granted women their right to vote. Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) campaigned for the 19th Amendment, and was considered a leader among women’s suffrage. In the following address to Congress, Catt argues for the rights of women. Pair “Ain’t I A Woman” with “Address to Congress on Women’s Suffrage” and ask students to compare how each speaker builds her case to advocate for social change. Find “Address to Congress on Women’s Suffrage” at CommonLit.org. (Men & Women ➔ How do we define the roles of men and women? ➔ 9th-10th Grade)

Answer Key for Text-Based Questions:

1. B
2. Answers will vary.
3. A
4. Answers will vary.
5. A
6. Answers will vary
7. Answers will vary
8. C