“Ain’t I a Woman?”
*Sojourner Truth*

**Biographical Sketch:**

Sojourner Truth was born in 1797 as a slave in Hurley, New York named Isabella Baumfree. At the age of nine, she was then separated from her parents, James and Betsy, when she was sold for one hundred dollars. Raised speaking Dutch, Baumfree was beaten regularly for not understanding her new English-speaking masters until she was sold twice more, first to a fisherman for $105 and then to Mr. John J. Dumont in 1810. It was during her time with Dumont that she “married” (as it was not legally recognized) a fellow slave, Thomas, and had five children.

When Baumfree was 30 years old, the state of New York passed a bill known as the Emancipation Act of 1827 which stated that all blacks would be free on July 4th of that year, if they were born before July 4, 1799. After initially telling her that she would go free on this date, Dumont changed his mind when the day came, refusing to free her because of her crippled hand and inability to find work. Soon after, she fled for refuge to nearby Isaac Van Wagener, who did not support the establishment of slavery. Van Wagener promptly paid Dumont $20 so that Baumfree could work for him for one year.

Shortly after her freedom, Baumfree began to exhibit her strong spirit and courage by becoming the first black woman to sue a white man and win when she discovered that her son had been sold South illegally. Then, witnessing the economic depression of the 1830s, the rising class gap, and the disadvantages of the poor, she determined that she was called by God to travel and speak the truth. On June 1, 1843, she left New York with a new name of Sojourner Truth and dedicated her life to reform, seeking equal rights as well as women’s rights. After decades as a much sought-after orator for the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements, Truth died on November 26, 1883 in Battle Creek, Michigan.

**Contextual Background:**

In 1851, a Women’s Rights Convention was held at a local church in Akron, Ohio with the primary interest of women’s suffrage. According to reports, Truth silently attended the first day, and it was not until the second day that she rose to the podium after hearing ministers deny the rights of women, citing the differences between the natures of men and women as well as biblical arguments for male superiority.

The first reports of this speech were published by the *New York Tribune* and *The Liberator* in 1851, shortly after she spoke at the convention. However, both accounts were brief and not full transcriptions. The first complete record was published two years
later in 1853 in the Anti-Slavery Bugel. This account was recorded by Marius Robinson, an abolitionist who acted as the recording secretary at the convention. The most popular version was recorded twelve years later in 1863 by Frances Gage, which then became known as “Ain’t I a Woman?”

“Ain’t I a Woman?”:

Truth responds to four arguments provided by the ministers arguing against women’s suffrage:

1) Women are weak. According to Truth, she has never depended on male chivalry to survive. Rather, she has proven herself just as strong and capable. She points to her arms to show the muscle and explains how she has worked hard in the fields and endured many sufferings just as well as any man could. In fact, as a mother losing her children to slavery, she has shown her strength in the ability to endure such extreme grief.

2) Men are intellectually superior. Truth seems to be mocking the idea of women lacking intellect when she points to her head as if she does not know the very word “intellect.” However, she argues that even if some people are more capable than others, this does not mean that the other is less deserving of rights. Instead, those in superior positions should be charitable and help those beneath them, giving them their just due.

3) Jesus was a man. Truth points out that Christ came from God and woman, not man. Therefore, man cannot claim superiority, because although Christ was man, a woman played just as essential of a role by bringing him into the world.

4) The first woman was a sinner. Rather than seeing this as a weakness (as the ministers would have connected this to their first argument), Truth turns it into a sign of strength. Woman was strong enough to unhinge all of God’s created order. If one woman is capable of this, cannot many women aid in restoring God’s order?

Discussion Questions:

1) Filling in from the context of this speech, what arguments do you think Truth is responding to and refuting? How does Truth refute implied definitions of womanhood? What fallacies does Truth point out in arguments against women’s rights? List all of the reasons Truth believes that women should have equal rights.

2) What does Truth say about the differences between men and women in paragraph two? Do you agree with her or her opponents with how women should be treated? Are women just as strong as men? Why is it significant that Sojourner Truth saw her children sold off to slavery?
3) What does Truth say about intellect in paragraph three? Do you agree with her? What imagery does she use to make her point?

4) How does Truth use biblical arguments in paragraphs four and five? What does she mean about women being able to turn the world “right side up”? How does Truth view a world set in proper order once again?

5) How does this reading connect to the section “Self and Community” and “Diversity and the Other”? In your opinion, are there differences between men and women, and if so, what are they? Does this affect the rights each should have within their community?

6) Considering the controversy over this text, do you think it was changed? If so, why would someone make those changes? If not, why would this rumor start? Would this claim discredit the text at all or affect the message of the text?

**Possible Activities:**

Write a fictional speech that would have been delivered by one of the ministers Truth is responding to in “Ain’t I a Woman?” What position would they hold and what arguments would they provide?

How might her opponents respond to Truth’s speech? Separate into two groups, placing yourself in the context of the Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, and hold a mock debate on women’s rights.

**Connections to Other Readings:**

Plato (The Allegory of the Cave), Lakoff and Johnson, Bohm, Plato (Apology), Winter, Mill, Jefferson, Emerson, Jie, Myers, Loury, McIntosh, hooks, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Tillich, King, Jr., and Camus

Examples of connections include:

Bohm: The previous speakers would have blocks concerning their views on women; however, if they put these blocks aside to listen to Truth’s speech, they could come to a new understanding or truth.

Plato (Allegory of the Cave and Apology): Just as Socrates was arguing against the fallacies of his opponents and Plato uses a metaphor to open the eyes of his readers, these readings all show how the status-quo must be questioned in order to progress and come closer to truth.

Winter: People can read and understand scripture differently. With the ministers using the Bible to support their arguments against women’s suffrage, Truth uses the same scripture to prove them wrong. Rather than a literal reading of the text, people can interpret and come to their own understanding of the truth.
Loury: Just as Loury explains how we should not find our identity in social understandings of race, Truth redefines the common definitions of womanhood, using her own unique human experiences.

Tillich: What is Truth’s faith? Looking at her life, is it an ultimate concern and centered act? Should it be?

Jefferson, King, Jr, and UDHR: Are equal or inalienable rights just for men? What rights should women have and why?

Camus: Rather than continuing to push the rock up the hill, accepting her fate with a positive attitude, Truth decides to defy this fate and turn the world “right side up” again.

**Online Resources**

Sojourner Truth
[http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/](http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/)

Apologetics Press, “The Biblical View of Women”

*The Good Wife’s Guide* reenactment video
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DB5TOs5Eyl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DB5TOs5Eyl)

Controversy resources:

**Potential Essay Questions:**

What are your beliefs about gender equality and rights? Like Sojourner Truth, come up with your arguments and support them with clear evidence (whether religious, social, or political).

Is sexism alive today? In 21st century American society, are we still sexist toward women? Or have we become more sexist towards men? Or have we achieved complete equality between the sexes? Use your own life and surroundings as well as various forms of media (advertisements, tv shows, the news) to support your claim.

**Note:**
There is now a controversial claim that Gage’s record does not strictly adhere to what Truth actually said that day. According to this claim, there are several discrepancies to consider: 1) Gage changed Truth’s language into that of a typical Southern slave, although Truth was from the North and for the first nine years of her life only spoke Dutch; 2) Gage added the claim to bear the lash as well as a man; 3) Gage added the claim that no man treated her as a lady (helping her into carriages and over puddles); 4) Gage added the claim that most of her 13 children were sold into slavery, when all records show that Truth had 5 children, one of which was sold from her into slavery; and 5) Gage added to the speech that the environment was initially hostile, while she previously wrote of the positive and friendly reception.

*There is no clear evidence to back up this claim; however, it’s interesting in that it has become a topic of debate.*