

# Ain't I a Woman?



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOJOURNER TRUTH

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in 1797 as Isabella Baumfree (sometimes spelled “Bomfree”). She was raised in a Dutch-speaking town in Ulster County, New York, and she had the first of her five children (not 13, as some sources claim), in 1815. In 1827, she and her infant daughter fled slavery and took shelter with an abolitionist family who lived nearby. The family bought Truth and two of her children out of slavery. Truth moved to New York City, where she became devoutly religious and renamed herself Sojourner Truth, claiming that the Holy Spirit had encouraged her to always preach the truth. But as Truth began speaking at increasingly prominent venues around the United States on behalf of the abolitionist and women’s rights movements, she found herself disappointed by the rhetoric of abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, who believed Black men should receive the right to vote before Black women, and many religious authorities of her era. In the 1850s, Truth moved to Michigan, where three of her daughters were living. She remained active in the intertwined fights for abolition and suffrage for all. A prolific speaker, many of Truth’s landmark speeches (most notably “Ain’t I a Woman?”) have been rewritten and, in many historians’ views, corrupted through said rewrites, over time. Nevertheless, Sojourner Truth remains an enduring icon of the abolitionist movement as well as the first wave of feminism in the U.S. Many monuments and buildings across the United States—most notably in Michigan, Ohio, and New York—have been erected and named in her honor.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s in the United States, a women’s rights movements took hold of the nation. Now referred to as the first wave of feminism, this movement was largely led by white women. Some of these women were abolitionists, but many of them had no interest in fighting to secure equal rights for non-white women—they feared that the women’s rights movement would attract greater scorn and opposition if it became an interracial one. Sojourner Truth’s speech at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, was a landmark one—while many such conventions were being held all over the country, not all of them allowed Black women to speak and make their voices heard.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” is one of many famous feminist addresses throughout United States history. Elizabeth

Cady Stanton’s “Address on Woman’s Rights,” which was delivered in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York, is a long speech arguing that women are intellectually, morally, and even physically equal to men—and in many ways, even superior to their male counterparts. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” is in conversation with Stanton’s address. Both speeches invoke themes of religious hypocrisy, and both point to the biblical story of Adam and Eve from the Book of Genesis in order to argue that women have been unfairly maligned throughout history because of Eve’s perceived “original sin”—when, in fact, Eve’s storied actions weren’t inherently sinful at all. Other significant speeches by first-wave feminists include Lucretia Mott’s 1854 speech “Why Should Not Woman Seek to Be a Reformer?” and Lucy Stone’s 1855 address “Disappointment is the Lot of Women.”

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Ain’t I a Woman?”
- **When Written:** Early 1850s
- **When Published:** First delivered at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in May of 1851
- **Literary Period:** First-Wave Feminism
- **Genre:** Persuasive Speech, Abolitionist Address
- **Setting:** Akron, Ohio
- **Climax:** Sojourner Truth repeats the refrain “and ain’t I a woman?” as she relays horrific tales of enslavement, brutality, and loss.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, slavery, sexism, religious hypocrisy, selfish men
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Rewritten.** The speech that many recognize today as “Ain’t I a Woman?” is, in fact, likely not the original speech Sojourner Truth delivered. Many scholars and historians now believe that the speech Truth gave at the Akron convention didn’t even contain the phrase “ain’t I a woman?” at all. Instead, historians believe that the version of the address in circulation today was rewritten by white feminist Frances Gage using an offensive, stereotypical Southern dialect that Truth—who never even lived in the South and who spoke low Dutch for most of her youth—would not have used. Gage also included erroneous facts about Truth’s life—Truth had five children, not 13, for instance.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In her brief but powerful speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” delivered at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851, Black abolitionist and feminist activist Sojourner Truth urgently describes the need for equal rights for women in the United States. Truth’s speech was one of the first to highlight the need for intersectional rights for Black men and women. Throughout “Ain’t I a Woman?” Truth uses raw, urgent language to describe the pain and suffering she endured as a formerly enslaved woman in order to point out the grave injustices being perpetrated against Black men and women all over the country.

Truth’s speech was revolutionary for its time: it spoke unapologetically about the horrors of slavery, the corruption of the Christian religious establishment in the U.S., and the hypocrisy of those who would confer the rights to suffrage and property ownership unto white women, but not Black women. While only a few paragraphs long, Truth’s speech managed to pointedly address many of the most urgent issues in American society at the time.



## CHARACTERS

**Sojourner Truth** – Sojourner Truth was an American abolitionist and women’s rights activist. Born into slavery in Ulster County, New York, around 1797, Truth (born Isabella Baumfree) later made her way to freedom in 1826 after an abolitionist family bought her and her infant daughter out of slavery. In 1843, she adopted the name Sojourner Truth for the first time and began traveling the United States, giving speeches about the urgency of the abolition and women’s rights movement. There was some crossover between the two movements—but many white first-wave feminists did not feel too concerned with the issue of abolition. In her landmark speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Truth pointed out the racism that existed within the women’s rights movement of her day; the hypocrisy of men who sought to keep women out of the public sphere; and the corruption of the Christian Church, which often used harmful rhetoric to justify the mistreatment and exclusion of women of all races. Truth’s speech, though brief, became famous for its raw emotionality and its critique of the Church. While historians generally agree that the version of the speech that is best-known today was heavily edited by the white feminist Frances Gage, Truth’s speech has nonetheless become a vital piece of feminist history and one of the most important pieces of rhetoric from the first wave of feminism in the United States. By invoking poignant symbols and imagery (such as the fabled “**thirteen children**” she bore while enslaved, a fact that historians have since debunked and now attribute to Gage’s flawed transcript of the speech), Truth communicates the profound injustices that American women were facing. Truth called attention to the need for an intersectional

feminism (though she did not use those words) that recognized the equality of women of all races and demanded abolition, suffrage, and reparations for enslaved Black women.

**The Little Man in Black** – At one point in her speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” abolitionist and feminist activist Sojourner Truth makes reference to “that little man in black there”—a man who claims that “women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman.” The man whom Truth is referring to is likely a clergyman, given that reverends, priests, and other Christian clergymen traditionally wear black garments. It’s likely that Truth isn’t talking about a particular “little man in black” but is instead referring to all the clergymen who use religious doctrine as an excuse to subjugate and sideline women of all races throughout the United States. Sojourner Truth’s contempt for people who sought to transform Christian doctrine into a weapon against women seeking equality is clear from her reference to the smallness of these men. She isn’t speaking of their physical stature, but rather the smallness of their minds and hearts as they seek to malign and discredit the movement for women’s equality.

**Jesus Christ** – Christianity holds that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and the Savior of mankind from sin. Born to a human woman, Mary, Christ preached love, equality, and understanding, and amassed a large following that made him a liability to the Roman government occupying Palestine. Jesus was betrayed by one of his 12 apostles and was then crucified—but, according to the Bible, he rose from the dead days later to prove to his followers that he was the son of God. In her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” Sojourner Truth invokes the figure of Christ as she claims that in all her suffering as an enslaved woman, Christ was the only one who listened to her cries of grief. But Christ, Truth asserts, has been used for ill means by Christian religious leaders across the U.S. She states that preachers and reverends claim that women can’t have the same rights as men because Christ was not a woman—but Truth provocatively points out, at a key moment in her speech, that Christ was the creation of God and a human woman, and thus men had nothing to do with the creation of Christ. Additionally, Christ’s Last Supper—which he attended along with his 12 apostles, creating a total of 13—has a symbolic connection to the “**thirteen children**” Truth speaks of having birthed into slavery.

**Eve** – According to the biblical Book of Genesis, Eve was the first woman. God created her from Adam’s rib, intending for her to be Adam’s companion in the Garden of Eden. But the serpent tempted Eve to eat a forbidden apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve then offered the fruit to Adam, who ate it. God had told the two of them not to eat from the tree—and once they did, he angrily cast them out of the garden forever. In her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” Sojourner Truth invokes Eve to strengthen her argument in favor of equal rights for all women. Truth claims that Eve was strong enough

to “turn the world upside down”—and so, by that logic, the women fighting for abolition and equal rights during Sojourner’s day should be able to “get it right side up again.” Truth suggests that Eve’s deeds don’t speak to women’s fallibility, sinfulness, or simpleness, as religious leaders often used her story to claim they did. Instead, Truth presents Eve as a powerful woman whose actions resulted in a reordering of the world. So in Truth’s estimation, women are strong and powerful enough to reorder the world once again. Truth’s invocation of Eve speaks to the speech’s central themes of men’s hypocrisy and religion as an excuse for the subjugation of women.

## TERMS

**Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851** – The “Woman’s Rights Convention” held in Akron, Ohio in 1851 took place just a few years after the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which many consider to be the landmark convention on women’s rights in the U.S. Over the course of the two-day convention, Ohio men and women gave speeches, sang songs, and read poems in support of women’s rights to education, suffrage, and equality more generally. **Sojourner Truth’s** speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” is arguably the most famous and enduring address from the convention. The attendees ultimately reached a number of conclusions about the sorry state of women’s rights in the United States at the time, asserting that the distinction between the sexes was “unjust,” and that it was furthered by “religious instructors” around the nation. The leaders of the convention ultimately concluded that women needed to form “Labor Partnerships” in order to demand fair compensation for their work, demand a constitutional amendment conferring equal rights to men and women, and form District Societies throughout the state in order to coordinate collective actions in the fight for women’s rights.

**Seneca Falls Convention** – The Seneca Falls Convention, held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, was the world’s first women’s rights convention.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### RACISM IN THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Sojourner Truth’s landmark speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” argued for equal rights for women in the

United States—but it also highlighted the racism that permeated the U.S.’s women’s right movement. The speech’s central repeated refrain, “ain’t I a woman?” implicitly references the fact that white women within the movement largely excluded Black women from the fight for equal rights. By calling attention to how U.S. society treated Black women differently from white women, Sojourner Truth argued that the women’s rights movement would not be a success until all women were allowed to participate in it equally.

Through the repeated refrain “ain’t I a woman?” Truth points out the double standards and racism that define her era’s movement for women’s rights. As Truth delivers her brief but powerful speech, she relays painful anecdotes both from her life as a formerly enslaved woman and from her present life as a free individual fighting for abolition and women’s rights. The commonality between these two different parts of Truth’s life is that she’s always excluded from being treated like a woman because of the color of her skin—and she’s always found herself frustrated and bewildered as she wonders, “ain’t I a woman?” Men pamper and coddle the white women around them, helping them into carriages and over mud-puddles—but they never do such things for Truth, failing to recognize her as a woman because she is Black. “Ain’t I a woman?” she asks rhetorically, suggesting that if men won’t recognize her as a woman, the white women they influence won’t see Truth as a woman, either.

While Truth was enslaved, she worked more than Black men who were also enslaved, suffered “the lash” the same as they did, and still managed to survive. Under slavery, she wasn’t recognized as a woman or treated with the care a woman should ideally be shown. If Truth couldn’t be recognized as a woman after suffering great pain under slavery, and she couldn’t be recognized as a woman trying to make her way in the world as a free person, only one thing was possible: her Blackness was keeping her from being seen as worthy of a place in the fight for women’s issues. Now that Truth is free, the people around her—those who work with her in the struggle for equal rights as well as those who oppose her—talk about “this thing in the head”: intellect. The implication is that because Truth is Black, people assume not only is she unworthy of the special treatment women receive in society—they also assume she is intellectually inferior to white women. But a person’s intellect, Truth points out, has nothing to do with whether they’re afforded rights.

Truth suggests that until all women, regardless of race, are recognized as women and allowed to participate in the women’s rights movement as equals, the movement as a whole will suffer. If Eve—who was just one woman—managed to topple the world through the act of original sin (i.e., introducing sin into the world by disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit), then “these women together ought to be able to turn [the world] right side up again.” Here, Truth is implying that if one

woman could forever change the world like the Bible shows that Eve did, then a whole group of women ought to be able to affect the same kind of monumental change. But because Truth has pointed out the flaws in the women's right and called out the racism that Black women within the movement are facing, her words have a deeper implication. Truth implies that the movement isn't yet as powerful as it could be. "These women together" at the forefront of the movement aren't making the change they should be making, she's implying, because they're not really together—they're excluding Black women from their cause and hindering their own strength.

Truth ends her speech by thanking her audience for listening to her and stating that "old Sojourner" has "nothing more to say." Her weariness is palpable in this moment—she knows that her audience has stood there and listened to her, but she isn't confident that they've really heard her. She knows that white women in the movement discount the voices and experiences of Black women—and so her departure from the stage isn't hopeful and confident but rather exhausted and self-effacing. Sojourner's mild tone toward the end of her speech reveals her disappointment, perhaps, with how the women's movement has chosen to stymie itself through exclusion rather than open itself up to all women and thus greatly increase its strength and power.



### MEN, PATERNALISM, AND HYPOCRISY

Throughout her speech "Ain't I a Woman?" Sojourner Truth repeatedly calls attention to the tension, paternalism, and hypocrisy that defined

relations between men and women in the mid-19th century in the United States. Men of the time claimed that women were too dull, fragile, or inexperienced to have roles in the public sphere or have access to suffrage (the right to vote). But throughout her groundbreaking speech, Truth called out men's hypocritical treatment of women, highlighting the immense burdens and grief that women—especially Black women—were expected to bear quietly and gracefully. Truth argued that men of her era were hypocrites whose ideas were baseless when it came to their smallminded, patronizing ideals about what women were capable of.

Early on in her speech, Truth points out the selfishness and paternalism of men who claim that women should "have the best" while doing very little to help women achieve equal rights. Between Black people in the South fighting for equality and women in the North seeking the same thing, Truth comically predicts in the first lines of her speech that white men across the U.S. will soon find themselves "in a fix." Here, she's pointing out the changing social organization of the U.S. and suggesting to her audience that white men aren't fully invested in the women's rights movement. Not only are they not fully on board—they're vexed by the idea that women could soon share their social spaces and have the same rights that they do.

These same men, Truth goes on to suggest, say that women should be helped into their carriages, carried over muddy ditches, and given "the best place everywhere." Here, she's suggesting that men want to infantilize women and treat them like they can't handle the world. They do this, she's suggesting, to imply that women cannot in fact handle the public sphere and the responsibilities that come with it. They don't actually want women to have the "best" of everything—they want to keep women sheltered and sequestered from mainstream society. But Truth points out that "nobody ever helps [her] into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives [her] any best place." By calling attention to how she isn't treated like other women—namely, like white women—Truth is further illustrating how men aren't actually invested in women securing rights. They especially don't want Black women (or Black men, for that matter) to encroach on their social territory and undermine the superiority they've enjoyed in American society for so long.

Truth then underscores the harsh realities of enslavement, loss, grief, and/or solitude that women must suffer while the men around them do little to aid in their plight. Men have no problem helping women step over mud-puddles on the street—but when it comes to the cause of women's rights or abolition, they're not willing to do much to help. Truth describes her traumatic experiences as a formerly enslaved woman, detailing the brutal labor, painful whippings, and emotional losses she suffered under slavery. "And ain't I a woman?" Truth asks after detailing each trauma. Here, she's saying that she's a woman, too—and that if men were actually invested in helping women, they wouldn't just be lifting them over puddles. Women all over the U.S., Truth implies, are suffering grievous losses and unbearable abuse every day—but men, through their silence and inaction, allow women to endure these things. In Truth's view, men are not just selfish or paternalistic, but hypocritical as well. They claim to want to help give women the best of everything—but they ignore the everyday suffering that women all over their country are going through. If men really wanted to help, she's suggesting, they'd use their social power to do something to advance the cause of equal rights for all women.

By pointing out the hypocrisy, paternalism, and inaction of the men around her, Truth suggests that men know nothing about (and care very little for) the women whose fates they seek to determine. All women are asking, Truth states, is for men to "let them" put the world "right side up" by ensuring equal rights for all. But men won't even grant women their attention or help—instead, they're forcing women to struggle and suffer as the long fight for equal rights marches on. Not only are men uninvested in the rights of women, Truth suggests—white men in the U.S. actively don't want women and Black people to secure the same rights that they enjoy. Truth implies that white men in the U.S. feel there isn't enough power to go around. Even though they possess a metaphorical "quart" of power

when women and Black people just want a “pint,” men feel that any lessening of their own share of power is a threat. By highlighting men’s reticence to invest in the women’s rights movement, Sojourner Truth is pointing out how men maintain their power through hypocrisy, paternalism, and feigned ignorance of the struggles that women and Black people face every day.



## CHRISTIANITY AS AN EXCUSE FOR OPPRESSION

At the climax of her 1851 speech advocating for Black women’s rights, Sojourner Truth states that “That little man in black there [...] says women can’t have as much rights as men.” Here, Truth is pointing out how clergymen of her era (who traditionally wore black) often use religion to justify women’s ongoing oppression and exclusion from the public sphere. But over the course of her speech, Truth points out how cruel and wrong it is to use religion to justify and prolong women’s subjugation. Truth argues that devout Christians in the United States—especially clergymen—pointedly used their religion to excuse the ongoing oppression of women and Black people.

Truth herself was a devout Christian—and as such, she uses her speech to point out the flaws in how the Church speaks about and treats women of her era, especially enslaved Black women. Truth speaks about crying out in grief after the loss of several of her own children—and she says that the only one to hear her lament was Jesus Christ. This illustrates Truth’s faith and reliance upon Christ in a time of need, suggesting that she is truly devout and has close connection with him. This gives Truth firm ground to stand on as she begins criticizing the ill-intended Church just a few lines later. Truth suddenly and humorously pivots to an attack on “that little man in black” who always states that “women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman.” Here, Truth is condemning American clergymen—the ubiquitous “little man in black”—for mistreating and ignoring the women who turn to their faith in their most desperate hours of need. Through these two moments, Truth is implying that the Church has long ignored women’s struggles—even going so far as to corrupt the messages of Jesus Christ, who preached tolerance and equality in order to excuse their ongoing and blatant ignorance of women’s issues.

Truth suggests that many devout Christians in the U.S., clergymen specifically, go so far as to corrupt religious doctrine to justify their mistreatment of women. By claiming that women don’t deserve rights because “Christ wasn’t a woman,” the clergy and other Christians are perverting the message of Christ himself. To Truth, and to countless others whose cries of grief go unheard, Christ is a holy and compassionate figure. By claiming to know the mind of Christ, the Church, its clergymen, and its followers are exploiting a sacred religious figure in order

to justify its exclusion of women, as well as its disregard toward the issues that are important to them. Truth continues to criticize the metaphorical “little man in black”, asking where “[his] Christ come[s] from” before pointing out that Christ came from God and a woman—“man had nothing to do with Him.” Here, Truth is pointing out the cruelty of an institution that excludes women when a woman (Mary) was responsible for the birth of the figure around whose teachings that institution is based. She’s pointing out the Church’s unbelievable hypocrisy, illustrating how the Church uses religious messaging to excuse its mistreatment of women everywhere.

Truth underscores the church’s cruelty toward women with one final blow: by invoking Eve, an oft-maligned biblical figure whose behavior (disobeying God by eating forbidden fruit) men still use to claim that women are inherently sinful, capricious, and untrustworthy. But Truth turns the biblical story of Adam and Eve on its head, rendering Eve a powerful figure who was “strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone.” By reclaiming Eve’s power, Truth is showing that the Church has the capacity to twist women’s actions in order to manipulate its followers into believing the worst about women, thus justifying its own cruelty toward women.

Sojourner Truth was a religious woman whose own spiritual awakening, when she was still called Isabella Baumfree, led her to adopt the name Sojourner Truth. She named herself a journeywoman on a mission to spread her truth—and God’s—far and wide. She used “Ain’t I a Woman?” not only as a platform for abolitionist messaging or for the advancement of the tenets of women’s rights. She also used the speech call out the Church for its perversion of doctrine in order to justify its ignorance toward and oppression of women of all races.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE THIRTEEN CHILDREN

Sojourner Truth’s “thirteen children” symbolize the arduous pain and grief Black women of Truth’s era faced. At one of the emotional climaxes of the speech, Truth states that she has given birth to thirteen children, and has seen “most all sold off to slavery,” causing her to “cr[y] out with [a] mother’s grief.” As Truth invokes the image of thirteen children being taken away from her, she highlights the immense grief that enslaved mothers were forced to bear in silence and solitude. The act of crying out in her grief was, in and of itself, revolutionary, since enslaved women could be beaten, raped, or even killed for expressing emotions. Slaveholders often claimed that the Black men and women whom they enslaved couldn’t feel emotions, since they were considered less than human.

This cruel rhetoric allowed slaveholders to get away with torturing the men and women whom they considered to be their property. By claiming that she watched nearly thirteen of her own children ripped away from her, Truth externalizes the unbearable pain that enslaved women were forced to endure. This rhetorically and emotionally strengthens her argument not just for the abolition of slavery but for the immediate and irrevocable conferring of equal rights upon women of all races.

Importantly, thirteen is a symbolic number across many religions and cultures. It is sometimes considered especially lucky (or unlucky). There were thirteen people in total at the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus Christ shared with his twelve apostles before his Crucifixion. Sojourner Truth invokes Christ several times throughout her speech, strengthening her feminist argument by claiming that man had no role in the creation or birth of Christ. The “thirteen children” she speaks of and the grief she felt as they were torn away from her may have a symbolic connection to Christ and his apostles, though no direct connection is made within the speech.

It is significant to note that Truth’s “thirteen children” aren’t historically accurate—according to most historical records, Truth only gave birth to five children. She did watch as one of her children was sold off to a slaveholding family in the South, but she was reunited with her son after an abolitionist family in Ulster County helped Truth buy him back and set him free. Frances Gage—an abolitionist and white feminist who transcribed the version of “Ain’t I a Woman” that’s most commonly in circulation today—likely came up with the number thirteen on her own. It’s possible to see Gage as cheapening the very real traumas that Truth endured as an enslaved Black woman by purposefully expanding those traumas’ proportions to manipulate readers. There is a lot of controversy surrounding Gage’s transcript of the speech, and while the symbolism of the “thirteen children” is nevertheless weighty and poignant, many scholars consider Gage’s erasure of Truth’s actual experiences problematic.

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

In the opening line of her speech, Black abolitionist and feminist activist Sojourner Truth describes the “racket” within the women’s rights movement that she has come to the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851 to discuss.

Sojourner Truth notably refers to her audience as “children” as she begins speaking. Truth was a well-known speaker at the time, and, as her name suggests, she sojourned across the country speaking her truth. (She was born Isabella Baumfree but chose the name Sojourn Truth for herself after having a religious awakening). An abolitionist and supporter of the fight for equal rights for women, she was well-known throughout the United States.

The “racket” that Truth wanted to address through her speech was the division within the women’s rights movement. White women were at the forefront of the movement—and while some of these first-wave feminists were devoted to the securing rights for all women, some of them had no interest in supporting Black women or championing the abolitionist cause. This schism was the source of much discord within the movement, and it ultimately led to the creation of two different factions of the movement entirely. Thus, Truth felt that there was something “out of kilter” among her fellow first-wave feminists. She wanted to address the issues within the movement just as seriously as she wanted to address the opposition the movement was getting from the white American men and Christian clergymen who sought to discount and undermine the cause.

☞ 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!

**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Sojourner Truth points out the racism and hypocrisy within the movement for women’s rights. Here,



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Great Speeches by American Women* published in 2007.

### Ain’t I a Woman? Quotes

☞ Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter.



**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker)

she takes issue with how men hypocritically claim that women deserve “the best” while actively working to undermine the struggle for women’s rights. Men, in Truth’s estimation, sought to coddle and infantilize the women around them as a way of paying lip service to women’s beauty and integrity. By claiming that women deserved “the best”—but never doing more for women than small acts like helping them over mud-puddles—men were hypocritically ignoring the focus of the women’s rights movement, which was aimed at securing suffrage (the right to vote) and women’s access to life in the public sphere. So Truth’s first issue with the relations between men and women of her time lies in men’s condescending, paternalistic view of women.

But this quotation is also tied to the racism and exclusion that Truth, as a formerly enslaved Black woman, has faced as a part of the women’s movement. The same (ostensibly white) men who claim that women should “have the best place everywhere” don’t extend the same courtesies to Black women like Truth as they do to white women. So not only are men condescending, patronizing, and two-faced—they also refuse to recognize Black women as deserving of the same treatment as white women.

●● And ain't I a woman?

**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

This line is the repeated refrain at the heart of Sojourner Truth’s speech. Throughout the speech, Truth describes her experiences being sidelined in society for being Black and being a woman, being tortured and brutalized under slavery, and being torn apart from her children. As she does so, she continuously repeats the phrase “and ain’t I a woman?” to highlight the hypocrisy and racism within and around the women’s rights movement. Men suggest that women should have the “best place everywhere”—but under slavery, Truth was treated maliciously and subjected to unbearable horrors. And now that she’s free, those same men who claim that they’re being allies to women by helping them into carriages and over mud-puddles don’t extend those same courtesies to Truth, because she’s Black. The women who protest, fight, and hold conventions to lobby for women’s rights to suffrage, too, ignore and sideline Truth and other


Black women. To them, the privileges of equal rights for women shouldn’t extend to women of color.

Truth’s repeated refrain has become famous—even though she herself may never have said the words at all during her original address—because they highlight in stark terms how exclusionary, cruel, and hypocritical the original women’s rights movement truly was.

●● 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?

**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is significant because it introduces the speech’s central symbol—the nearly “thirteen children” that Truth had taken away from her and “sold off to slavery.”



This passage is meant to underscore the cruelty and inhumanity that Truth was forced to endure as an enslaved person—even though she is a woman, and, according to women’s rights activists, should have been spared from such horrors. Truth offers this anecdote in order to underscore the hypocrisy of the self-concerned white women within the women’s rights movement as well as the ignorance and paternalism of white men who claim that women should be treated as the “best” of society (while outright ignoring the unspeakable indignities women endure every day under slavery).

According to modern-day historians, Truth did not actually have thirteen children—she had five. And while she *did* suffer the painful trauma of watching one of her children being sold to a slaveholder in Alabama, she didn’t watch a succession of nearly thirteen children leave her arms. Frances Gage—a white woman responsible for transcribing the version of Truth’s speech that’s in circulation today—likely edited Truth’s words or embellished the speech she did give, and the “thirteen children” Truth speaks of are almost certainly Gage’s invention. So while this passage does rhetorically argue against the unrepentant cruelty that white people show Black women, it also exaggerates the facts of Truth’s life. Some scholars argue

that this cheapens the very real, intimate traumas that Truth did endure.

☞ Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights its 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.

**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker), Jesus Christ, The Little Man in Black

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sojourner Truth turns her attentions to the hypocrisy, sexism, and racism within the Christian Church. Here, Truth suggests that the Church purposefully twists religious doctrine in order to justify its cruelty toward women. She begins her argument by calling out a metaphorical “little man in black.” She’s not speaking of a literal man in the audience, but rather of the Church clergymen—who traditionally wear black garments—who try to dictate what rights women should and should not have. These men, Truth asserts, twist the Bible’s teachings in order to justify their own exclusionary protocol. So when a preacher or reverend claims that women shouldn’t have the same rights as men because “Christ wasn’t a woman,” they are, in Truth’s estimation, corrupting Christ’s teachings about love, understanding, and equality.

Truth rejects these cruel attempts to control women through the perversion of religious doctrine that teaches compassion and grace. She hammers home her point by turning the clergymen’s argument on its head—she suggests that because men had nothing to do with the creation of Christ, it’s perhaps *men* who should have their roles and powers within the Church reexamined. (Here, she’s drawing on the Christian belief that Christ is the Son of God and was born to Mary via immaculate conception, meaning that Joseph had nothing to do with Christ’s birth.)

☞ 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!

**Related Characters:** Sojourner Truth (speaker), Eve

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sojourner Truth invokes the oft-maligned biblical figure, Eve, to strengthen her own argument about the fractures and faults within the movement for women’s rights.

In this passage, Truth invokes the biblical story of Adam and Eve from the Book of Genesis, referring to Eve as “the first woman God ever made.” In Christianity—especially in the sermons delivered by male clergymen during Truth’s era—Eve is often used as a figure marked by original sin and wickedness. Eve went against God’s word (eating the forbidden fruit and thus introducing original sin into the world), and for millennia, she has been seen as a paragon of temptation and corruption. But here, Truth highlights Eve’s strength and power. Eve was able to shake the very foundations of the world, and she was only one woman—so certainly the women’s rights movement, a whole group of women across the entire nation, should be able to make change.

However, there is a central flaw within the women’s rights movement that is holding the cause back from achieving its goals. Throughout her speech, Truth has implied that until white women at the center of the movement for women’s rights recognize the inherent rights of Black women, the movement will fail. White men, religious institutions, and political leaders throughout the U.S. are already working to discount the movement. By excluding Black women from their movement, white feminists are hampering their own ability to make the radical change they want to see.





## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## AIN'T I A WOMAN?

Addressing her audience at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, as "children," Black abolitionist and feminist Sojourner Truth begins her speech. "When there is so much racket," she says, "there must be something out of kilter."

*When Sojourner Truth stepped onto the stage at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, she was already well-known as a prominent abolitionist and feminist speaker. After a religious awakening years before, Truth—who was born Isabella Baumfree—gave herself a new name that spoke to her need to journey the U.S. in order to speak her truth and share her stories of enslavement, liberation, and salvation through her religion. So Truth was able to command a room—and her decision to address her audience as "children" shows that she had a lesson she wanted to teach her listeners. The "racket" she's referring to here references the discord surrounding the women's rights movement, as well as the racism and tumult within the movement (the things that are "out of kilter").*



Both the "Negroes of the South" and the women of the North are "talking about rights." Because of this, Truth predicts, the white men of America will soon "be in a fix." And yet Truth herself is still unsure about what the core of "all this here talking" is aimed toward.

*Truth points out that women and Black people are still only "talking about rights"—meaning that they're unable to find the social support they need to secure those rights. And the reason they can't find social support, she's implying, is because women's and Black people's equality would detract from white men's power in the U.S. This would place white men in a "fix"—and so in Truth's estimation, white men haven't adequately supported the abolitionist movement or the feminist movement. "All this here talking," then, is exhausting Truth and others who are sick of begging for recognition and equality from people who are threatened by their desire for equal rights.*



Some men say that women need to be helped into carriages and over ditches—women, these men say, should “have the best place everywhere.” But Sojourner Truth, a Black woman, says that she never gets helped into carriages—no one gives her the “best place,” ever. “And ain’t I a woman?” she asks her audience.

*This passage introduces the speech’s central refrain: the question “And ain’t I a woman?” As Truth tells her audience about men who claim to revere, elevate, and help women, she exposes the hypocrisy behind their actions. It’s easy enough to help a woman into a carriage—but these men shouldn’t claim that they want the “best place everywhere” for women when they won’t help the women’s rights movement gain any real traction. What’s more, Truth’s question—“ain’t I a woman?”—reveals the racism in the burgeoning American feminist movement. Men never help Truth (or even acknowledge her) because she’s Black. She implies that her Blackness erases her womanhood in the eyes of these hypocritical and paternalistic men. As the speech goes on, Truth will continue to give examples of how men (and other women) exclude her—and, by extension, all Black women—from any conversations about what women deserve.*



Truth urges her audience to look at her carefully. “Look at my arm!” she says, urging them to see that as a formerly enslaved person, she has ploughed and planted and raised barns. No man, she says, can compete with her. She asks again, “ain’t I a woman?” While enslaved, she could work as much as a man and eat as much as one, too—and she could “bear the lash as well” as a man could. Again, Truth repeats, “And ain’t I a woman?”

*Here, Truth recounts her most torturous experiences, showing her audience that her womanhood—which, according to certain white men, should mean she gets the “best place everywhere—didn’t protect her from the brutality of slavery. She was expected to work just as hard as the men around her and suffer the same physical punishments and emotional cruelties that they did. The implication here is that men shouldn’t get to determine what privileges womanhood should confer upon a woman. It should be up to women themselves, she’s suggesting, to decide how they should be treated and what place they should have in society.*



Truth states that she has given birth to **thirteen children**—and of those thirteen, she has “seen most all” sold into slavery. She has cried out with a mother’s grief, and no one but Jesus Christ has heard her. “And ain’t I a woman?” she asks.

*Here, Truth begins invoking her Christian faith, and the comfort she found in times of trouble through Christ. It’s also one of the speech’s most controversial moments, since historians have refuted the idea that Truth had thirteen children—she only had five, and Frances Gage (the white feminist who transcribed the version of Truth’s speech that’s now in circulation) likely edited Truth’s words. Thirteen is considered a very lucky (or very unlucky) number across several religions and cultures. One of the most notable instances in which thirteen appears in a religious text is in the New Testament, during the story of the Last Supper. Christ’s final meal with his twelve apostles before his Crucifixion saw a total of thirteen people gather around the table. So Truth’s “thirteen children” can be seen as a symbol of her own Christ-like suffering during slavery. Though Truth suffered tremendously as she lost her children (and, according to the historical record, she was forced to watch as one of her children was sold to a slaveholding family in Alabama), no one comforted her. Again, Truth’s womanhood afforded her no special care or treatment. The only person who heard her cries was Christ himself.*



“They talk,” Truth states, about “this thing in the head.” She asks her audience what the thing in the head is called—and a member of the audience replies, “intellect.” Truth tells the individual that they’re right—and that intellect has nothing to do with women’s rights or “Negroes’ rights”. “If my cup won’t hold but a pint,” she asks, “and yours a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?”

*Here, Truth points out one of the primary arguments that men of her time use to sideline women and Black people from society and ensure they don’t attain equal rights. By arguing that women and Black people were of inferior intellect, white men in the U.S. were able to hoard power for themselves and discount any bid that women or Black people made for equality. Truth is using white men’s own argument against them here, taking for granted—just for the moment—the idea that they’re right, and that white men are of superior intellect. Even if this is the case, though, intellect shouldn’t have any bearing on whether a person can have equal rights. All Truth and her fellow women are asking for, she’s saying, is a “pint” of power—and yet men won’t dip into their own large “quart” to offer them some. Truth is pointing out the hypocrisy in the arguments that white men make against legislation that will abolish slavery and provide equal rights for women and Black people.*



A “little man in black”—ostensibly a preacher or reverend—is always saying that women can’t have the same rights as men because Christ was not a woman. But now, Truth asks her audience rhetorically where Christ came from. The answer, she says, is “from God and a woman”—man himself had nothing to do with the creation of Christ.

*In this passage, Truth reflects on the hypocrisy, cruelty, and exclusion in the Christian Church in the U.S. The “little man in black” isn’t one specific man; instead, Truth is referring more broadly to the Church, given that clergymen traditionally wear black garments. These men, Truth suggests, are corrupting religious doctrine and twisting its meaning for the purpose of justifying the exclusion and oppression of women. Christ wasn’t a woman, so men in positions of power within the Church use Christ’s image to justify their exclusion of women. But Truth turns that argument upside down, here, suggesting that it’s men who have nothing to do with Christ—since Christ was created by the union of a woman (Mary) and God himself.*



The first woman that God ever made—Eve—was, in Truth’s estimation, strong enough to “turn the world upside down” all on her own. Therefore, the women fighting for equal rights today should be able, together, to “get it right side up again.” These women are asking to change things, and men should let them.

*White men across the U.S. and clergymen within the Christian Church claim that women are weak and must be protected—so they shouldn’t have the right to vote, and they shouldn’t participate in public life. But in this passage, Truth is suggesting that if one woman—the biblical figure of Eve—could change the world forever, then certainly a large group of women with the same collective purpose should have no problem securing their goals. But men are using their power to sideline the women’s movement—and, in Truth’s view, this has to stop. The figure of Eve is still, to this day, often used to claim that women are responsible for original sin or that they are inherently weak-willed—but in Truth’s interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, Eve is the very image of strength, action, strong-willed capability: exactly what the women’s rights movement needs.*



Referring to herself as “old Sojourner,” Truth thanks her audience for listening to her, then states that she has “nothing more to say.”

*As Truth concludes her speech, her language becomes weary rather than fiery. She calls herself “old Sojourner,” implying that she’s exhausted from her travels and from her fruitless attempts to secure equality for women and Black people in the eyes of the law and the Church. No matter how fired up she gets about the equality women deserve, the need for abolition, or the corruption and hypocrisy within the U.S.’s social, political, and religious institutions, no change really happens. So Truth is using her weariness and frustration to show her audience that it’s time for immediate change.*





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