

Analysis of "Aint I a Woman"

Maria B. Perry

Appalachian State University

Abstract

In Sojourner Truth’s speech that she gave to the Women’s Convention of 1851, she speaks on the inequalities that women and blacks faced at that time in America. I will attempt to analyze the way she uses rhetorical strategies in order to achieve a successful and powerful delivery of her message. In this analysis, I will look at the way Sojourner uses personal experiences to get an emotional response from her audience, connecting with them as both women and mothers. She also uses repetition and rhetorical questions in order to rebut opposing arguments for gender equality. Finally, Sojourner makes biblical references throughout the speech to connect with her Christian audience and bring her listeners to connect on a more personal level.

Analysis of “Ain’t I a Woman”

In the town of Akron, Ohio in the year 1851, an African American woman delivered a moving speech at the Women’s Convention that would be remembered for its rawness, authenticity, and powerful message. Sojourner Truth spoke to the Women’s Convention about her experiences and tribulations as not only a woman in that day’s society but as a black woman. She used her personal experiences and biblical references to connect with her audience and provoke them both on an emotional and personal level. By sharing personal experiences, utilizing repetitive language, and making biblical references, Sojourner Truth connects emotionally with her audience to effectively invoke a sense of power to overcome race and gender inequality.

Sojourner establishes a sense of identity as a victim of discrimination by describing how she faces prejudices as a black person and as a woman in order to incite an emotional response in her audience. Through these personal anecdotes, Sojourner invites her audience, who are mostly women suffering from their own forms of discrimination, to realize the injustices of which they too are victims. She points out a man in the crowd, claiming that he says “women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and have the best place everywhere.” Immediately following this description of how a white man described the way to treat women, she follows with a personal rebuttal. She bluntly exclaims that no one performs these courtesies for her, and she emphasizes this point by repeating each of the actions: “Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me the best place!” By juxtaposing this ideal way of how a man says women should be treated with chivalry with the reality that she has never experienced any of this civility, Sojourner is pointing out the presence of a fierce hypocrisy.

This hypocrisy of the inequality between men, women, blacks, and whites incites an emotion of resentment in the audience. Not only does the presence of hypocrisy in any matter,

subject, or person hold a negative connotation, but it also creates a feeling of trepidation that encourages individuals to take action. By depicting the existence of this hypocrisy present in her own life, she invites her audience to realize potential injustices in their own lives, which they should want to change. Sojourner plays on the emotions of her audience in order to grab their attention and their willingness for change by elucidating her own vulnerable state to which they can relate.

Once she has incited an emotional response in her audience, Sojourner empowers them through the repetition of the profound rhetorical question “and ain’t I a woman?” Her proud exclamation of this fact states her belief in her own deserving right to equality. With each repetition of this powerful question, Sojourner builds more and more on the emotions of her audience as they too should feel deserving of freedom from discrimination. She continues with this rhythmic and poetic repetition, building up an energy in her voice and audience with a brief personal experience followed each time with that same rhetorical question. She draws a picture of her equality to men by professing her strength and hard-working efforts as she “ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me.” Again, she follows this claim with, “and ain’t I a woman?” She rhythmically continues on in this pattern, making a claim to her earned equality she feels with males and then following it with the ever increasingly powerful question “and ain’t I a woman?”

Although we cannot actually hear Sojourner speak these words, reading the documentation of this speech, I can feel her energy, anger, and resentment building up as she repeats this commanding phrase. She brings the rhythm slowly to an end with a vivid image of the grief and hardships she has faced as a slave and a woman. She declares that she has “borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery” as she “cried out with [her] mother’s

grief,” following this recollection with one last repetition of “and ain’t I a woman?” She purposefully ended this part of her speech with such a brilliantly clear image of violence and the traumatic effects of inequality, forcing her audience, most of which were probably mothers, to relate to her suffering on an even deeper emotional level. Through this repetition, Sojourner transitions the attention of her audience from injustices that women face to the injustices that blacks face as well. Effortlessly tying these two issues of inequality together, Sojourner allows her audience, who as women feel discriminated against, to connect with and understand the discrimination that blacks face as well.

Sojourner seals this initial emotional connection with her audience through a common religion and system of faith. By making biblical references and using biblical language, Sojourner’s mostly Christian audience see her as a fellow Christian and will, in turn, relate and respond more positively to her ideas and stance on equality. Opening her speech, Sojourner addresses her audience as “children,” an endearing and welcoming term that defines an innate human connection between her and all who are listening. By calling the audience “children,” she is delineating the fact that they are all equal in her eyes, just as a mother loves all of her children equally despite all of their differences. Not only can this word be interpreted to refer to motherhood, but it can also refer to the biblical idea of all humans as “God’s children” who are created equal and in the “likeness and image of God.” By opening up with this loaded word of “children,” Sojourner is foreshadowing her speech’s focus on equality. In this same first sentence she notes, “where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter” as she uniquely introduces her intention of seeking harmony among all as she refers to the “negroes of the South and the women of the North, all talking about rights.” By referencing her audience’s religious

beliefs, Sojourner plays even more on their emotions by implying a sense of obligation they should feel to stand up against injustice.

Sojourner closes her speech with an extremely clever tool for inspiring her audience to act on this inequality and solve the injustices that they each face by referring to the impact that Eve had on the world. She claims, “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!” By referencing the strength of the commonly known Christian figure of the world’s first woman, Eve, Sojourner is cleverly drawing in each member of her audience so that they can emotionally and personally relate to her proposition to fight injustice. She proposes the idea that if these women all work together, there is no reason that they should not achieve what they are looking for: equality for all.

Utilizing multiple rhetorical strategies to engage her audience, Sojourner effectively delivers the powerful message on the hypocrisy, unjust nature, and moral inaccuracy of gender and race discrimination. She emotionally appeals to her audience using personal anecdotes, repetition, and biblical references in order to successfully depict the injustices occurring at that time and to successfully provoke a desire for change.

References

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