



Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I Woman" Speech and the Creation of Ethos

The lesson I discuss below addresses character creation, stereotypes, and credibility. In it I examine four versions of Sojourner Truth's famous speech, commonly titled "Ain't I a Woman." I invite students to identify the speaker's ethos, or persona, in each version and how it's created. I have used the lesson in composition and oral presentation courses for the past two decades, and I often use it when I have to substitute for a fellow instructor. The lesson is largely self-contained, and I can deliver it in either the fifty-minute or one hour and fifteen-minute formats.

At the beginning of the session, I briefly explain that Truth, a mother and an ex-slave, spoke at an abolitionist's convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. Truth hadn't prepared the speech in advance, but requested permission to speak during a debate, which will become evident as the students read the speech. The president of the convention, Francis Gage, published the speech in May of 1863, some twelve years later.

If I deliver the lesson in an English class, I review the meanings of the three appeals in rhetoric, also called the three modes of persuasion: pathos, logos, and ethos. Pathos is an emotional appeal to the audience's sympathy; logos is an appeal to logic, generally understood as using reason; and ethos is a means of persuasion that attempts to convince the audience of a point by emphasizing the speaker's credibility and expertise. In this lesson I emphasize the appeal to ethos. If I'm teaching this to a class outside of English, I avoid discussing the three appeals and focus instead on identifying the speaker's persona and the language that creates that persona.

I label the versions of the speech as A, B, C, and D. Version A is the so-called "plantation dialect" version. It is difficult to read for two reasons: Gage attempted to create a strong stereotypical accent in it, complete with misspellings and abbreviations, and she uses the N-word in it. Both of these faults require careful explanation and warnings before I hand out copies of the speech. The B version is one contemporary audiences are more familiar with. It substitutes the word "Negroes" for the N-word and more legible wording for some of the misspellings. Version C is one I wrote, using very formal and stilted language, yet the speech still contains the same content. Version D is the speech as it was reported in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, an abolitionist newspaper from the 1800s, and we can assume that it is nearly

accurate as it was recorded only days after the speech.

I distribute the speech versions one at a time (I have attached each speech version as an Appendix to this essay). I like to select student volunteers to read, but I often read version A myself given its difficulty. When I've completed reading, I invite volunteers to discuss Truth's character, that is, the ethos/persona that the speech reveals. I ask students to give me adjectives and phrases describing the speaker. I write these on the board. Among the more common descriptions, students will note that the speaker is "strong," "uneducated," "intelligent," "willful" (or a similar synonym), "brave," and "experienced." They always note that she's a mother and knows farm labor. We identify particular words or expressions that indicate the speaker's strength, lack of education, and so on.

Then I distribute version B, and here I'll always solicit a volunteer to read. I ask students if they can add or delete any of the descriptive phrases we've put on the board. Students rarely suggest changes. However, when we discuss the speaker's ethos, students always agree that the speaker in version B sounds less authentic. I ask them to explain why. My students across time and space have agreed that version B puts words into the speaker's mouth in order to make her speech less offensive. We discuss the N-word, and how it seems more likely that Truth would have used that word instead of Negroes. The reason students give is that Truth, as an uneducated slave from a southern plantation, would most likely have used that word without a second thought. Students compare and contrast the language between both versions to support their claim. If I'm teaching a 50-minute class, I will skip version B and go directly to version C.

When I share version C with students, there's no doubt among any of them that this version is totally false. I like to have a student reader for this version as well. I entitled this version, "Am I Not a Woman?" Students frequently laugh during the discussion of version C. The speech does sound silly, and it gives students an opportunity to break some of the tension that arose in our conversation about the differences in language between the two prior versions. We repeat the process of collecting descriptive language to create a character portrait. Among the terms I've written on the board, these are common: "boring," "stuffy," "male," "cautious" (or "careful"), and "fake." Again, to support their assertions, they have to identify specific language that leads them to their conclusions. Then I'll share version D, along with the contemporary journalist's introduction.

After reading all of the speech versions, we have a vote on which version is most authentic—that is, which version they believe best represents the ethos of the speaker. Version

A always wins. Depending on time constraints, I'll either share Truth's biography with them after this, or I'll ask them to create another descriptive portrait and then I'll share the biography (see Michals). Regardless of the direction I take, after sharing the biography I ask students again to select which speech version seems most accurate in depicting Truth's character. Many students still select version A.

Finally, I like to open the conversation up to allow students to pursue topics as they arise. Class discussion has been far-ranging. Students have attacked Gage for inventing a character as egregiously false as is the version C character, and students have defended Gage for creating a speaker's ethos that promoted a higher cause. Students have compared and contrasted the pathos and logos in each version. They have discussed "politically correct" language, disparaging language, and racial epithets. Before time runs out, though, I will intervene and ask students to examine why they chose version A as the most believable representation of an African American woman. "Because," some have said, "that's the way we've been taught to imagine African American women of the time." This topic of conversation delves into racial and gendered stereotypes, our expectations, and our socially constructed beliefs. There is rarely time to complete this discussion, but the goal has been achieved, which is that we examine what comprises ethos and what false beliefs we might be accepting without question.

Since this is often a lesson I deliver as a substitute, I rarely assign homework. When I incorporate this lesson into a class of my own, however, I'll ask students to include a journal entry examining their beliefs. I sometimes ask them to create a version E of the speech in which they create or adopt an ethos of their own.

David MacWilliams, *Division Head, Arts and Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at New Mexico State University, Alamogordo, 2400 Scenic Dr., Alamogordo, NM 88310. Email: dcmacwil@nmsu.edu

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Appendix A

Version A

Wall, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o'kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de [negroes] of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking 'bout?

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place, And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm. I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it) and bear de lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman?

Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head. What dis dey call it? ["Intellect," whispered some one near.] Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do with woman's rights or [negroes'] rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Den dat little man in black dar, he say woman can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. Whar did your Christ come from? Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had not'ing to do with him.

If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder ought to be able to turn it back, and git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let 'em. Blegged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner ha'n't got nothing more to say.

Version B

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. (Halsall)

Version C

Ladies and Gentlemen, where there is so much confusion, something must have gone awry. I think that between the African and African-American slaves in the south and the women in the north, our white brothers will find themselves in trouble fairly soon. But what on earth is the point of all this?

Version D

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity: “May I say a few words?” Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded:

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. (sojournerturthmemorial.org)