

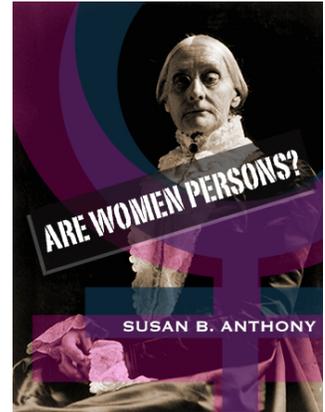


Are Women Persons?

by Susan B. Anthony

[Things To Know/ Things To Think About](#)

In one of her most famous speeches, “Are Women Persons?” Susan B. Anthony captures the feelings of moral outrage felt by suffragettes, and soon to be, women everywhere. But what makes her arguments in favor of women’s suffrage so singularly powerful is her appeal to our reason, as well as our heart strings. Anthony accomplishes this by using the preamble to the U.S. Constitution as her chief weapon. In her speech, Anthony draws heavily on the nuances of the language in the Constitution to further her own ends, and to justify her decision to cast a ballot in the presidential election of 1872. By recognizing that the U.S. preamble explicitly states “We the people,” Anthony not only removes herself from culpability for “breaking a law,” but argues that she was simply exercising her Constitutional rights. Even more amazingly, with one swift rhetorical move, Anthony shifts culpability to the United States government for directly defying “the supreme law of the land.” In Anthony’s eyes, and in the eyes of thinking people everywhere, the U.S. government had failed to “secure the blessings of liberty” to over one half of the country’s population.



If this hypocrisy wasn’t enough, Anthony goes on in her speech to expose the unequal distribution of power existing between the sexes. Anthony doesn’t stop with exposing this power imbalance, however, she also exposes unequal power dynamics in relation to differences in race, social class, and education. Most impressive, though, is Anthony’s final paragraph. Although she relies on the definition of “citizen” espoused by Webster, Worcester and Bouvier, she uses this definition to great effect. Using it, Anthony creates a syllogism, or a problem with two premises, to logically conclude that women are persons. This piece is ideal for lessons on Susan B. Anthony, the history of the women’s suffrage movement in the United States, and gender relations in the United States. Additionally, because of its compelling arguments, and unique rhetorical style, this piece works well as part of a lesson on english composition, rhetoric, public speaking, and speech writing.

Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Before Reading

1. Imagine you live in a world where all the rights and privileges granted to a citizen of the United States suddenly didn't apply to you. In a short paragraph, describe your thoughts and feelings about this change of affairs.

During Reading

1. What question does Anthony posit that, if answered in the affirmative, should qualify women for the right to vote by the authority of the constitution?
(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2)
2. Which document does Anthony cite to strengthen her arguments? How does she use this document to her advantage?

After Reading

1. In her speech, Anthony says at one point that the United States government is not a democracy but “an odious aristocracy; a hateful oligarchy of sex...” In class discuss the different rhetorical effects of Anthony making these connections. What is she implying about the relations between the sexes in society? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2)

Connections In Text

1. In her speech, Anthony draws parallels between the oppression of women, and the oppression of African Americans. Compare Anthony’s speech to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” When comparing the two, think about the different persuasive tactics used by Anthony and King. More importantly, though, use these two pieces to compare the Women’s suffrage movement and the Civil Rights movement. What were both movements trying to accomplish? How were their goals similar and different?

Further Readings

For Teachers:

<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/women-s-suffrage>

This link provides teachers with a number of thoughtful lesson plans pertaining to women’s suffrage. The link also has a number of brain-storm questions, to get children actively thinking about the topic.

For Students:

<http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressiveera/suffrage.html>

This link provides some supplemental reading about the background, and history, of the women’s suffrage movement.

Vocabulary

Domain-Specific Vocabulary:

liberty, aristocracy, republic

G10 Challenging Vocabulary:

derive (9), dissension (9), abridge (8), discord (8), indict/indictment (8), odious (8)

G8 Challenging Vocabulary:

abridge (8), discord (8), indict/indictment (8), odious (8), allege (7), appeal (7), domestic (7), jurisdiction (7), posterity (7), campaign (6), period (6), sovereign (6), testify (6), tranquil/tranquility (6),

G6 Challenging Vocabulary:

authority (6), campaign (6), period (6), sovereign (6), testify (6), tranquil/tranquility (6), establish (5), loss (5), nation (5), nerve (5), welfare (5), ballot (4), consent (4), mock (4), vote (4),

G4 Challenging Vocabulary:

ballot (4), mock (4), vote (4), conflict (3), define (3), form (3), make (3), opponent (3), privilege (3), result (3), wealth (3), beyond (2), declare (2), effort (2), exercise (2), future (2), guarantee (2), insure (2), law (2), rule (2), tour (2)

G2 Challenging Vocabulary:

declare (2), exercise (2), future (2), guarantee (2), insure (2), law (2), rule (2), tour (2), country (1), create (1), crime (1), lose (1), pay (1), perfect (1), person (1), poor (1), question (1), stand (1), father (0), give (0), mother (0), never (0), sister (0), talk (0), woman (0)