Sojourner Truth was a nineteenth-century African American evangelist who embraced abolitionism and women's rights. A charismatic speaker, she became one of the best-known abolitionists of her day. Born a slave and given the name Isabella Baumfree, she was freed in 1828 when a New York law abolished slavery within the state.

In 1843 she had a religious experience and came to believe that God had commanded her to travel beyond New York to spread the Christian gospel. She took the name Sojourner Truth and traveled throughout the eastern states as an evangelist. Truth soon became acquainted with the abolitionist movement and its leaders.

In the early 1850s, she met leaders of the emerging women's rights movement, most notably Lucretia Mott. Truth recognized the connection between the inferior legal status of African Americans and women in general. Her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" first given in 1851, challenged cultural beliefs, including the natural inferiority of women, and biblical justifications for the second-class status of women.

Prior to her speech, male speakers had argued in favor of men's superior rights and privileges on the grounds of their superior intellect and the manhood of Christ. As the convention was heating up, the dignified Sojourner Truth—who was in her 60s at the time—rose slowly from her seat in a corner of the room. Amid shouts of “Don’t let her speak!” and hissing, she moved to the front, laid her bonnet down, and began this unprepared speech.

Delivered December 1851 - Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio

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 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? 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.
Questions for Analysis

1. What is the rhetorical situation or occasion of the speech?
2. Who is Sojourner’s audience?
3. Where in paragraph two does she acknowledge the opposing argument and refute it?
4. How does she establish ethos in the same paragraph?
5. How does she establish pathos in paragraph two?
6. What is the effect of repeating the rhetorical question, “Ain’t I a Woman?” throughout the speech?
7. To what does she compare women’s rights in paragraph three?
8. What analogy/rhetorical question does she use at the end of paragraph three? What is her point in making this comparison?
9. How does she refute the “Christ” argument in paragraph four? Why is this logical argument particularly strong?
10. What allusion does she make in paragraph five? How does she spin this reference, which usually puts women in a bad light, in her favor and use it to further her argument about the strength of women?