

# Address on Woman's Rights



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

Born in Johnstown, New York into an affluent, powerful family, Elizabeth Cady enjoyed a privileged youth and received a more substantial education than most young women of her time. While spending some time living with a cousin who was an abolitionist, she married anti-slavery activist Henry Brewster Stanton. When the couple attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention on their honeymoon, Stanton wasn't recognized as a delegate—even though her husband was—and neither were several other women in attendance. After returning to the United States, Stanton became a mother and remained active in the struggle for women's rights. Together with Lucretia Mott and several other prominent women's rights activists, Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention in July of 1848. At the first convention for women's rights, Stanton delivered the Declaration of Sentiments, a list of grievances and demands modeled after the Declaration of Independence that assessed the sorry state of women's rights in the U.S. at the time. Together with Susan B. Anthony, Stanton spent the rest of her life fighting for women's equality and advocating for women's right to vote. The women's suffrage movement wasn't without controversy or discord—in 1866, Stanton and the Women's Loyal National League lobbied against amendments that would give Black men the right to vote, since the amendments did not give women of any race the right to vote. Though Stanton's position lost her some momentum and credibility, she continued to write, speak, and advocate for the rights of women until her death in 1902, just 18 years before women were granted suffrage in the U.S.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1848, the year that Stanton gave her "Address on Woman's Rights," was an important yet fraught time in U.S. history. The country was, in many ways, expanding and entering a new age of prosperity: in the unincorporated territory of California, the onset of the Gold Rush promised wealth and fortune for anyone brave enough to pursue it. The U.S. added its 30th state, Wisconsin, and expanded its territory greatly with its victory in the Mexican-American War. But the casualties from the war were vast—and with new territory to claim, lawmakers faced tensions over how to handle the new acquisitions' relationship to slavery. The abolitionist movement, which sought to end slavery, was in full swing, yet the South's economy still depended on the labor of enslaved Black people. The Civil War wouldn't begin until 1861, yet already the nation

was deeply divided over the institution of slavery. While Elizabeth Cady Stanton, her fellow women's rights activists, and the Seneca Falls Convention made history, the movement was blighted by racism and exclusionary politics that would reach a boiling point in the years to come. This created a deep rift between those who prioritized white women's suffrage over securing Black men's right to vote.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Address on Woman's Rights" was one of the first speeches of its kind—a rousing and humorous yet deft and clear call to action. In the nearly 175 years since Stanton's address, the subsequent second, third, and fourth waves of the feminist movement have been marked by many similarly inspiring, commanding addresses from skilled women orators. Virginia Woolf's extended essay "A Room of One's Own" was drawn from a series of lectures she delivered at Cambridge University. The speech, which called for women's immediate access to financial independence, education, and solitary space, has since become a hallmark feminist text. Decades later, in 1971, Gloria Steinem, a vanguard of the second-wave feminist movement, delivered an "Address to the Women of America" at the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus. The landmark speech made history for its focus on a new type of feminism that acknowledged the roles that race and class play in women's experiences and access to education, financial security, and bodily safety. In 1995, Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered an address which has become known as her "Women's Rights Are Human Rights" speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. More recently, author and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2012 "We Should All Be Feminists" speech received widespread recognition after she delivered a TEDx talk about the importance of men and women embracing feminism together as equals.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Address by Elizabeth Cady Stanton on Woman's Rights
- **When Written:** Mid-1840s
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** First delivered in 1848, though it is debated whether Cady Stanton first delivered it at the Seneca Falls Convention in July or later that year, in September
- **Literary Period:** First-Wave Feminism
- **Genre:** Persuasive Speech

- **Climax:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton declares that a new era of women's equality is about to dawn.
- **Point of View:** First Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Dynamic Duo.** Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony are two giants of first-wave feminism—and their collaboration went even deeper than many know. Stanton composed many of the speeches that Susan B. Anthony delivered throughout her travels around the United States. (Stanton was a wife and mother, whereas Anthony was unmarried and free to travel.) Stanton would later say of her partnership with Anthony, “I forged the thunderbolts and she fired them.”

Global society, Stanton suggests, will remain only half-developed until women are allowed to pursue their own educations, stand beside their husbands as equals, and participate in public life through suffrage. Women throughout history—women like Joan of Arc, Hannah More, Elizabeth I, and Isabella of Spain—have forever bettered their countries and indeed global society. The United States will remain fraught with social and political divisiveness and will never prosper until a new era of women's equality dawns, shining a “flashing **sunlight**” on the dark of the old world dominated by men. Only when men and women recognize their true equality will they ascend to the “palace homes” of enlightenment and harmony to rule as Kings and Queens of their own destinies.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In her 1848 “Address on Woman's Rights,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton aims to explain the “degradation and woe” that women have faced throughout history, due to the widespread perception that women are inferior to men. Instead, Stanton argues, woman ought to stand “by the side of man” as his equal and enjoy the same rights to suffrage, education, property ownership, and employment as men do. Men squander the very opportunities that their wives, daughters, and sisters yearn for, all the while pompously asserting their superiority. Such men must be “vanquished” in order to make room for a new era of women's equality.

Stanton begins to critique men's claims to moral, physical, and intellectual superiority over women. First, she argues that women are morally superior to men, since women have been forced to become self-denying and generous by the societies in which they live. Yet rather than shirk their moral duties, women have committed to prioritizing purity, caregiving, and temperance. Stanton also claims that while society attempts to use biblical arguments—such as the story of Adam and Eve—to keep women down, God has actually entitled women to the same earthly rights as men. She encourages women to focus on God's judgment (rather than men's judgment) and to seek comfort and fulfillment in their spirituality until they're granted their God-given rights on Earth.

Next, she argues that men's physical superiority to women is based on the fact that women aren't afforded the same opportunities to romp, wander, and receive physical educations. Until women have been allowed to participate in sports and public life for at least a century, she suggests, it will be impossible to accurately gauge the physical differences between the sexes. Finally, she suggests that men are not intellectually superior to women either. Instead, they simply lord the fact that they're able to pursue academic and religious educations over women, rather than sharing the knowledge they accrue during their studies with the women in their lives.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton** – Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a prominent figure in the women's rights movement in the United States throughout the mid-to-late 1800s. In 1848, at the Seneca Falls Convention in her home state of New York, she presented the Declaration of Sentiments and made the first formal demand for women's suffrage (or the right to vote) in the U.S. Well-educated for a woman of her time due to her privileged station—her father was a member of the House of Representatives and a New York Supreme Court Judge—Elizabeth Cady married Henry Brewster Stanton, a noted slavery abolitionist. When Stanton was barred from attending the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 due to her sex, she and several other women delegates, including Lucretia Mott, became dedicated activists for women's rights. Together, Stanton and Mott held the Seneca Falls Convention and presented their demands for reforms of women's treatment in society, including a call for women's suffrage and an expansion of women's opportunities for education and employment. Stanton was an abolitionist, an advocate for temperance (or abstention from alcohol), and the president of the National Woman Suffrage Association from 1869–1892. A prolific writer and lecturer, Stanton drafted the federal suffrage amendment that would eventually be passed into law in 1920. Her “Address on Woman's Rights” was first delivered in 1848, though there is some historical debate as to whether she delivered the speech at the Seneca Falls Convention in July or later in the year, in September. In this speech, Stanton humorously yet passionately advocates for the equality of the sexes and demands women's rights to vote, to pursue educations, and to participate in public life. The speech reveals Stanton to be a playful yet astute orator and an informed, careful student of global women's history.

**Queen Elizabeth I of England** – Elizabeth I was Queen of England and Ireland from 1558 until her death in 1603. A daughter of Henry VIII, she was often referred to as the Virgin

Queen due to her refusal to marry. She was a popular monarch who founded what would become the Church of England, and she presided over the culturally rich Elizabethan era. Elizabeth Cady Stanton invokes Elizabeth as an example of one of history's most capable and beloved female leaders.

**Adam and Eve** – According to the creation stories of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Adam and Eve were the first man and woman to walk the earth. According to the myth, God created Adam, then from Adam's rib created Eve to be his companion. Adam and Eve were instructed not to eat from a tree in the Garden of Eden that bore fruit containing the knowledge of good and evil—but Satan, disguised as a serpent, tempted Eve into eating of the apple, and Eve then shared the apple with Adam. Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, creating the doctrine of “original sin,” or the “fall of man.” Throughout history, the story of Eve's temptation has been weaponized against women. In her 1848 “Address on Woman's Rights,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton attempts to invert the demonization of Eve by suggesting that it was Eve who craved knowledge—and was thus motivated by intellect—while Adam irrationally and emotionally craved only Eve's approval and attention.

**Isabella of Spain** – Isabella I was Queen of Castile, Spain from 1474–1479 and Queen of Aragon, Spain from 1479 until her death in 1504. She and her husband Ferdinand II were known as the Catholic Monarchs. An efficient but ruthless ruler, Isabella oversaw the conversion of Spanish's Jewish and Islamic populations and the financing of Christopher Columbus's 1492 sea voyage to discover the New World.

**Joan of Arc** – Joan of Arc, canonized in 1920, is a French historical figure and Catholic saint. In her youth, Joan—or Jeanne, as she was called in French—received visions of angels and saints that encouraged her to support Charles VII in his campaign to liberate France from English dominion in the early 1400s, during the Hundred Years' War. In 1430, at approximately age 18, Joan was captured, tried, and burned at the stake by Burgundian forces, a group of French nobles allied with the English.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Margaret of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden** – Margaret was Queen of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (which once included Finland) from 1387 until her death in 1412. Margaret earned a reputation as a wise, enthusiastic leader who wanted to unite the Scandinavian kingdoms—and she succeeded in doing so for over a century.

**Hannah More** – Hannah More was an English religious writer known for her poems and plays on moral and religious topics. More lived from 1745–1833, during which time she wrote anti-slavery works and founded a number of schools (along with her sister) in order to educate the poor.

## TERMS

**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. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** worked with local women of the Quaker faith—as well as fellow women's rights activist Lucretia Mott—to organize the convention, which featured many lectures and presentations about women's rights.

**Declaration of Sentiments** – At the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** introduced the Declaration of Sentiments, a document that she was the primary author of. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments (sometimes referred to as the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments) demanded that women be given “immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States.”



## 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.



### EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton delivered her “Address on Woman's Rights,” in which she made the case that women were mocked simply for “dar[ing to] assert that woman stands by the side of man [as] his equal.” In many societies at this time, women were regarded as inferior to men in every way: intellectually, physically, and morally. Throughout her groundbreaking speech, Stanton picks apart men's claims to superiority piece by piece—and in the process, she calls for equality between the sexes socially, politically, and economically. Stanton's address suggests that men and women should regard one another as equals and partners—only then, she suggests, will men and women be able to live together in harmony and “see what few have seen” by achieving equality and thus an enlightened, unprecedented state of relating to one another.

First, Stanton dissects the assertion that men are intellectually or physically superior to women. She suggests that men have been “educated to believe that [women] differ from [them] so materially” that they cannot even relate to women. But this is a failing of society: by making it so that men never have to consider women's intellectual, physical, or moral lives, men can minimize women and thus assert their own superiority. But Stanton suggests that men aren't superior to women at all. After all, men have been given far more opportunities to better

themselves intellectually and physically: men can attend universities and seminaries, they can play sports and walk freely in public, and they chase their own intellectual betterment without sharing any of their knowledge with their female counterparts. Stanton claims that it will be impossible to determine whether men are superior to women (or vice versa) until women have been, for at least a century, allowed to pursue educations and participate in public life. Only then, once the playing field has been leveled, will society be able to authentically judge men and women in relation to one another.

Next, Stanton interrogates the claim that men are morally or spiritually superior to women. As far as moral superiority, Stanton tells her audience that all men and women are made in God's image and imbued with the "spark" of divinity He saw fit to give every one of his creatures. But over the course of human history, men have been given ample opportunities to "carry out [their] own selfishness" and made "an almost total shipwreck" of their own virtues. Men, in Stanton's view, are drunk, vulgar, and immoral. But women, who have been held to impossible standards of morality and been shunted away from public life, have had no choice but to hone "the noble virtues of the martyr" and become utterly selfless in their prescribed roles as wives and mothers. By taking apart these claims to physical, intellectual, and moral superiority, Stanton is suggesting that "by nature," men and women aren't actually all that different. It is society, she believes, that has elevated men's claims to greatness while sidelining women. This has created unevenness and unfairness between the sexes—but it doesn't mean that men and women are inherently dissimilar.

Then, Stanton suggests that men and women must learn to see one another as equals, based on the evidence she's provided, if they are going to improve society together. Stanton states that she and the rest of the women's movement are united in the goal of establishing "the same code of morals for both" men and women. Women simply want to exist "upon an even pedestal with man." The only happy partnerships between men and women, she suggests, are those in which "husband and wife share equally in counsel and government." Until men realize that women can't be happy as long as they're subordinated and entrapped, men will continue to become more and more degenerate while women suffer the indignity of being excluded from education and public life. Men have, throughout history, turned to women in times of need. Stanton gives the example of Hannah More, who "was [...] besought by many eminent men" to write works that would counteract the radical, atheist ideals taking hold of English society. And it was Isabella of Spain who became the "mother of the western world" by sending Christopher Columbus to discover the new world. "Man cannot fulfill his destiny alone"—history itself has shown that societies prosper most greatly when men and women work together as equals. And yet Stanton asserts that "the earth has never seen a truly great and virtuous nation, for woman has never yet stood

the equal with man." It could be the U.S.'s great triumph, she implies, to create a society that's unparalleled by any other in the world. But that can only be accomplished if men invest in the struggle for women's rights and permit women to become their equals.

Finally, Stanton offers a perspective on the potential men and women stand to reach together when they work together as equals. Toward the end of her speech, Stanton uses vivid language to predict what the world could look like if men and women put aside their manufactured differences and view one another as equals. The world will awaken from the dark ages, she predicts, and enter a new era of social and intellectual enlightenment and freedom once men and women recognize that "God has given [them] the same powers and faculties." Once men and women come to this understanding, Stanton envisions that they'll "see what few have seen [in] the palace home of King and Queen." This suggests that there are limitless, unimaginable possibilities for a new world in which men and women, as equals, ascend to their "palace home" of mutual support and understanding. The U.S. can be the first nation to "see what few have seen" by ushering in a new era of equality unprecedented in the world.



## WOMEN, PUBLIC LIFE, AND AMERICAN PROSPERITY

When Elizabeth Cady Stanton first delivered her "Address on Woman's Rights" in 1848, most women around the world couldn't vote or hold property, and only rarely could they pursue a real education. All the while, their male counterparts attended seminaries and universities, voted in elections, and lived public lives (as opposed to domestic ones). Stanton took great issue with the fact that American women were forced to languish in their homes, never meeting their full potential, while American society developed without them. She believed that the vice, racism, and inequality in the U.S. could be remedied if American women were allowed to play an active role in society. Stanton's speech suggests that as long as women remain stunted and "half developed"—due to being barred from equal participation in public life—the U.S. will suffer politically, socially, and diplomatically.

Much of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speech calls attention to the issues and ruptures in American society. By highlighting the failings of American society—war, drunkenness, immorality, and the upholding of slavery—Stanton was offering to her audience a rousing call to action. The U.S., in her estimation, was at a low point, and it could only be raised up again through the struggle for women's rights. A form of government that exists "without the consent of the governed" cannot uplift itself and prosper. "There seems now to be a kind of moral stagnation in our midst," Stanton says of the current state of American society. "War, slavery, drunkenness, licentiousness and gluttony have been dragged naked before the people [and] we hug these



monsters to our arms.” In this quotation, Stanton is alluding to the issues plaguing American society in the mid-1840s—among them racism, war with Mexico, greed (fueled by the California gold rush in the West), and an absence of temperance laws. At the time of Stanton’s speech, there were indeed a great many conflicts and tensions rocking America, which was still a relatively young nation comprised of just 30 states. Stanton was an abolitionist, or an opponent of slavery, and a pacifist who opposed war and violence. But the U.S. of 1840 was defined by the institution of slavery, and the country was involved in foreign conflicts in the name of adding land to its territory and reaping the resources that belonged to others. In Stanton’s estimation, the fact that women’s “rights and interests [were] wholly overlooked” was contributing to the unhappiness of the American family, as well as the “drear and dark” state of American society more broadly. Half of the United States’ population couldn’t participate in elections or have any fair say in their country’s trajectory—and Stanton suggested that women could have a unique role in solving the problems blighting the U.S. if they were allowed to participate fully in society.

By highlighting how the U.S. was suffering without women’s full participation, Stanton forecasted more wars and moral transgressions unless women earned the right to shape the society in which they lived. “How shall we account for this [wicked] state of things?” Stanton asks, before answering her own question: “Depend upon it the degradation of women is the secret of all this woe, the inactivity of her head and her heart.” In other words, Stanton is saying that the “secret” of American society’s failings is rooted in how it treats its female population. By resigning women to “inactivity” and denying them the chance to pursue educations, to vote, and to put their “heart[s]” into the betterment of American society, America has doomed itself. “As long as the women of this nation remain but half developed in mind and body,” Stanton argues, America will suffer from a moral lack that penetrates every aspect of society. But if women secure the right to vote and to participate in public life, Stanton argues, they might be able to “soften down” the nation’s violence and “[refine its] vulgarity.” The instant women are allowed to “claim all the rights of a citizen,” Stanton argues, they will “buckle on [their] armor and fight in defence of [their] country.” Women are just as “wise and patriotic” as men—and once women are allowed to use their voices and their votes to influence American society, Stanton claims, the country will begin to find redemption and prosperity.

Throughout history, countries around the world have seen men turn to women “in great cris[is] of national affairs”—Stanton cites the infiltration of “French revolutionary and atheistical opinions” into English society, which was remedied by the religious writer Hannah More’s writings against “these destructive influences.” Stanton also offers up the story of Joan of Arc, who led France in a war against their English occupiers

and helped to deliver her country’s independence. Through these examples of how women have bettered their societies, Stanton suggests that American society, too, will ascend to new heights and eradicate its political and moral woes if women are allowed to have voices. When women can at last participate fully in society, Stanton argues, society will “fulfill its destiny” and reach its true potential.



## CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN'S WORTH

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1848 “Address on Woman’s Rights” is full of Christian imagery. From her unconventional analysis of the Adam and Eve

story to her reverence for Saint Joan of Arc, Stanton fills her speech with religious references and biblical allusions. In doing so, the speech advocates for feminism that’s rooted in piety and the pursuit of Christian charity. The speech argues that in devoting themselves to the pursuit of holiness, women can find purpose and meaning in allegiance to God. While they wait for the rest of the world to recognize their worth and bestow upon them their earthly right to equality, Stanton suggests, women should focus on being as morally and spiritually pure as possible.

Throughout her speech, Stanton calls attention to how men have weaponized the Bible against women for centuries. Stanton first points out how men have used the story of the fall of man—the story of Adam and Eve—to claim that men are creatures of “intellect” while women are creatures of “affection.” But in her assessment of the biblical tale, Stanton suggests that Eve was the creature of intellect, and that is why the serpent appealed to her and urged her to consume the apple that would give her the knowledge of good and evil. Adam only ate the apple after Eve urged him to, demonstrating that it was *he* who was solely motivated by his affection for Eve. Stanton also overturns the presumption that the Bible tells women they must “obey their husbands in the Lord.” Stanton suggests that it is up to women to decide “what is in the Lord”—in other words, women should be able to decide for themselves who is worthy and godly. Women, Stanton suggests, shouldn’t feel compelled to obey men who don’t aspire to moral purity and godliness just because the Bible tells them to. It is up to women—who have developed superior moral fortitude, in Stanton’s estimation—to “sit in judgement on the character of the command.” By pointing out both the fallacies in the biblical creation story and the emptiness of the command for women to “obey their husbands in the Lord,” Stanton suggests that men have used scripture to demean and control women for millennia.

In spite of all this, Stanton argues, women are actually closer to God than men due to the suffering they’ve endured and the moral purity they’ve maintained in the face of “degradation and woe.” Because women have suffered so much for so long, Stanton suggests, they find “earthly support unstable and

weak” and more easily recognize that the “only safe dependence is on the arm of omnipotence,” or on God. In other words, women have come to understand that their male counterparts will not readily provide them with the support and validation that faith in God will. Demonstrating faith and courage in the face of “degradation and woe” is a quintessentially Christian value modeled after the struggle of Jesus Christ. Because women have had no choice but to accept inferior treatment for so long, Stanton suggests, women possess an intrinsic “fallen divinity” that makes them more generous and patient. Women aren’t inherently morally superior to men—but their difficult circumstances have taught them to be more tolerant and enduring, which are qualities that allow them to be closer to God.

Stanton reminds the women in her audience that while the fight for women’s rights will be long and difficult, God has promised them equality. “Now is the time [...] for the women of this country to buckle on [their] armor. [...] ‘Voices’ were the visitors and advisers of Joan of Arc, ‘voices’ have come to us, oftentimes from the depths of sorrow degradation and despair,” Stanton tells her audience toward the end of her speech. By comparing the struggle of American women in the mid-1800s to the long-ago struggle of Joan of Arc—a young girl whose visions of angels compelled her to join the French army and resist an English occupation—Stanton suggests that God actually wants women to lift themselves up from the “depths of sorrow.” “Our struggle shall be hard and long but our triumph shall be complete and forever,” Stanton tells her audience, assuring them that what they’re fighting for is something they’ve already been promised by their creator. God, after all, placed women alongside men to enjoy Earth as their home. Now, it is time for women to place their faith in the idea that while there will be a difficult struggle ahead, their creator will not leave them behind.

Until that struggle does compel society to recognize their worth, Stanton suggests, women must focus on maintaining their moral purity and their relationships with God. “Let her know that her spirit is fitted for as high a sphere as man’s,” Stanton urges her audience. She wants women to draw strength from the knowledge that in God’s estimation, men and women are equal. While human society has relegated women to positions of obscurity and inferiority, their “spirit[s]” are just as strong and pure as ever before. “That same voice [that created men] called us into being, that same **spark** which kindled us into life is from the Divine and [...] we are responsible to Him alone.” Stanton wants the women in her audience to recognize that while men hold positions of power in American society, women aren’t going to answer to men at the end of their lives. God “alone” will judge women, and He has already endowed them with the “spark” of the “divine.” Thus, women should rest easy in the knowledge that they’ve been deemed worthy of the same rights as men by a much higher

authority than men themselves.



## WOMEN’S RIGHTS AROUND THE WORLD

Throughout her 1848 “Address on Woman’s Rights,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton references the various sufferings—and triumphs—of women all around the world. For instance, she discusses women kept as “slave[s]” in the “harems” of the East who choose to see their bondage as proof of their worth (though modern readers might find this description racist or condescending), as well as the legacies of monarchs like Queen Elizabeth of England and Queen Isabella of Spain. In this way, Stanton uses her speech to broaden her American listeners’ perspectives on the wide-ranging struggles that women around the world face. The address argues that the fight for equality must be a global one—and that American women must learn from the pain and glory of their counterparts around the world in order to unrepentantly resolve to “be free or perish.”

In order to paint a holistic view of women’s rights around the world, Stanton compares the successes of liberated, empowered women to the struggles of women who remain constrained by their positions in society. “In all eastern countries,” Stanton claims, woman is a “mere slave bought and sold at pleasure.” Women are forced to perform physical labor other otherwise serve as “the idol of [men’s] lust” as a “toy for [...] play.” By highlighting how women in far-away parts of the world struggled simply to be recognized as human, Stanton appeals to her audience’s sense of empathy—as well as their sense of superiority. Stanton goes on to claim that “[C]hristian countries” possess a “more advanced state of civilization and refinement”—and that although women still hold “inferior” positions in Europe, they can indeed advance in society. Women have led countries like Russia, England, and Spain—and women in Europe enjoy “literary attainments” and other fulfilling pursuits such as careers in science. Today, readers may find Stanton’s rhetoric offensive, since she suggests that white, Christian countries are superior. But to the American women she was addressing, her arguments would have bolstered her audience’s view of her worldliness and legitimized her entire address. By highlighting the experiences of women around the world, Stanton was helping her audience understand the stateside struggle for women’s rights in a wider context. “The feeling we so often hear expressed of dislike to seeing woman in places of publicity [is] the effect of custom very like that prejudice against colour that has been proved to be so truly American,” Stanton says in her speech. With this, she suggests that American women face a uniquely difficult struggle for equal rights because of the United States’ uniquely prejudiced stance against women and people of color.

American women, Stanton argues, must remain wary of the things that threaten the women’s movement, such as ignorance

or complacency. “The most lamentable aspect our cause wears is the indifference indeed the contempt with which women themselves regard our movement,” says Stanton at one point in her speech. Here, she’s suggesting that many American women don’t wholeheartedly participate in the women’s right movement because they’re either hopeless about the possibility of changing their circumstances or have been duped into believing that their current station is acceptable. But Stanton believes both of these perspectives are harmful to the movement—and that they can be remedied by turning to the stories of women around the world. Women who “glory in their bondage” must shake themselves from their complacency and “demand” equality. Modern readers might find Stanton’s language outdated and racist, since she’s suggesting that women in less “civilized” countries—that is, places that aren’t predominantly white or Christian—actually enjoy their “bondage” (enslavement or oppression). But American women, she suggests, know themselves to a “somewhat greater degree” and so must not languish in obscurity and powerlessness. In other words, Stanton is suggesting American women learn from the ignorance of women in other parts of the world and use their comparatively easier circumstances to fight for their rights.

To fortify the women’s movement, American women should turn to the stories of powerful women throughout the world who have achieved power and helped their countries. Stanton suggests American women look to successful, impassioned European leaders and thinkers like Hannah More, Elizabeth I, Isabella of Spain, and Joan of Arc for guidance. (Again, modern readers may find this subtly racist against non-white women, since Stanton focuses on white European women as role models.) All of these women made major changes in their countries by leading battalions, commanding naval fleets, and serving as religious, moral, and intellectual authorities. In Stanton’s view, American women should look to less-civilized women’s ignorance as a cautionary tale, but they should view women who’ve ascended to greatness in the Western world as role models. She entreats her audience to look to the rest of the world for examples of how to pursue equality (though her argument arguably flawed, since it’s biased in favor of European women). Nevertheless, she encourages American women from all walks of life to learn from women around the world as they struggle for their own advancement.



## SYMBOLS

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



## SUNLIGHT

Throughout Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1848

“Address on Woman’s Rights,” sun and sunlight symbolize the dawn of a new era of history, in which women are given equal rights in global society. Several times throughout the speech, Stanton speaks of women’s present obscurity in society. They are relegated to dark, cramped homes and prevented from being intellectually illuminated through education. They’re not permitted to participate in public life or to vote. Women are languishing in a “half-developed” form, according to Stanton—but they long to stand under the “full blaze of the sun.” Stanton refers literally to women’s desire to stand in the sun—to freely leave their homes and the other interior spaces to which they’ve been confined—and metaphorically to their desire to stand in the “light” of knowledge and power. The women’s movement, Stanton predicts, will bring a new “dawn” of openness and equality—and that dawn will give way to a bright and “flashing sunlight” that will nourish global society and allow it to grow into something better.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Northeastern University Press edition of *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* published in 1992.

### Address on Woman’s Rights Quotes

☹️ Woman alone can understand the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of her own degradation and woe. Man cannot speak for us—because he has been educated to believe that we differ from him so materially, that he cannot judge of our thoughts, feelings and opinions by his own.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 52

#### Explanation and Analysis

Having just acknowledged that ordinarily she’s a shy person who’s reticent to speak in public, Stanton states here that she has nonetheless chosen to deliver her address because “woman alone” can understand and speak to her present condition.

This passage lays the foundation for one of Stanton’s core arguments throughout the speech: men and women were created equally by God, and it is only through the way they’ve “been educated” by society that sexism and inequality have emerged. Men have been taught to think that women are radically different creatures from them. As

a result, men now shy away from discussing women's issues or advocating for women's rights because they believe they cannot relate to women at all. This is far from the truth—but as a result, women need to use their voices to express the full measure of their “degradation and woe”. Stanton is dismayed by how society has educated men and women to believe they're “materially” different—yet as long as the majority of men and women continue to see one another as adversaries and strangers, she's going to shoulder the work that must be done to convey the difficulties women face in pursuit of securing equal rights.


to invoke the idea of God's design for all of his creatures. In Stanton's view, God created men and women equally and intended for them to enjoy, in equal measure, all the fruits of the earth. God, Stanton suggested, wanted women to be able to stand in the sun not just literally but spiritually and intellectually as well. “The sphere of woman” was not nearly wide enough in Stanton's opinion, and, throughout her speech, she invokes God's divine plan for all of his creations as justification for continuing to widen that sphere and allow women to enjoy the full rights their male counterparts already enjoyed freely.

☞ Suffice it to say for the present, that wherever we turn the history of woman is sad and drear and dark, without any alleviating circumstances, nothing from which we can draw consolation. As the nations of the earth emerge from a state of barbarism, the sphere of woman gradually becomes wider but not even under what is thought to be the full blaze of the sun of civilization is it what God designed it to be.

☞ [Satan] thought that [Adam] could be easily conquered through his affection for [Eve]. But the woman [...] could be reached only through her intellectual nature. So he promised her the knowledge of good and evil. He told her the sphere of her reason should be enlarged [...] so he prevailed and she did eat. [...] Eve took an apple went to Adam and said "Dear Adam [...] if you love me eat." Adam stopped not so much as to ask if the apple was sweet or sour. [...] His love for Eve prevailed and he did eat. Which I ask you was the "creature of the affections"?

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 52


### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton introduces for the first time in her speech one of the piece's central symbols: sunlight.

Here, Stanton claims that the history of women all over the world is defined by sadness, dreariness, and darkness. Women have no relief from these dark circumstances. Confined to their homes, barred from participating in public life, and restricted from pursuing formal educations, women are both physically and metaphorically left in the dark. They're unable to feel the sun in a literal sense—women of Stanton's age were encouraged to stay home with their families and, when in public, were often forced to cover up from head to toe and only go about in the company of chaperones or husbands. But women of Stanton's time were also unable to feel the illuminating light of education and equality in a more metaphorical sense. They couldn't stand under “the full blaze of the sun,” even though they were repeatedly told that the slim rights they did have should have been more than enough.

This passage is also significant because Stanton continues

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker), Adam and Eve

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 54-55

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton considers how the story of Adam and Eve—the story of “the fall of man”—has been used as justification for keeping women down for millennia, since the story often renders Eve as a cunning temptress who convinced Adam to betray God's will. In Stanton's opinion, however, the story of Adam and Eve has been corrupted and perverted over time. Here, she lays out what she believes the truth of the story to be: the serpent knew that only Eve was the truly intellectual, curious creature, and that only she could be tempted by the promise of expanded knowledge. Stanton is suggesting that women on some level want to better themselves, expand their spheres of understanding, and participate more fully in the world around them—and for that reason, they've been demonized throughout history.

This passage is also important because men of Stanton's era often claimed that women were too emotional—or motivated by “affection”—to participate fully and productively in public life. Here, Stanton renders that



argument patently irrelevant by pointing out that it was Adam, after all, who was moved by his affection for Eve. Men, Stanton is suggesting, are “creature[s] of the affections”—not necessarily women.

By overturning a myth that had, for millennia, been used to imply that women were inherently sinful, greedy, and easily duped, Stanton was proclaiming that she and her fellow women’s rights activists were done believing men’s assessments of their own inner worlds. Stanton knew that men of her era were educated to believe that women were inherently different from them—and not just different, but inherently weaker and more changeable. In tearing down a harmful fallacy in the creation myth—a foundational story of Christendom—Stanton was suggesting that men had ruled society based on false claims for far too long.

☛ In my opinion he is infinitely woman's inferior in every moral virtue, not by nature, but made so by a false education. In carrying out his own selfishness, man has greatly improved woman's moral nature, but by an almost total shipwreck of his own. Woman has now the noble virtues of the martyr, she is early schooled to self denial and suffering. [...] Then [man] says by way of an excuse for his degradation, God made woman more self denying than us, it is her nature, it does not cost her as much to give up her wishes, her will, her life even as it does us. We are naturally selfish, God made us so. No!

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton interrogates the supposition that men are inherently morally superior to women.

Men, Stanton believed, were actually “women’s inferior in every moral virtue”—but not because they were inherently morally deficient. What Stanton believed was that a “false education” perpetuated over the course of centuries, or even millennia, had made men believe that they were superior to women and thus entitled to rights and privileges in which women could not share. Because men never questioned the arbitrary traditions that placed them above women in every aspect of life, they “carr[ie]d out [their] own selfishness” and “shipwreck[ed]” their sense of morality. By keeping women down, men have actually tipped the scales

of morality in women’s favor.

The reason that Stanton believes women of her time are morally superior to men is, essentially, because they’ve been forced into a moral framework that leaves them with no choice but to be “noble” and “self denying” at great cost to themselves. Women are forced into domestic spheres and made to care only for their husbands and children, while never being allowed to pursue their own intellectual, physical, artistic, or spiritual betterment. As a result, women *seem* to men to be inherently self-denying. And men, in Stanton’s view, knowingly use this as an excuse to claim that women have no problems giving up their very lives. But claiming that men are naturally selfish while women are naturally given is a fallacy Stanton cannot abide. Her passion in this paragraph’s final, resounding “No!” telegraphs her disgust at the idea that men and women have allowed themselves to be convinced that they’re inherently different at all—and that men are the naturally superior beings.

☛ Now your strongest men are [...] very often the small man who is well built, tightly put together and possessed of an indomitable will. Bodily strength depends something on the power of will. The sight of a small boy thoroughly thrashing a big one is not rare. Now would you say the big fat boy whipped was superior to the small active boy who conquered him? You do not say the horse is physically superior to the man—for although he has more muscular power, yet the power of mind in man renders him his superior and he guides him wherever he will.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 56



### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton seeks to debunk the idea that men are naturally physically superior to women. While the primary argument for men’s superiority is that they’re generally of larger statures than women, Stanton suggests that physical size actually has very little to do with strength and power. She uses two examples to underscore the idea that mental capacity and the will to survive often makes up more of a person’s physical strength than their size or might alone. One example is of a small boy thrashing a larger one, and the other example is of a man dominating a horse, a physically superior animal, by riding it. In arguing that

physical strength has more to do with will than size, Stanton is implicitly suggesting that women are just as capable of feats of physical strength as men. Because women have been shunted to the side for so long, they've developed extremely resilient moral centers and strong wills to endure the humiliations and frustrations of simply existing in the world as a woman. Thus, women's wills are ironclad—and men should recognize sooner rather than later that their claims to physical superiority over women are irrelevant and unfounded.

☞ We did assemble to protest against a form of government existing without the consent of the governed, to declare our right to be free as man is free.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Stanton reflects on the purpose of the Seneca Falls Convention—the first convention on the topic of women's rights, which was held just months before she delivered this address.

While many men, Stanton concedes, thought that the Seneca Falls Convention would be a meeting of women who aired grievances about frivolous topics (like having to wear dresses), Stanton uses this passage to refute men's attempts to cut down the women's rights movement. The Seneca Falls Convention was not frivolous at all—rather, women assembled there to protest a very real degradation they face each and every day. As long as women are barred from the right to vote, the United States government exists “without the consent of the governed”. Women pay taxes and live under the law of the land—yet they're prevented from being free in the same way men are free.

This passage is significant because it illustrates that Stanton is unwilling to put up with any claims that seek to lessen the intensity and severity of the need for women's suffrage. Women don't just want to be able to wear pants or to strut in public. They want to participate in the government that rules their existences. By laying out the issue at hand here in such stark terms, Stanton points out that the United States is taking advantage of nonconsenting citizens. The United States was founded on freedom and equality—yet every day, Stanton shows here, it keeps half of its population (women)

constrained by the indignity of being prevented from voting.

☞ But say some would you have woman vote? What refined delicate woman at the polls, mingling in such scenes of violence and vulgarity—most certainly—where there is so much to be feared for the pure, the innocent, the noble, the mother surely should be there to watch and guard her sons, who must encounter such stormy dangerous scenes at the tender age of 21. Much is said of woman's influence, might not her presence do much towards softening down this violence—refining this vulgarity?

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton suggests that while men often argue that women should be protected from the “violence and vulgarity” of public life, woman's presence in the public sphere might actually temper and “soften” society's ills.

Throughout her speech, Stanton repeatedly brings up the myriad arguments men use to suggest that women are unfit to vote or participate in public life—then turns them on their head by expressing how ridiculous those arguments appear from a women's point of view. Earlier in her speech, subverted the myth of the story of Adam and Eve and made a compelling counterpoint to the idea that men are inherently physically superior to women based on size alone. Now, she offers a compelling counterpoint to yet another argument: the idea that if women were allowed to vote and roam freely in public, they would be scandalized and corrupted by the “stormy dangerous scenes” of public life.

Stanton suggests that women, however, would actually have the power to refine and soften society through their fuller participation in it. The reason society is so ugly and brutal, Stanton is suggesting, is because women are absent from the most vital parts of it. A world ruled by men, she's implying, reflects the behavior of men—but a world in which women are able to vote, govern, and participate will be purer and kinder. Here, Stanton is using an argument men make to paint women as weak to suggest that women are actually stronger than men in surprising, important ways.

☛ In nothing is woman's true happiness consulted, men like to [...] induce her to believe her organization is so much finer more delicate than theirs, that she is not fitted to struggle with the tempests of public life but needs their care and protection. Care and protection? such as the wolf gives the lamb—such as the eagle the hare he carries to his eyrie. Most cunningly he entraps her and then takes from her all those rights which are dearer to him than life itself.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 59-60

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton tears down the idea that men offer women “care and protection” from the world—men themselves, Stanton suggests, are the greatest threat to women’s safety and autonomy.

This passage is significant because it illustrates the dangers of the paternalistic, exclusionary society the United States was at the time of Stanton’s address. Every moment of women’s existences, Stanton suggests, was manipulated by men. Under the guise of chivalry and care, men sought to bar women from public spaces and restrict their rights to suffrage and property ownership. The U.S.’s male-dominated society told women that they were too “delicate” and vulnerable to venture into the public sphere. And yet men—rendered in this passage as predatory wolves and eagles—did all of this simply to protect their own “dear” claim on social, moral, and political authority over women. Men, in Stanton’s estimation, were hoarding knowledge and power while denying it to the women they claimed to want the best for. By exposing the hypocrisy of this situation, Stanton was encouraging her female listeners to stop seeing men as their protectors and instead begin thinking about how best to protect themselves from the people and the forces that sought to hold them back.

☛ Let woman live as she should, let her feel her accountability to her Maker— Let her know that her spirit is fitted for as high a sphere as man's and that her soul requires food as pure as refreshing as his—let her live first for God and she will not make imperfect man an object of reverence and idolatry— Teach her her responsibility as a being of conscience and of reason—that she will find any earthly support unstable and weak, that her only safe dependence is on the arm of omnipotence.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 61


### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton posits that until women are seen as equals by their male counterparts, they should in the meantime take refuge in their “accountability to [their] Maker.”

This passage is significant because it ties in with one of the central themes of Stanton’s speech: Christianity and women’s worth. Stanton posited throughout her speech that God had created men and women as equals. She wanted women to find solace and comfort in this fact. Even if U.S. society hadn’t yet recognized that women were entitled to freedom and participation in public life, Stanton was suggesting, women could rest easy in the knowledge that God—a higher authority than man—saw them as equals, and would one day assure that women ascended to their rightful place in society. Stanton urged her listeners not to look to “imperfect man” for permission or validation. Instead, women had the “responsibility as being[s] of conscience and of reason” to look to a higher authority: God. Stanton argued that women would find their deliverance only “on the arm of omnipotence.” In other words, she believed that God was in control, and that in honing their religious and moral inner words, women could encounter a sense of fulfillment and security that their sexist society would not offer them—at least not yet.

☛ Wives obey your Husbands in the Lord. Now as the command is given to me, I am of course to be the judge of what is in the Lord and this opens a wide field of escape from any troublesome commands.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Stanton makes the radical assertion that it is up to women alone to decide for themselves what is “in the Lord,” or godly.

Throughout her speech, Stanton suggests that women have developed a unique relationship with God and Christianity

due to their exclusion from society. Unable to look to their male counterparts for support of any kind, women, confined to the domestic sphere, have instead turned to God for a sense of companionship and validation. So when male preachers and priests urge women to “obey [their] Husbands in the Lord” merely because parts of the Bible have, over the course of history, been twisted by men to suggest that women are subordinate to men, Stanton takes great issue with such a “troublesome command.”

In Stanton’s estimation, women are better judges of what is “in the Lord” because they are superior moral creatures. God didn’t make women more inherently good or devout—but because men have relegated women to the corners of society, women have developed a Christ-like impulse to turn the other cheek and accept however they may be treated by those society unfairly deems superior to them. Women, Stanton states, should take pride in their own authority as judges of what is truly godly and good. God, Stanton suggests, wouldn’t want women to blindly obey their husbands, if their husbands are cruel or morally degenerate. So Stanton is urging women to take pride in their ability to differentiate between what is good and what is not. Women had so little authority in American society at the time of Stanton’s speech that what little agency they could wrangle—in this case, by sitting in judgment of whether their husbands were even worthy of obeying—was of paramount importance.

☞ I think a man who under the present state of things has the moral hardihood to take an education at the hands of woman and at such an expense to her, ought as soon as he graduates with all his honours thick upon him take the first ship for Turkey and there pass his days in earnest efforts to rouse the inmates of the Harems to a true sense of their present debasement and not as is his custom immediately enter our pulpits to tell us of his superiority to us "weaker vessels" his prerogative to command, ours to obey—his duty to preach, ours to keep silence.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton rails against the ways in which educated men hoard their knowledge and condescend to their female counterparts rather than helping to elevate the

cause of women’s equality around the world.



This passage is a complex one, because while Stanton’s core argument about men’s imperative to share their knowledge is a righteous one, much of her language is rooted in presumptions that many modern readers might recognize as racist. Stanton essentially believes that the most privileged men—American men who have graduated with honors from the hallowed institutions of learning they’ve attended—should share the wealth of their knowledge with the least privileged women. In Stanton’s estimation, the women who need the most help are those from Eastern countries, like Turkey. Earlier in her speech, Stanton suggested that women of the Eastern world “glory in their bondage” and see the restrictions men place on them as proof of women’s value to men. But Stanton takes issue with this perspective, and she wants to liberate women in less privileged positions, or “rouse the inmates of the Harems.” This language is paternalistic, condescending, and indeed racist by today’s standards. But Stanton’s core argument—that men owe a debt to women restricted by societal prejudices—speaks to her passion for the cause of women’s rights.

Stanton’s disdain for the idea that women are “weaker vessels” than men is palpable in this passage. Stanton believed, to her core, that God had placed men and women on earth as equals. So the idea that men alone were allowed to pursue educations, to ascend to positions of religious authority, and to condescend to women about women’s inferior place in society rankled and upset her, fueling the urgency of her fight for women’s rights. This passage exemplifies Stanton’s frustration with the idea that men excitedly looked forward to opportunities to preach to women about their inferiority—yet when asked to help actually educate women and lift them up, they refused to do so. Stanton believed men around the world wanted to keep women in positions of inferiority in order to make sure their own unfettered access to educations and positions of power wouldn’t be threatened. Men wanted to keep women “silenced”—but Stanton and her fellow women’s rights activists were not going to let that happen.

☞ The only happy households we now see are those in which Husband and wife share equally in counsel and government. There can be no true dignity or independence where there is subordination, no happiness without freedom.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)



**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 64

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton makes one of the core arguments of her address on women's rights: that men and women can only experience true happiness and harmony as equals.

Throughout this section of her speech, Stanton interrogates the idea that any married couple could experience true happiness in a society in which women are cast as subordinate beings. One of the major arguments against women's suffrage was the suggestion that women's participation in public life would rupture her family's domestic bliss—if women weren't there to serve as the protectors of their homes, those homes would descend into discord. But what Stanton argued was that every American home was already full of discord because of the fundamental fact of women's subordination. Without "dignity" or any sense of "independence," women were languishing and suffering—and this surely made their homes fraught, often unhappy places.

Stanton's argument that American households would actually be better off if women had equal rights was a radical one for her time. Paternalist, condescending rhetoric at the time claimed that women needed to be shielded and protected from the world so that they would be happier, more dutiful wives and mothers. But Stanton claimed that that entire line of thinking was erroneous and indeed offensive. Women, she suggested, could only fulfill their roles in the domestic sphere if they were allowed the freedom to live public lives and participate in the society that governed them. This argument would come to be foundational to later waves of feminism that continued to expand women's rights over the course of the next 175 years, nearly, of American history.

●● The feeling we so often hear expressed of dislike to seeing woman in places of publicity and trust is merely the effect of custom very like that prejudice against colour that has been proved to be so truly American.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 65

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Stanton—who was, in addition to being a women's rights activist, also a staunch abolitionist (or opponent of slavery)—discusses the malignant prejudices plaguing the United States.

Stanton suggests that American society's reluctance to allow women into public places is an arbitrary "custom" with no real, solid reasoning behind it. The "truly American" prejudice against color—specifically Black people—was used to justify the abominable institution of slavery, which was still ongoing at the time Stanton gave her address. Stanton suggests that that prejudice, too, was baseless and outdated. Stanton's disgust for the United States' racism against Black people and sexism against women is palpable in this passage, and, by linking the two things, she's suggesting that in order for American society to be repaired, the U.S. must right its wrongs against women and people of color. While Stanton would, in later years, face criticism for her elevation of the struggle for white women's suffrage over the struggle to secure rights and protections for America's Black population, her joining of the two issues here suggests that both were of great importance to her. Stanton felt that the exclusion of women and people of color from American society was especially egregious because the United States, as a new country founded on principles of freedom and equality, had a unique opportunity to become a trailblazer as a supporter of the rights of the marginalized. But the only things that Stanton felt were "truly American" so far in the course of the United States' history were discrimination and prejudice.

●● There seems now to be a kind of moral stagnation in our midst. [...] War, slavery, drunkenness, licentiousness and gluttony have been dragged naked before the people and all their abominations full brought to light. Yet with idiotic laugh we hug these monsters to our arms.... [...] And how shall we account for this state of things? Depend upon it the degradation of women is the secret of all this woe—the inactivity of her head and heart. The voice of woman has been silenced, but man cannot fulfill his destiny alone—he cannot redeem his race unaided[.]

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanton claims that the cause of the “moral stagnation” plaguing American society is due to the “degradation” and exclusion of women.

This passage is significant because Stanton directly ties the troubles the U.S. was facing at the time to its treatment of women. One of Stanton’s central arguments throughout the speech is that because God created men and women to be equals, any society that does not give women an equal chance at suffrage, education, and participation in public life will suffer. Women are intelligent, good, and valuable—and any society that excludes them will remain stunted and “half developed.” At the time of Stanton’s speech, the U.S. was full of discord and tension. The institution of slavery was supported in the South but looked down on as a moral abomination by a growing number of people throughout the North and the country’s newly expanding westward territories. The U.S. had just won a difficult war with Mexico over those new western territories, and many pacifists (like Stanton herself) saw the war as an act of greed and extreme hubris. The “licentiousness and gluttony” Stanton speaks of reflects her contempt for men’s vulgarity and drunkenness (Stanton was a staunch advocate of temperance laws that would inhibit the consumption of alcohol). All of these issues in American society, she claims, are due to men’s propensities for greed, cruelty, debauchery, and the blind desire for dominance over others.


Stanton suggests that if women were allowed to participate in society, men would have an easier time fixing their society’s problems and “redeem[ing] his race.” Relegated to the shadows for so long, women, she argued, had developed a strong sense of resilience and self-reliance, a worthy moral code, and a strong relationship with God. Only these things, Stanton suggested, could redeem American society and pull it back from the brink of destruction. By making this argument, Stanton positioned the need for women’s rights—especially women’s suffrage—as one of immediate urgency. She wanted her audience to recognize that the U.S. was facing a tipping point—and that unless women were allowed to have a say in society, and soon, it might never be able to recover from its missteps.

☞ A new era is dawn[ing] upon the world, [...] when the millions now under the iron heel of the tyrant will assert their manhood, when woman yielding to the voice of the spirit within her will demand the recognition of her humanity, when her soul, grown too large for her chains, will burst the bands around her set and stand redeemed....

The slumber is broken and the sleeper has risen.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

This fragmented passage comes toward the end of Stanton’s speech. (Some pieces of the original draft, which passed from hand to hand for years, were damaged and later reconstructed.) Stanton uses rousing, motivating language of illumination and growth to rouse her audience toward action.

Sunlight and illumination are central symbolic images throughout the speech—and as she draws her address to a close, Stanton uses language that revolves around the bright dawn of a new era that rises “sleeper[s]” from their dark slumber. She does this to suggest that humanity is currently living in a dark, dormant period of ignorance. But when men and women rise up together as one and “burst” the chains of inequality that bind them, a new age of enlightenment will begin.

Stanton uses imagery of light and dark, as well as imagery of sleep and forceful awakening, to suggest that now is the time for those in her audience to act. Her speech is a call to action for men and women alike. In order to end a long period of inequality and ignorance, men and women will have to fight together against the restrictive powers that be. Only together can men and women “redeem” humanity’s long history of subjugating women while elevating men to positions of power and glory. Global society, Stanton suggests, has been in a period of extended slumber, during which human progress and potential have been slowed to a halt. But all of that can change, she implies, when men and women extricate themselves from the “iron heel” of oppression and seek a new future together.

●● Persist to ask and it will come,  
Seek not for rest in humbler home  
So shalt thou see what few have seen  
The palace home of King and Queen.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of her seminal address on women's rights, Stanton uses a lyrical departure into verse to bring home her point about the necessity of equality between the sexes.

In these lines, Stanton uses lyrical language to paint a compelling, inspirational portrait of the greatness to which men and women might ascend together as equals in some bright, shining future. The language is motivating and aspirational—she wants her audience to “persist to ask” for

the rights they deserve, having faith in the fact that those rights will soon come. She doesn't want the men and women in attendance to settle for humble homes like the ones they currently live in—instead, she wants them to envision the heights they could reach together, as equals. By suggesting that men and women as equal participants in society would be able, together, to “see what few have seen,” she's hinting at the power that not only men and women but the United States as a whole could wield as the first country on earth to codify into law the equality of the sexes. Stanton wants to incentivize the fight for equality not just for women, but for men as well. Men and women could ascend to “palace home[s]” and rule as mighty “King[s] and Queen[s],” she says, further working to make the fight for equality as appealing and attractive as possible. Stanton knows that the fight for women's suffrage won't be won, unfortunately, without the help of men. So in using this language to end her speech, she's trying to get both sexes to see equality as a force that could open up new realms of possibility, wealth, and grandeur.



## 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.

## ADDRESS ON WOMAN'S RIGHTS

Addressing a group of ladies and gentlemen gathered in an unnamed village, Elizabeth Cady Stanton says that several weeks ago, she asked a gentleman living in the village to review her report of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. She wanted this gentleman to offer her his objections to the Declaration of Sentiments she presented there so that his response could “serve [...] as a text on which to found [her] address” this evening.

The gentleman did so—but the comments he offered were so terse that Stanton found it difficult to reply to them. If that same gentleman is in attendance now, however, and feels like offering any more objections, Stanton and her fellow women's rights activists will be happy to answer his complaints.

Stanton is usually very shy and not accustomed to public speaking. But she is so “nerved by a sense of right and duty” that she felt compelled to appear and give this speech. “Woman's wrongs” must be laid out publicly, she says—but only a woman can understand the full scope “of her own degradation and woe.”

*In the introductory lines of her address on women's rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton establishes that humor and irony will be central to her speech. Stanton was an accomplished women's rights activist who organized the landmark Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights conference. So by beginning her speech by stating that she wanted to defer to a local gentleman, whose rebuttals to the issue of women's rights she'd then use to fuel this address, Stanton is demonstrating her gutsy brand of humor. She's also mockingly calling attention to how men's opinions dictated much of what women of her era could say and do.*



*Stanton knew that her ideas about women's rights to vote, to pursue educations, and to participate in public life were largely unpopular amongst men at the time. So in jeering at a man's terse objections to the declaration presented at Seneca Falls as she begins this new address, she's showing her audience that she is going to push forward with her work no matter what men's objections to it might be.*



*Here, Stanton tells her audience just how fully committed she is to righting the “wrongs” women are facing each and every day. She's willing to step outside of her comfort zone because she knows that the work to be done must be done by women themselves. Only women can truly understand one another's struggles and pain, so only women can communicate the depths of each other's sorrow to the world.*





Men cannot speak for women, Stanton says, because they've all been raised and educated to believe that women are so profoundly different from them that they couldn't begin to understand them if they tried. People can only understand one another based on how they understand themselves. As an example, Stanton points out that drunkards are "hopelessly lost" until they realize that they are ruled by the same laws as a sober person.

Men can no more understand how women think and feel than they can understand the minds and feelings of any other living being, human or animal. Men know little with certainty—and what they do know, they can learn only by careful observation.

The idea of women's rights, Stanton says, affects the entire family unit. Women around the world occupy a "degraded and inferior" position, and they must constantly put up with the ridicule and the cruel, lewd comments of the men around them when they try to stand by a man's side as his equal. But God has put women and men on Earth to enjoy it equally. Women have been put down for so long that they may not know there is a solution to their pain.

Though it's impossible to address the entire present condition of women in one lecture, it is safe to say that wherever one turns, the history of women appears to be "sad and drear and dark." Women don't live under the "full blaze of the **sun**," as men do—all around the world, women are regarded as inferior to their male counterparts.

*Here, Stanton begins to outline one of the fundamental problems in the relations between men and women of her time. American society in the mid-1840s reinforced, at every level, the idea that men and women were completely different beings—and that men were the superior ones. As a result, men have developed a narrow-minded view of women and women's issues. Men struggle to understand women because they have been taught only to see the world through the lens of their own righteousness. Stanton compares this state of mind to a state of dangerous and "hopeless" inebriation and impairment. Men must shake themselves out of this stupor and work to understand women as their equals.*



*Men have been raised to consider only their own humanity. They don't think of things from women's point of view, because they've been taught that women are far too different from them. But men have the power to learn about the things around them. So Stanton is suggesting here that men need to carefully observe and actively work to understand women's issues in order to help their female counterparts in the struggle for equality.*



*In this passage, Stanton begins expanding several of her speech's core rhetorical arguments. First, she makes the assertion that women's issues don't just affect women—because they affect women's husbands and children as well, they are universal problems that need a serious global reckoning. Women's rights aren't just an issue in America—women all over the world, she posits, aren't just excluded from public life but actively ridiculed and attacked when they try to change that fact. Stanton also brings religion into her argument here, widening the moral scope of her argument beyond the idea of earthly justice. By underscoring that women are exhausted and put upon, she highlights the serious toll women's degradation and exclusion takes not just on individual women but on global society as a whole.*



*In this passage, Stanton introduces some of her speech's central images. She contrasts the dreary darkness of women's history against the bright, blazing sun of enlightenment that marks men's experiences in society. Stanton introduces sunlight as a symbol of the illuminating potential of equal rights. If granted equal rights, women will be able to experience the enlightening possibilities of education and suffrage—and they'll also, more literally, be able to live lives outside of the private home spheres to which they've been relegated for centuries.*



Whether a country is civilized or “heathen” doesn’t matter—women are essentially enslaved to men. Whether they do physical labor in the fields, domestic labor in the home, or the emotional labor of being “the idol of [man’s] lust,” women are treated like property or playthings. Even in the United States, women cannot hold office or vote—all of their rights are completely overlooked and disregarded.

Many men believe in their own “natural” superiority both in mind and body. These men ought to try comparing themselves to some of the great women of history, from leaders (like Elizabeth I of England) to writers to scientists to the “famous [...] Amazones” (or Amazons, a mythical South American tribe comprised entirely of females). The men who object to women’s equality are often well-educated and well-traveled, yet they are utterly barbaric—and such men must be “vanquished.”

It can’t be decided whether men are actually superior to women until women have had a “fair trial” and have been allowed to participate in higher education and the professional world for at least a century. Until women are allowed to put themselves first and pursue the same opportunities as men, Stanton will not hear any more about men’s “boasted greatness.”

Women are tired of watching men throw away the opportunities that women so desperately yearn for. Men squander their educations while women, confined to the home, must resign themselves to abandoning even the simplest of enjoyments—music and literature, for example—in order to care for their husbands and children. While men are “infinitely happy,” women can barely “endure” their own circumstances.

*In this passage, Stanton introduces yet another facet of her complex argument in favor of women’s rights. While her argument about “heathen” societies of the world may strike contemporary readers as reductive and racist, Stanton sought to widen her audience’s understanding of women’s experiences around the world. She wanted to show that while women in the United States are better off than women in other countries, the global fight for women’s rights was going to be a long and difficult one given how degrading and humiliating so many women’s positions around the world were.*



*Here, Stanton ridicules the idea that men are naturally superior to women in any way. Such arguments had been used for centuries to excuse the subordination of women—but in highlighting various examples of women’s intellectual, moral, and physical strength, Stanton points out that this line of reasoning is nothing but a fallacy. She suggests that any men who seek to keep women in subordinate positions by using such flawed logic must be defeated. Such men are responsible for the slow but steady degradation of global society because they keep society focused on backwards, “barbaric” ways of thinking.*



*Because men have been given an unfair advantage in society up to this point, Stanton suggests, it’s impossible to know whether there is in fact a superior sex. Stanton points out that women have been barred from the spaces in which men are able to brag about their own success: education, religion, and politics were all off-limits to women of Stanton’s era. So while men claim at they’re superior to women in many ways, the truth is that they’ve just been given an unfair head start—until women are able to enjoy many decades of a leveled playing field, any arguments on which sex is the superior one will remain irrelevant.*



*This passage gets at the core of Stanton’s sadness and dissatisfaction with the state of relations between the sexes. Men are given unfair advantages over their female counterparts—and they don’t even try to even the score. Men are told they can achieve anything, and they’re given unfettered access to education, suffrage, and participation in public life. But they don’t even try to share their knowledge with women or to fight on behalf of women’s rights. Men, this passage suggests, know how difficult and miserable things are for many women—but they do nothing with their power and privilege to ease women’s suffering.*



Society, in Stanton's estimation, has hardly progressed at all since Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden. There, the two had everything they needed—but “The Evil One,” or Satan, was troubled by their happiness and decided to destroy it. Satan knew he could destroy Adam through his affection for Eve—but that Eve could only be reached through intellect. So, Satan promised Eve knowledge and offered to expand her world by inviting her to eat an apple that would offer her knowledge of good and evil. When Eve offered the apple to Adam, he ate it without thinking about it. So, all along, men are the ones who have been driven by affection and emotion rather than intellect.

Next, Stanton turns her attentions to claims of men's moral superiority. Only men are allowed to attend seminaries and study religion—yet men are nowhere near the perfect ideal of a devoted, self-sacrificing being of “perfect moral rectitude.” Even faith leaders from different sects and religions fight as bitterly among themselves as common politicians—and even priests are not unimpeachably virtuous, pure, and chaste. Religious leaders commit “sickening deed[s]” too—and if they aren't above sin, neither are doctors, lawyers, or any other men.

Men, in Stanton's estimation, are “infinitely woman's inferior in every moral virtue.” Men are selfish where women are giving—yet they excuse their own behavior by claiming that God made women to be inherently “self-denying.” In fact, women have been educated to deny themselves, whereas men have been educated to indulge themselves. It is ridiculous to claim that God would have made men and women differently—in fact, God commands men to exhibit the same selflessness and kindness he commands of women. Men should guard their virtues just as carefully as women do.

*In this passage, Stanton suggests that while society deems men as having superior intellect, there is actually precedent for their susceptibility to emotionality and irrationality. In citing the biblical story of Adam and Eve—which has been used to demonize women as greedy traitors for millennia—Stanton humorously reckons with how even contemporary religion seeks to keep women down. In reality, society needs to more closely examine its foundational myths and reassess which traits define which sex.*



*In her discussion of men's ostensible moral superiority over women, Stanton calls out the idea of moral authority as yet another way that men seek to keep women in subordinate positions even as they hypocritically flout any real moral code. Stanton suggests that even the men in society who should be held to the most stringent moral standards—religious leaders—are just as prone to vice as anyone else. By pointing out the hypocrisy and abdication of duty that blights moral leadership in America, Stanton debunks the idea that men are naturally somehow more virtuous or righteous than women.*



*Here, Stanton delves even more deeply into the intricacies of men and women's comparative morality. While men have been given license to do whatever they please and face no consequences, women have been held to stringent moral standards since time immemorial. For this reason, it may seem that women are inherently more virtuous and giving—but in fact, societal pressure has made them this way. Stanton uses religious rhetoric here to further underscore her assertion that men and women were created exactly the same—and that it only because society treats them differently that they've adapted to act differently.*



Stanton clarifies that she isn't calling for women to be or to act "less pure," but for men to act more purely. Both men and women should be guided by the same moral code. Men should suffer the same consequences women do for moral impropriety—they've gotten away with too much for too long, and as a result, the world has been filled with depravity and degeneracy. Both men and women have suffered as a result, and the world has become a much more vulgar and coarse place.

Next, Stanton turns her attentions to men's claims to physical superiority. She knows that many will be scandalized by her claims that men have no physical superiority over women. But until women have been granted opportunities for the same physical educations as their male counterparts, it is impossible to say if men are truly physically superior to women. Strength and size aren't all that matter—endurance is a tremendous part of physical strength and superiority.

The strength of the body depends on the power of the will. After all, no one claims that horses are physically superior to men. Horses have great power, but the power of man's mind allows him to assert dominance over the horse and guide it wherever he chooses. The power of the mind isn't connected to the size and strength of the body. Many small men possess great intellectual power and emotional courage.

It's impossible to know what physical feats women could achieve if they were allowed to play and romp and hunt and fight as men are. Women from other cultures and countries ride horses, till fields, and carry heavy burdens while their husbands rest and idle. Yet when women have "well developed intellectual region[s]" they're called masculine, and when men are simple and small-minded, they're called feminine. But the brain "grows with using," no matter an individual's sex.

*Stanton's activism, which would later come to be known as first-wave feminism, wasn't defined by the assertion that women deserved more than men or that they were inherently superior to men. Instead, Stanton defined her politics by the belief that men and women had been created by God as equals, and so should treat one another as equals in all matters. One sex's behaviors and actions, she suggested, always had an impact on the other. The world, Stanton believed, had become corrupt and vulgar due to society's refusal to hold men accountable for their behavior. So women didn't need the freedom to act vulgarly, too—rather, men needed to get their act together and behave in a way befitting a creature of God.*



*Here, Stanton once again debunks a baseless claim of male superiority. She suggests that physical prowess is more complicated than it seems. Men are generally larger than women, so they're seen as being stronger. But women, Stanton suggests, have plenty of unrealized and unexplored potential when it comes to physical strength. Additionally, women are skilled in enduring terrible things. Stanton isn't just referencing the dearth of women's rights—she's also tacitly acknowledging how women must often face threats of violence, especially sexual violence, due to their subordinate positions in society. Women are stronger than they seem, and it would be ridiculous to assert that men are inherently stronger than women given the head-start they've had in life.*



*By invoking the metaphor of the horse here, Stanton suggests that physical strength alone isn't a marker of power, endurance, or potential. Horses are stronger animals than men by far, yet humans' superior intellect allows them to command horses. Men use the argument of their greater physical stature to justify their cruel treatment of women—but Stanton suggests that women will no longer tolerate such a ridiculous, faulty argument.*



*In this passage, Stanton points out the numerous double standards to which women are constantly held. Women all over the world prove their physical might in many ways—yet any time they try to assert their physical or intellectual worth, they're constantly reminded that strong bodies and minds are considered exclusively masculine traits. This is yet another way that men have rigged society against women: they've claimed that weakness is inherently feminine, while strength is inherently masculine in flagrant disregard for the fundamental similarities between the two sexes.*





The women of New York have met at conventions in Rochester and Seneca Falls over the last several months to discuss their “rights and wrongs.” At these conventions, women didn’t just discuss their social rights or bash their husbands or demand to be clothed in men’s attire. In fact, men’s clothing, Stanton jokes, violate every standard of beauty that women hold dear. And after all, bishops, priests, judges, and even the Pope of Rome wear long, flowing, feminine robes in their professions.

*In this passage, Stanton asserts, once again, that women don’t want to switch places with men or usurp men’s roles in society. All they want is the freedom that comes with equal rights. Throughout her speech, Stanton is systematically debunking the many excuses men use to ignore or undermine the women’s rights movement. It’s important that in this section, she highlights the “wrongs” perpetuated against women by men who seek to corrupt or pervert the mission of the women’s rights movement.*



What the women *did* assemble to protest was a government that exists without the consent of the women it governs. Women should be free in the same way men are free. They should be represented in government—they pay taxes, after all—and they should be able to earn incomes, hold property, and fight unjust laws. All women want is to uplift their own “fallen divinity” on to an “even pedestal with man.”

*Even as Stanton uses this section of her speech to discuss women’s political and fiscal rights, she underscores the moment with an appeal couched in religious language. Both women and men are “divine” creatures because they’ve been created in God’s own image. Yet men debase women by denying them man-made rights. Stanton is underscoring that men shouldn’t have the authority to keep women down or to govern them without their consent—women have a divine right to occupy a equal position in society beside men, not below them.*



At the Seneca Falls convention, Stanton and her fellow women declared their own right to vote under the U.S. constitution. Women don’t need to be accomplished lawmakers or politicians in order to vote—even the most ignorant men, after all, have the right to participate in democracy. Men of all stripes are considered equal in America, no matter the size or value of their mind, body, or estate—so women, too, should have the right to vote.

*Here, Stanton points out that while different kinds of men are certainly unequal to one another in intelligence and morality, they’re seen as one homogenous group and are all allotted the right to vote. Even the best of women, though, are seen as being somehow lower than men, and they’re excluded from public life. This is an injustice that, in Stanton’s estimation, can no longer be tolerated.*



It is “grossly insulting” for women to watch the most vile, stupid men enjoy full rights while women cannot participate in public life. No just government can be formed without the consent of the governed—and women will not be silent on this matter until there is change.

*Here, Stanton is pointing out the compounding indignities women must bear as they watch the men in their lives enjoy freedoms that they cannot. In Stanton’s view, it is not only humiliating, but also unconstitutional, for women to be so excluded from a say in their own country’s government. By appealing not only to her audience’s emotions, but to their sense of justice as well, Stanton is hoping to get more people dedicated to the cause of women’s rights.*



Many men claim that women are too pure to participate in public life alongside the very rowdiest and worst of men. But Stanton's counterargument is that women, if allowed to participate more in the public sphere, might indeed mitigate the violence and vulgarity of the world that men have long presided over. After all, as a pacifist, Stanton believes that men should reject war and violence and learn to be better to one another—with or without the influence of women.

*Stanton is deftly anticipating and overturning every possible argument to women's suffrage (and more general participation in public life) that comes her way. By suggesting that women's participation in American society might actually stand to improve that society from the inside out, Stanton is forcing those who oppose women's rights to admit that they care more about keeping women out of public spaces than potentially bettering their society. Stanton is placing her opponents in a kind of catch-22: if women are so gentle and pure, she's suggesting, society would ostensibly become more peaceful and generous with their input.*



Many men ask what women would gain by voting. If women had a voice in government, the laws that govern women might be fairer. Women aren't consulted on anything—instead, men represent all their interests. Men try to satisfy women in other ways by insisting women are too delicate and pure to endure the “tempests of public life.” But the care and protection men give women is equal to the protection “the wolf gives the lamb.”

*Here, Stanton is dismantling the condescending, paternalistic rhetoric that men use to keep women out of public life. Men suggest that women cannot weather the “tempests,” or storms, of life in the public sphere. But as Stanton shows, such language is patronizing and demeaning, suggesting that women must be shielded and protected from everything. In reality, men aren't protecting women—they're threatening them. By comparing men to wolves and women to lambs, Stanton is externalizing the fear women experience—and the cruelty men leverage against them—in debates about what women should have the right to do.*



Women are so entrapped by men that many young women who discover the cause of women's rights ridicule it themselves. But hopefully, Stanton says, when women are granted greater freedoms, they will stop finding “glory in their bondage.” Women in the Eastern world are held in “harems” and constantly reminded of their inferiority. Women who have traveled there claim that Eastern women pity Western women for being free—Eastern women feel that the intensity of their imprisonment speaks to their value.

*In this passage, Stanton explores how women, both in America and abroad, have internalized so much of men's rhetoric against women that they actually come to see their “bondage” as a form of protection. Men want women to believe that in being excluded from public life, they're being shielded from danger. But in reality, men are just keeping women from using their voices. While Stanton's assessment of how “Eastern” women are treated is racist and reductive by today's standards, she uses the anecdote about women who see enslavement as an assessment of their great value to point out how insidious men's methods of control truly are.*



But Western women know better; they cannot be content as long as they cannot have an equal share in the world of man. Women must demand equality—they must stand beside their husbands as peers and look only to God their “Maker” as superior above them. Women must learn to see themselves as entitled to earthly rights, beholden only to the moral accountability required to one day enter Heaven.

*In this passage, Stanton appeals to her audience's sense of pride by stating that enlightened Christian women who live in the Western world are already leagues ahead of their fellow women elsewhere around the globe. She's doing so to bolster their sense of self-worth—because she knows that it is only through a sense of dignity and worth that women will be able to join the fight. It is time, Stanton says, for women to stop looking to men for approval—as long as they look to God as their only moral authority, they will be righteous, and their cause will succeed.*



To women who say that the Bible commands they must obey their husbands, Stanton has a ready reply: she claims that these women have not read the Bible correctly. God, after all, didn't tell Adam and Eve anything about being obedient to one another—throughout the Bible, God addresses men and women as equals. St. Paul's minor claim that wives must "obey [their] Husbands in the Lord" is up to women to interpret, according to Stanton—women must decide for themselves "what is in the Lord." But refuting equality between the sexes based on biblical claims is too complicated a road to go down, and so Stanton will say only that the Bible's best books actually argue for freedom, justice, and love.

*In this passage, Stanton continues to place power back in the hands of the women in her audience. For too long, society and religion have told women that they're somehow inherently lesser or subordinate to men. But by reminding the women in her audience that they alone have the power to decide what is godly, she's restoring some of their agency and helping them realize how men have weaponized potential sources of strength against them. The idea of women being able to assess for themselves "what is in the Lord" was an incredibly powerful one. Men had been seen for so long as the only worthy interpreters of the Bible—but Stanton wanted women to claim their right to decide such personal matters, like religion and belief, for themselves.*



Next, Stanton turns her attentions to the education society—"one of the greatest humbugs of the day." It is "monstrous and absurd" that women should receive inferior educations while men hoard learning to themselves. Women go ignorant unnecessarily, toiling at idle tasks like stitching while even "great strong lug[s]" of men are thoroughly educated. Men's educations come at the expense of women's. Any man who avails himself of such a thing should be morally obligated to use his knowledge to educate women around the world. It is vulgar and cruel for men to boast of their own intellectual superiority rather than help women who cannot secure educations for themselves.

*In this passage, Stanton points out one of men's great moral failings. They know that women are being unfairly denied equal access to education—and yet they don't take any initiative to share what they learn in school and in seminary with their female counterparts. Men don't think twice about the rights they're afforded—and Stanton suggests that many men don't even appreciate their educations. Yet all the while, men claim to be superior to women based on their educations. This vicious cycle is, in Stanton's estimation, vile and predatory. Men should be helping women to grow and learn rather than seeing them as useless, dull, or subordinate.*



But men are too proud and selfish to use their educations for good. Women who can neither read nor write are so generous that they do whatever is necessary to scrape together the money to educate their sons—but men never return the favor. Stanton encourages those in attendance—especially women—to stop donating money to the education society. Women have worked long enough for men while getting nothing in return.

*The education society, which helped young men without good finances gain access to educations in universities and ministries, helped many disadvantaged men. Women, as some of the primary donors to the education society, were in a way responsible for helping those young men. So here, Stanton is suggesting that because men don't share the knowledge they gain over the course their educations, women should stop sharing their time and resources as well until there is equality for all.*



Many people argue against women's education by stating that educated women would destroy the intrinsic harmony of the domestic sphere. But there's no such thing as a truly harmonious household in the first place—every housewife is forced to remain "meek and subdued" as they care for sick children and mend their husband's tattered garments. Men can't converse with their wives the way they can with their educated peers, and so women don't even receive equal attention or love from their husbands. Isolated and alone, women find few comforts in their homes in the first place.

*Here, Stanton overturns a claim that was, at the time, treated as fact: that women across America presided over harmonious, peaceful homes, and that entry into academia or the public sphere would somehow disrupt their ability to maintain that harmony. But Stanton believes that homes are not the idyllic, blissful retreats that Americans consider them to be: every home is fundamentally an unequal, discordant place as long as women must shoulder all the burdens of homemaking and reap none of the joys of equality.*



Women are forced to be perfectly subordinate and abandon all will of their own. Men require their wives to wait on them hand and foot—yet even when their wives fall ill, these men can't be bothered to care for them. God gave women “holy love” for their husbands and children—but women have been made to experience a twisted, forced version of that love. It is a mother's “sacred duty” to shield their families from violence, and so women must recognize the violence inherent in their own oppression.

*In this passage, Stanton coldly satirizes the idea that women's sense of “holy love” for and “sacred duty” to their families is any more intrinsic than men's supposed superiority. Women have been forced to put all of their available energy into doting on their husbands and children because there are no other opportunities or pursuits available to them. So while women have indeed become capable, generous caregivers, it's not because of any innate “holiness” or sanctity—it's because society has relegated women to the domestic sphere.*



Even in households where “Hen-pecked Husband[s]” defer to their wives so that everything runs smoothly, there is no harmony. The only truly happy households are the ones in which men and women share equally in the governing of their homes. No dignity can be found when one spouse is subordinate, and no happiness can be found when one spouse is not free.

*Stanton uses this moment to state that she believes domestic harmony is a fallacy perpetuated in order to keep women down. There can only be true happiness when neither men nor women rule over one another. For homes to become happy places that raise prosperous children, there must be complete equality between the sexes.*



Stanton finds it strange that men are “slow to admit” to the intellectual and moral power of women. After all, throughout history, there have been far more good queens than good kings. Monarchs like Margaret of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden and Isabella of Spain have done much more for their countries than any man has. Women are generous of spirit and strong of character—they make good, just, and fair negotiators and leaders, and they remain devoted wives and mothers even in positions of power.

*Here, Stanton cites several examples of female monarchs in Europe who have led their countries to unity, prosperity, and glory. If women in other countries can not only participate in public life but indeed occupy the highest station in their land, she's suggesting, American women must at least demand the immediate right to suffrage. Men who insist that women are unfit for public life or otherwise unequipped to have a say in how their countries are run are perpetuating a harmful lie about women's inferiority simply for the purpose of barring women from equality.*



In times of national crisis, men often turn to women for advice and aid. Women like Hannah More, a celebrated English religious thinker and writer, have steered the course of history by influencing the men around them. And it was Isabella, after all, who urged Christopher Columbus to sail to America. The public prejudice against women in the U.S. is much like the “prejudice against colour that has been proved to be so truly American.” Women like Joan of Arc have saved their countries and inspired greatness—yet there is no faith in or enthusiasm for women's capabilities in the United States.

*Not only are women capable of doing public-facing jobs and steering their governments, Stanton suggests, but men in other countries often actually seek the counsel of their female counterparts. This underscores Stanton's assertion that discrimination against women is, in many ways, a uniquely American problem. She suggests that the U.S. is laden with prejudices—not just against women—and it is time for the men in power to recognize the nation's moral failings and reckon with how these unseemly prejudices are hampering the nation's progress.*



The United States has come to a place of “moral stagnation.” War, slavery, and vice have corrupted the nation—and the forced subordination of women is the reason that so many problems have seized the country. Women languish in obscurity, unable to speak or vote, while men struggle to “redeem [their] race unaided.” Because women and men have never truly been equal, there has never been a “truly great and virtuous nation” on Earth.

As long as the women of America remain “half developed,” so too will the men they raise and send out into the world be only half developed. The husbands of women who aren’t allowed to explore their full potential will suffer, too, as long as their family units are sites of deprivation and “violence.”

American women must armor themselves against their enemies. Like Joan of Arc, they must heed the voices within them telling them to aspire to more and fulfill the prophecy of equality that has long been foretold. The struggle ahead will be long and hard, and many will oppose the fight for equal rights. But women must stay strong and steadfast as they carry the banner of their fight.

A new era is about to **dawn**. The old guard must yield, and the tyrants must surrender. Women cannot be held captive any longer—their “slumber is broken” and the days of darkness are over. All over the globe, legions of women are about to rise and resolve “to be free or perish.”

*Here, Stanton points out several of the problems currently plaguing the U.S. She makes reference to the abomination of slavery, the difficult war with Mexico that was just ending at the time of her speech, and the lack of temperance laws (an issue that was particularly important to Stanton as an advocate of temperance, or abstention from alcohol). She’s saying that there are so many problems in the U.S. that men—who have created all these problems in the first place—can’t possibly fix the nation or redeem their own failings alone. The U.S. conceives of itself as a new kind of nation—yet it is squandering an opportunity to be the world’s first authentically “virtuous” nation by pioneering unequivocal equality between the sexes.*



*In this passage, Stanton asserts that the state of women’s lives reflect the state of their nation’s health. Right now, in the U.S., women are “half developed” due to their exclusion from public life and education. And because of this, the children they raise and the husbands they attend to can only ever be “half developed” as well. Women’s degradation, Stanton asserts, is at the core of every single one of the United States’ political, social, and moral failings.*



*Stanton begins to wrap up her speech by instigating a rousing call to arms. Women in the United States, she says, must no longer accept unequal treatment. Instead, they must look to the legacies of the powerful women who have come before them and draw strength from their stories. Men are not going to take up the cause of women’s rights—it must be women themselves who advocate tirelessly for their own equality.*



*Here, Stanton brings back the symbolic imagery of sunlight, dawn, and awakening. She’s stating that a new era of women’s equality will be as warming and illuminating as a bright dawn after a long, numbing “slumber.” Women must see their freedom as the glorious thing it is so that they are more motivated to fight for it with all that they have.*





The new “flashing **sunlight**” of the women’s movement will make dark the old world dominated by men. Women will no longer live in “narrow and circumscribed sphere[s]” assigned to them by men. God, after all, gave women the same powers and faculties he gave to men—and women’s lives are just as divine as those of their male counterparts. Men must revere women “that that is of like nature with [them]selves”—in other words, women.

Women must “persist to ask,” and justice will eventually come. Men and women, together as Kings and Queens, must demand their “castles” and “palace homes.” Only then will they “see what few have seen.”

*By contrasting the bright sunlight of equality against the dank, cramped darkness of subordination, Stanton is encouraging the women in her audience to aspire toward more than they currently have. Men have relegated women to the shadows of society for too long, but women know that they deserve equality. So men, too, must be brought under the “flashing sunlight” of the women’s movement and begin to understand that God himself has ordained women to be their equals and companions.*



*Here, Stanton continues to use rousing, evocative language as she paints a portrait of men and women ascending together into shining palaces as equal rulers of their own destinies. By using the attractive imagery of palaces—and the vague, enticing language of “see[ing] what few have seen”—Stanton is allowing her audience to imagine for themselves the illuminating, limitless potential that equality will bring to every aspect of life: relationships, politics, and the edifications of men and women alike.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "Address on Woman's Rights." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Feb 2021. Web. 27 Feb 2021.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "Address on Woman's Rights." LitCharts LLC, February 27, 2021. Retrieved February 27, 2021.  
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/address-on-woman-s-rights>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Address on Woman's Rights* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *Address on Woman's Rights*. Northeastern University Press. 1992.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *Address on Woman's Rights*. Evanston: Northeastern University Press. 1992.