

A Self-Evident Truth: Angelina Grimké and Justice

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can you promote justice for yourself and others?
- **Virtue:** Justice
- **Definition** – Justice is the capacity to determine and preserve our common rights.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will consider the perspective of Angelina Grimké regarding the injustices of slavery. They will consider ways in which they can promote or fight for justice in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will evaluate the injustices of slavery in the United States.
 - Students will analyze Angelina Grimké’s beliefs about the injustices of slavery and why she believed it should be abolished.
 - Students will analyze methods by which they can promote justice in their own lives.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of justice to their own lives.
- **Background**
 - Angelina Grimké was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1805. Unlike many in her community, Angelina was an ardent abolitionist. When her views were not accepted by her Presbyterian church, Grimké converted to the Quaker religion. Soon after her conversion, Angelina moved to Philadelphia. She, along with her sister Sarah, became more heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement. The Grimké sisters spoke at abolitionist meetings across the country, and Angelina even spoke before the Massachusetts legislature. Angelina published *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* in 1836 in which she called for southern women to stand up against slavery as it violated the natural rights promised by the Declaration of Independence as well as the teachings of the Bible. Angelina married another abolitionist and, along with her sister, the three continued to fight against slavery until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Abolitionist
 - Presbyterian
 - Quaker
 - Natural rights
 - Thirteenth Amendment
 - Involuntary
 - Prominent
 - Condemnation
 - Episcopal
 - Pamphlet
 - Justification
 - Attributes
 - Hebrew
 - Prophets
 - Rebuked
 - Endure
 - Testimony
 - Dignity
 - Providence
 - Calumny
 - Fraud
 - Mandate
 - Scathing
 - Conveying
 - Pulpit
 - Resolve

- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - What was Angelina Grimké’s role in the abolition movement? How did her role differ from other anti-slavery advocates about whom you have learned?
 - What was Angelina Grimké’s purpose for delivering the testimony to the Massachusetts legislature?
 - Why did Grimké believe that speaking against slavery was important?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - “Angelina Grimké Weld’s speech at Pennsylvania Hall.” *Africans in America*. PBSOnline. WGBH Educational Foundation. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2939t.html>
 - Birney, Catherine. *The Grimké Sisters: Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman’s Rights*. New York: Haskell House, 1970.
 - Grimké, Angelina E. “Slavery and the Boston Riot.” Boston, 1835. Letter written to William Lloyd Garrison, 30 Aug. 1835. Library of Congress. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2939t.html>.
 - Grimké, Angelina Emily. *Appeal To The Christian Women of the South*. New York: New York Anti-Slavery Society, 1836.
 - Henry, Katharine. “Angelina Grimké’s Rhetoric of Exposure.” *American Quarterly* 49.2 (1997).
 - Lerner, Gerda. *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*. New York: Schocken Books, 1977.
 - Lumpkin, Katharine Du Pre. *The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974.
 - Perry, Mark. *Lift Up Thy Voice*. New York: Viking, 2001.

Handout A: A Self-Evident Truth: Angelina Grimké and Justice

Background

Angelina Grimké was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1805. Unlike many in her community, Angelina was an ardent abolitionist. When her views were not accepted by her Presbyterian church, Grimké converted to the Quaker religion. Soon after her conversion, Angelina moved to Philadelphia. She, along with her sister Sarah, became more heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement. The Grimké sisters spoke at abolitionist meetings across the country, and Angelina even spoke before the Massachusetts legislature. Angelina published *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* in 1836 in which she called for southern women to stand up against slavery as it violated the natural rights promised by the Declaration of Independence as well as the teachings of the Bible. Angelina married another abolitionist and, along with her sister, the three continued to fight against slavery until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Narrative

As the session was called to order, the roar of the bustling crowd quieted. The year was 1838, and in the packed State House of Massachusetts, the mixed audience of men and women, legislators and citizens, silenced their voices to hear hers. Angelina Grimké had come to deliver anti-slavery petitions and to demand justice for all Americans. She would be the first woman ever to speak before a legislature. Her testimony would last three days.

“... If it is a self evident truth that *all* men, every where and of every color are born equal, and have an *inalienable right to liberty*, then it is equally true that *no* man can be born a slave, and no man can ever *rightfully* be reduced to *involuntary* bondage and held as a slave, however fair may be the claim of his master or mistress through wills and title-deeds.”

Grimké’s hand had never wavered for fear of the consequences when she wrote these words a few years before her appearance. She had grown accustomed to holding unpopular views. In fact, she was adamant in her pursuit of justice—despite the criticism of family, friends, church, and fellow southerners.

The daughter of a prominent judge and plantation owner, Grimké grew up in South Carolina and witnessed firsthand the cruelties of slavery. As she grew older, her condemnation of the practice deepened. In fact, she refused to be confirmed by the Episcopal Church because it supported slavery. In 1829 at the age of twenty-four, she moved to Philadelphia to join her older sister, Sarah, in the Society of Friends (Quakers). Together they began a lifelong mission to expose the injustices of slavery.

In 1835, Grimké inadvertently found herself in the national spotlight. She had written a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*, an abolitionist publication. In her letter, she vigorously and eloquently supported Garrison’s anti-slavery efforts, never intending that the letter be published. She was shocked when Garrison decided to do just that and included her name. As the daughter of a southern slaveholder, she faced an uproar. Even those closest to her, her sister, the Society of Friends, and many in the South, urged her to take back her statements. She refused. Instead, Grimké expanded her arguments into a thirty-six-page pamphlet.

Grimké’s pamphlet, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, analyzed slavery from a biblical perspective. While some slaveholders justified the practice with examples from the Bible, she systematically examined each biblical justification. As a result of her studies, she derived standards for slavery from each situation. The abolitionist then compared the biblical example to American slavery. American slavery failed each test. Grimké argued, “The attributes of justice and mercy are made evident in the Hebrew code; those of injustice and cruelty, in the Code Noir of America.”

Grimké understood that women felt powerless to change things since they could not vote, but she believed that women could effect change in other ways. She pleaded with the southern Christian women, “What can I say more, my friends, to induce you to set your hands, and heads, and hearts, to this great work of justice and mercy.” Women could read, pray, speak, and act on the subject. She suggested they teach their slaves to read and write and to set

them free if possible. She admitted that such actions were against the law but claimed, “Such wicked laws *ought to be no barrier* in the way of your duty.”

Determined to inspire action, Grimké declared, “But you will perhaps say, such a course of conduct would inevitably expose us to great suffering. Yes! My Christian friends, I believe it would, but this will *not* excuse you or anyone else for the neglect of *duty*.” She referred to the prophets who were tortured and killed “because they exposed and openly rebuked public sins; they opposed public opinion; had they held their peace, they all might have lived in ease and died in favor with a wicked generation.”

Grimké anticipated the protests and questions. “We are *women*. How can *our* hearts endure persecution?” She responded with, “Why not? Have not *women* stood up in all the dignity and strength of moral courage to be the leaders of the people, and to bear a faithful testimony for the truth whenever the providence of God has called them to do so?” She reminded her audience of an example from the Old Testament: “Who was chosen to deliver the whole Jewish nation from that murderous decree of Persia’s King, which wicked Haman had obtained by calumny and fraud? It was a *woman*; Esther the Queen; yes, weak and trembling *woman* was the instrument appointed by God, to reverse the bloody mandate of the eastern monarch, and save the *whole visible church* from destruction.”

The pamphlet brought Grimké nationwide recognition as well as scathing criticism. She and her sister, Sarah, began lecturing in New England in the late 1830s. They traveled to more than sixty-seven towns, conveying the shocking details of the slavery system they witnessed as children. Sometimes they lectured from the pulpit. Many times their words were met with violence. They were pelted with vegetables and faced angry crowds throwing rocks. Resolutely, they believed that nothing they could suffer would compare to what those who were bound by slavery endured. The northern audiences grew as the lectures attracted more and more abolitionists, both men and women.

In a time when women did not speak in front of mixed audiences, Grimké’s lectures caused a stir across the North. Some pastors balked, and many people were scandalized. In 1837, the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts published a “Pastoral Letter” barring women from speaking from the pulpit in churches. Grimké now found herself an outsider in both the North and the South.

Such opposition only strengthened Grimké’s resolve to fight injustice on all fronts. In addition to her work against the injustices of slavery, she served as one of the first women’s rights advocates. She believed that all human beings deserve equal treatment. As part of her work, she understood that education paved the way for change. To affect the next generation, the Grimké sisters opened a school in New Jersey. They were among the first to accept girls and boys as students, an unusual practice in the 1840s. She continued her work in education throughout the Civil War.

For thirty-one years, Angelina Grimké lived in the spotlight of the abolitionist movement. Her contributions to the movements for equal rights, equal treatment, and equal justice for all are still felt today. Today, students of all races and genders sit together in classrooms across America, a reflection of Grimké’s sense of justice. She refused to accept the social norm, and, instead, relied upon her understanding of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible to guide her principles. Grimké broke out of the mold of the proper southern woman and dared to declare her belief that slavery was wrong. She devoted her life to seeking justice for all human beings and led the way for others to do the same.