A Self-Evident Truth: Angelina Grimké and Justice

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Angelina Grimké was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1805. Unlike many in her community, Angelina was an ardent abolitionist. When her Presbyterian church did not accept her views, Grimké converted to the Quaker religion. Soon after her conversion, Angelina moved to Philadelphia. There, she became more heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement along with her sister, Sarah.

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.

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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 to ever speak before a legislature. Her testimony would last three days.

“If it is a self-evident truth that all men, everywhere 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. 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. 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
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Society of Friends, commonly referred to as 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 for the letter to 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. The abolitionist compared the biblical model 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, stating, “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, “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, arguing, “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 national 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 deserved 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.