

Fiction vs. Reality: Compare the Speeches of Cora Jenkins and Sojourner Truth

By Suzi Donnelly

Overview

Langston Hughes weaves two crucial themes into his short story "Cora Unashamed": the notions of speaking out against injustice and being the unlikely bearer of truth. Using key passages from the text in combination with Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, this lesson provides students with the opportunity to consider these themes in both fictional and real circumstances. Using these two powerful literary works, students will first examine what it means to "speak out." Afterwards, they may compose and deliver their own speech.. Suitable for High school students of all levels

Objectives

- Closely examine the similarities between two texts.
- Draw references between "speaking out" and issues pertinent to own lives.
- Explore the meaning of injustice and personal response to it.
- Practice writing and oratory skills through composing and delivering a speech.

Skills Attained

- Close text reading techniques
- Applying literature to own life situation
- Composition and oratory skills
- Research skills
- Group work skills

Background Information

Sojourner Truth delivered her famous "Ain't I A Woman?" speech at the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. An emancipated slave, her speech was born out of the frustration that she felt at the convention. Since the Women's Rights Movement was greatly influenced by and grew out of the anti-slavery movement, many of the women leaders were also abolitionists. This was the case with Frances Gage, who recorded Truth's speech.

Although there are discrepancies as to how the events unfolded and what exact words were spoken, there is general agreement that Truth's speech had a heavy impact on the convention. Since then, it has gone on to become an important piece in women's literature.

According to one account, several white male ministers were holding a floor discussion about the superiority of men over women. Using biblical references, they were trying to support their position through phrases such as the "manhood of Christ" and the "sin of our first mother." They also spoke of the "superior intellect" of men.

Unable to hold back her annoyance, Truth, a six-foot-tall woman, suddenly rose to respond. Many of the women present didn't want her to speak because they didn't want their cause tied to abolition. The speech appears below.

Lesson Outline

I. Introduction and Preparation

1. Students should have previously read "Cora Unashamed." Begin the lesson by asking students to ponder the following question: If you had an opportunity to speak your mind on an issue, what would it be? What would you say? Afterwards, have them do a Quick Write (10 minutes).
2. Divide the students into small groups of about three or four persons. Ask students to share their responses to the questions above with fellow group members. After the discussion, you can take a quick poll of the kinds of issues that students thought were worth "speaking out" about. This will allow you to assess their comprehension of the assignment. Then collect their papers.

II. Close Text Reading and Comparison

1. Before asking students to read "Ain't I a Woman?" inform them about Sojourner Truth's background and the circumstances in which the speech was made. Since this is a speech, it is more effective to have it read aloud, either by the teacher or a volunteer student. Then have students review "Cora Unashamed" before rereading Cora's speech at Jessie's funeral. For your convenience, the passage from the story as well as Truth's speech are contained in this lesson plan. Distribute copies of the texts so that students can follow along. Ask them to highlight similarities between the two works.
2. Have students regroup to chart what they think each speaker is saying. They may do this simply by noting their understandings under two columns labeled, "Cora Jenkins" and "Sojourner Truth." Students may need dictionaries to look up difficult vocabulary.
3. After this discussion, have the groups share their findings with the class. Before proceeding, make sure that everyone has a common understanding of the major themes of injustice in each work.

III. Actual Text

Langston Hughes' Funeral Speech in "Cora Unashamed"

...Cora got up from her seat by the dining-room door. She said, "Honey, I want to say something." She spoke as if she were addressing Jessie. She approached the coffin and held out her brown hands over the white girl's body. Her face moved in agitation. People sat stone-still and there was a long pause. Suddenly she screamed. "They killed you away from here in the springtime of your life, and now you'se gone, gone, gone!"

Folks were paralyzed in their seats.

Cora went on: "They preaches you a pretty sermon and they don't say nothin'. They sings you a song, and they don't say nothin'. But Cora's here, honey, and she's gone tell 'em what they done to you. She's gonna tell 'em why they took you to Kansas City."

A loud scream rent the air. Mrs. Art fell back in her chair, stiff as a board. Cousin Nora and sister Mary sat like stones. The men of the family rushed forward to grab Cora. They stumbled over wreaths and garlands. Before they could reach her, Cora pointed her long fingers at the women in black and said, "They killed you, honey. They killed you and your child. I told 'em you loved it, but they didn't care. They killed it before it was..."

Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?"

"Well Children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter, I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North--all talking about rights--the white men will be in a fix pretty soon, but what's all this talking about?"

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. An ain't I a woman?

Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. An no man could head me. An ain't I a woman?

I could work as much, and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! An ain't I a woman? I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. An ain't I a woman?

He talks about this thing in the head. What's that they call it?"

A woman in the audience whispered, "intellect."

Sojourner continued, "That's it honey. What's intellect got to do with women's rights or black folks' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours hold a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

That little man in black there! He says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman.' Where did your Christ come from?

Where did your Christ come from? From God and a Woman! Man had nothing to do with him!

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to run it back and get it right-side up again. And now that they are asking to do it the men better let them."

IV. Projects

Use the following project ideas to allow students to apply the themes learned from the two works:

1. Return the Quick Write writing assignments to students. Have them write a speech on one of the issues that the class deemed worthy of "speaking out" about. Students could then practice these speeches and present them in front of the class. This lesson leads to many role playing opportunities. You could have the students in the audience pretend that they are delegates at a convention; ask them to vote for the issues that they want to take action on. This project gives students an opportunity to practice their public speaking skills. Additionally, this activity demonstrates to students how literature may trigger self examination. Note that a debate unit may be spun off from this project.
2. In small groups, have students research and identify examples from literature, film and history of people speaking out against injustices. Their findings may be presented in several ways: as a scrapbook, class presentation, video, hyperstudio presentation with film clips, tape of the students reading these speeches, poster, etc.
3. Ask students to write a comparison/contrast essay based on the charts that they constructed during the close reading of the two texts. In this application, the chart becomes a pre-writing activity and demonstrates to students another way to organize their thoughts before setting pen to paper. A Venn diagram could also be used to illustrate this aspect of the writing process.

Assessment

A variety of assessment methods be used. Teachers should create their own rubrics for the writing assignments and projects. Additionally, students may critique their peers during the class presentation phase of the lesson. In drafting a standardized evaluation sheet for this purpose, you may want to ask students to reflect on the following:

- What did I learn about this topic?
- What were the strong points about the presentation?
- How could the presentation be improved?
- What grade would I give the presenter?

After the presentations have been made, ask students to vote on the best three and present special recognitions to those outstanding students.

Another option to consider is a student self-assessment in which they are asked:

- What did you learn from this assignment?
- How do you feel about "speaking out" on issues?
- You have now done you own research into and have had experience in "speaking out." What do you think are some of the major obstacles that Sojourner Truth and Cora Jenkins faced in their respective situations?

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