

American Literature: Rhetoric of Foundational Documents



Name: _____ Date: _____

Read the primary source excerpt below from the Declaration of Sentiments (Seneca Falls Convention, 1848). Analyze how the authors adapt Thomas Jefferson's 1776 prose.

A Re-Declaration of Equality (Seneca Falls, 1848)

Selected excerpt from the Declaration of Sentiments (1848), drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The questions are original practice; the passage is a primary-source excerpt.

Source: National Park Service: Declaration of Sentiments —
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/declaration-of-sentiments-the-first-women-s-rights-convention.htm>

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

1. What is the primary rhetorical purpose of Elizabeth Cady Stanton deliberately mirroring the exact syntax and opening cadence of Thomas Jefferson's 1776 Declaration of Independence?

- A. To commit plagiarism because the delegates lacked original speechwriting skills
- B. To legitimize women's suffrage by framing it within America's sacred founding creed and exposing the hypocrisy of excluding half the nation
- C. To declare a separate independent sovereign nation on the American continent
- D. To argue for the immediate restoration of British monarchical rule

2. In the famous sentence 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal...', what critical word addition transforms the political scope of the text?

- A. The addition of 'unalienable'
- B. The addition of 'and women', expanding natural rights theory to universal gender equality
- C. The addition of 'instituted'
- D. The removal of the phrase 'pursuit of happiness'

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3. In paragraph 3, the authors substitute King George III with 'man' as the perpetrator of 'repeated injuries and usurpations.' This rhetorical substitution serves to:

- A. Condemn the systemic, structural disenfranchisement of women throughout history as an ongoing form of political tyranny
- B. Argue that men should be permanently banished from political office
- C. Suggest that colonial grievances against the British crown were exaggerated
- D. Praise American legislative assemblies for treating women fairly