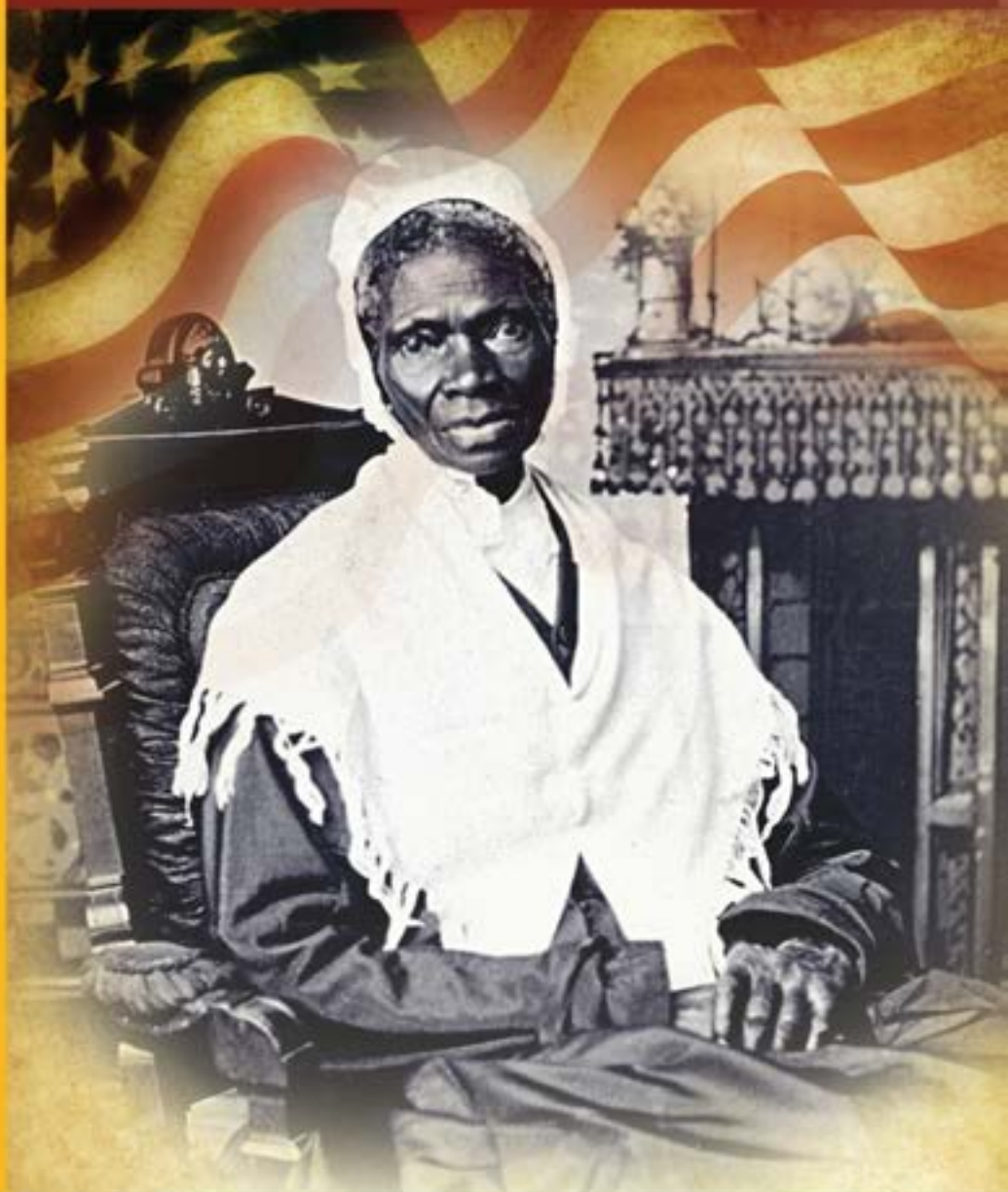


PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

NARRATIVE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH

by Sojourner Truth



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

NARRATIVE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH



Sojourner Truth



Prestwick House

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

While most information about individual slaves in the South is unknown, lost, or has been deliberately concealed, Sojourner Truth was a slave in New York State, and there are meticulous records detailing her life, in addition to those in her *Narrative*. She was born a slave in 1797, named Isabella Baumfree, and then sold three times to different masters before she was fifteen.

Brutal conditions, a forced marriage, and an owner who originally promised her freedom but then reneged caused Isabella to escape in 1826, taking only her infant. A firm believer in right and wrong, she said about her decision to escape, “I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right.” Her moral principles also dictated that she leave her four other children until they earned their own emancipation by working. While she was living with a Quaker family, New York gave all its slaves their freedom. At about this time, Isabella became a committed Christian and took the name Sojourner Truth.

She began traveling, preaching the Bible, and speaking out forcefully against slavery and for the rights of women. During this period, she met and worked closely with Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, among other abolitionists. During the Civil War, she worked tirelessly for the Union cause, even meeting President Lincoln.

Truth was one of the first feminists, and her 1851 speech, *Ain't I a Woman*,

became a rallying cry for equal rights for women, even into the twentieth century.

Until her health began to fail, Sojourner Truth also helped former slaves settle in the West. She developed ulcers on her legs, which weakened her considerably and contributed to her death at the age of 86.

Pointers

R E A D I N G P O I N T E R S

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insight

As you read *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, pay attention to the following:

1. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* as a dictated biography and a narrative
 - Since Sojourner was illiterate and could not read or write, she dictated her life story to another woman, Olive Gilbert, who recorded the events; the actual *Narrative* was not directly read or reviewed by Sojourner.
 - Consider how much of the *Narrative* is accurate (Sojourner's own words and feelings, for example) and how much is inferred and embellished by the writer.
2. Sojourner Truth's change in beliefs throughout her life
 - In the beginning, Isabella knew slavery to be the law of the land and believed that it was honorable.
 - During her life, Truth, a former slave, challenged the court system and won custody of her child, quite unusual in that era.
 - Sojourner came under the influence of the false prophet Robert Matthews, who called himself Matthias, but later she learned that his teachings were dishonest and self-serving.
 - After she was freed, Truth took it upon herself to travel around the country as an itinerant preacher. Her chosen name indicates that she was a traveler who spoke the truth about slavery.
 - She encountered and talked with followers of various faiths, such as Pentecostals, Methodists, Quakers, Shakers, and Second Day Adventists.
3. Hardships of slavery
 - Slavery in the South versus slavery in the North
 - A. In the South, slave owners owned large numbers of slaves, and slaves lived and worked together in groups; treatment was frequently much more harsh than for Northern slaves.

B. In the North, slave owners owned fewer slaves. Slaves often worked side by side with other workers and even lived in the houses of their masters. It was, as in the South, common for children of slaves to be taken from their parents and sold. Northern slaves also had fewer peers with which to share and preserve their heritage and culture.

- Because of a lack of education and illiteracy, slaves' viewpoints and thoughts were limited; Sojourner overcame these limitations and challenged authorities.
- Weaker or older slaves were often abandoned in their old age and left without care, food, and shelter. Slave owners would even grant aged slaves freedom to avoid the responsibility of owning and providing for them.
- Punishments for slaves were often severe. It is ironic that religious slave owners could claim to have strong religious beliefs, yet treat their slaves inhumanely.

4. Sojourner Truth as a symbol of a strong black woman

- In her life, she transformed herself from a slave named Isabella to a free woman who captivated audiences with her oratory.
- Women were typically not permitted to present formal speeches in public, as they had no rights and were not allowed to speak in front of mixed groups of men and women. Sojourner dodged this obstacle by preaching to informal audiences in the streets.
- Sojourner played a large part in the women's rights movement—the longest non-violent struggle in U.S. history—before it was acceptable to speak out against discrimination against women.

5. Dialect

- In the *Narrative*, dialect and language indicate one's social standing; Sojourner learned Low Dutch as a child, was beaten for it later, as it was the only language she knew, and had to learn English, which enabled her to communicate with her listeners.
- Note that Sojourner Truth's use of English, as translated for the book by Olive Gilbert, is excellent; in actuality, however, it was filled with the typical slave jargon, mispronunciations, and grammatical shortcuts.



HER BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

THE SUBJECT OF THIS biography, Sojourner Truth,[†] as she now calls herself—but whose name originally was Isabella was born, as near as she can now calculate, between the years 1797 and 1800. She was the daughter of James and Betsey, slaves of one Colonel Ardinburgh, Hurley, Ulster County, New York.

Colonel Ardinburgh belonged to that class of people called Low Dutch.[†]

Of her first master, she can give no account, as she must have been a mere infant when he died; and she, with her parents and some ten or twelve other fellow human chattels, became the legal property of his son, Charles Ardinburgh. She distinctly remembers hearing her father and mother say, that their lot was a fortunate one, as Master Charles was the best of the family,—being, comparatively speaking, a kind master to his slaves.

James and Betsey having, by their faithfulness, docility, and respectful behavior, won his particular regard, received from him particular favors—among which was a lot of land, lying back on the slope of a mountain, where, by improving the pleasant evenings and Sundays, they managed to raise a little tobacco, corn, or flax; which they exchanged for extras, in the articles of food or clothing for themselves and children. She has no remembrance that Saturday afternoon was ever added to their own time, as it is by *some* masters in the Southern States.

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

Glossary

HER BIRTH AND PARENTAGE.

Sojourner – Literally, “sojourner” means “a temporary resident.”

Low Dutch – a dialect originating from northern Germany

ACCOMMODATIONS.

HER BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

Mau-mau Bett – This name may be a corruption of “Mama”; coincidentally, a black revolutionary group in Kenya, Africa, in the 1950s took this as its name when it tried to gain independence from white-dominated rule.

shut and locked in the sleigh box – Isabella witnessed the taking of her brother and sister; in the North, slaveholders owned fewer numbers of slaves as compared with southern slave owners, so it was very common for families to be permanently separated.

HER RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

the Lord’s Prayer – Found in the Matthew and Luke chapters in the Bible, the Lord’s Prayer is a prayer that Christ taught his disciples.

Psalmist – a writer of psalms

THE AUCTION.

put under the hammer – to be put up for auction like livestock or other goods
struck off – to be sold at auction.

DEATH OF MAU-MAU BETT.

he would pole off some apples from a tree near – to use a pole to remove apples from a tree

LAST DAYS OF BOMEFREE.

Vocabulary

HER BIRTH AND PARENTAGE.

chattels – slaves

docility – obedience

ACCOMMODATIONS.

innate – native, inborn

master – a slave-owner

noxious – physically harmful

palsies – uncontrollable tremors or paralyses

rheumatisms – various conditions distinguished by pain in the joints or muscles

vestige – a trace or mark

HER BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

appellation – a name

availed – served, gained

fain – willing; to be compelled or inclined

foreboding – a prediction

harrowing – tormenting, vexing

philanthropy – goodwill toward others

HER RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

endeavor – an attempt

entreated – pleaded

impending – menacing

perilous – dangerous

refrain – to restrain

THE AUCTION.

appalling – horrifying

bereavement – being deprived of something or someone; state of losing a loved one

commenced – started