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Duration

Three class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Student handout



2. Sample multiple-choice questions



3. Answers to multiple-choice questions



4. Sample short-answer question



Objectives of Lessons

- To read a historical source with a focus on context and rhetoric
- To analyze the central arguments and resolutions of the Seneca Falls Convention
- To practice multiple-choice questions
- To practice short-answer question 1

College Board Objectives from the 2019–20 CED

- **Topic 4.11:** The Age of Reform (p. 105)
- **Key Concept 4.K:** “Explain how and why various reform movements developed and expanded from 1800 to 1848.”
- **Key Concept 4.1.III.C:** “A women’s rights movement sought to create greater equality and opportunities for women, expressing its ideals at the Seneca Falls Convention.”

Student Activities

- Close reading of a historical source (either in class or for homework)
- Group activities and class discussion based on the source
- Multiple-choice practice questions
- Short-answer practice question 1

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson plan is organized around the full text of the Declaration of Sentiments from the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. You could assign the text for homework or read it together in class over two class periods. (A natural dividing point in the text occurs with the resolutions at line 90.) Rather than provide a list of annotations or questions, we have provided five possible group activities to stimulate discussion in a different format. Alternatively, each “group activity” could also be used to lead a class discussion or as a homework assignment, depending on your preference.

For homework, there is a brief multiple-choice passage based on the Declaration of Sentiments as well as a short-answer question 1 based on sources by Benjamin Rush and Alexis de Tocqueville. This question is only loosely based on the format of question 1 and uses primary sources instead of modern secondary scholarship. The purpose of this question is to provide students an opportunity to connect Rush’s and Tocqueville’s perspectives to broader historical developments.

Historical Context

The Seneca Falls Convention is considered the first women's rights convention in history. It took place in Seneca Falls, New York from July 19–20, 1848. Heavily influenced by Quaker ideas about the role of women in church and society, the Convention issued the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, which demanded full equality for women in American law, church, and society. Two organizers of the convention, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, would go on to play a major role in nineteenth-century feminism. Crucially, Frederick Douglass was also in attendance as the only African American to participate. He argued forcefully that the demand for women's suffrage remain in the text of the Declaration of Sentiments, over the objections of Lucretia Mott, who wanted it removed. The Declaration of Sentiments was debated and revised at the Convention and was ultimately signed by exactly 100 attendees (of about 300 in total). The legacy of the Seneca Falls Convention was to put into writing an ideology of women's rights that would come to define the next several generations of women leaders. These early feminists would go on to organize annual conventions, publish a large body of feminist writing, and successfully advocate for women's suffrage first in individual states and eventually at the national level with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Guide for Group Activities and Discussion

1. The text begins by rewriting the Declaration of Independence in new terms. Ask the students to compare the text of the Seneca Falls Convention to the text of the Declaration of Independence and identify the changes in the text. Ask them why they think the authors at the Seneca Falls Convention chose to use the Declaration as a starting point?
2. Either individually or in groups, ask the students to divide the grievances (lines 32–76) into categories. The first few deal with law (lines 28–40), the next few focus on marriage and property law (lines 41–53), then taxation and employment (lines 54–61), then education (lines 62–63), then church and morality (lines 64–70), domesticity (lines 71–73), then confidence and self-respect (lines 74–76). Ask the students to consider why they begin the list with the “elective franchise” (i.e., voting rights) and why the authors arranged the list in the sequence they chose. Again, how does this compare to the categories and sequencing used by Jefferson and the framers in the Declaration?
3. Bring the students' attention to the techniques outlined in lines 85–89. Talk through the list of proposed techniques and their varying degrees of efficacy. Which would have been more effective in this time period: the pulpit or the press? Circulating tracts or petitioning state and national legislatures? You could ask students to update these methods for today's world. How do feminist and civil rights movements achieve their goals today? Which techniques and which media are most effective at changing public opinion and our laws?
4. Ask students to discuss the extent to which the Declaration of Sentiments is a religious document. There is a lot of language about the “Creator” and “Scripture” and “conscience” and the “great precept of nature.” Is this a Christian document? Is it an Enlightenment document? This discussion could allow you to thread together themes from previous units on the First and Second Great Awakenings, the Enlightenment, and even transcendentalism. You could have students take an inventory of every reference to religious language in the text and write a paragraph about the religious claims made in the passage.
5. Use the short-answer sample question as a starting point for discussion about varying perceptions of women's roles in American society. Benjamin Rush seems to agree with the view of the authors of the Declaration of Sentiments, while Alexis de Tocqueville does not. What do the authors of the Declaration of Sentiments have in common with Rush? How would they have responded to Tocqueville?

Passage

The Declaration of Sentiments, 1848

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
Line to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent
5 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
10 happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles,
15 and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience has shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while
20 evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has
25 been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the
30 establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to law in the formation of which she
35 had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men, both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right as a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of
40 legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of
45 her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her

Passage

master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty and to administer chastisement.

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper
50 causes and, in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the
children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of
the women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the
supremacy of man and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and
55 the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which
recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from
those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.
He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he
60 considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine,
or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education,
all colleges being closed against her.

He allows her in church, as well as state, but a subordinate position,
65 claiming apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with
some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world
a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral
delinquencies which exclude women from society are not only tolerated
70 but deemed of little account in man.

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as
his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her
conscience and to her God.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her
75 confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her
willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of
this country, their social and religious degradation, in view of the unjust
laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved,
80 oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist
that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which
belong to them as citizens of the United States.

In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small
amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall
85 use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall
employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the state and national legislatures,
and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this
Convention will be followed by a series of conventions embracing every
part of the country.

Passage

90 Resolutions

Whereas, the great precept of nature is conceded to be that “man shall pursue his own true and substantial happiness.” Blackstone in his Commentaries remarks that this law of nature, being coeval with mankind and dictated by God himself, is, of course, superior in obligation to any
95 other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries and at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this, and such of them as are valid derive all their force, and all their validity, and all their authority, mediately and immediately, from this original; therefore,

Resolved, That such laws as conflict, in any way, with the true and
100 substantial happiness of woman, are contrary to the great precept of nature and of no validity, for this is “superior in obligation to any other.”

Resolved, that all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature
105 and therefore of no force or authority.

Resolved, that woman is man’s equal, was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.

Resolved, that the women of this country ought to be enlightened in
110 regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by asserting that they have all the rights they want.

Resolved, that inasmuch as man, while claiming for himself
115 intellectual superiority, does accord to woman moral superiority, it is preeminently his duty to encourage her to speak and teach, as she has an opportunity, in all religious assemblies.

Resolved, that the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior that is required of woman in the social state also be required of
120 man, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman.

Resolved, that the objection of indelicacy and impropriety, which is so often brought against woman when she addresses a public audience, comes with a very ill grace from those who encourage, by their attendance, her
125 appearance on the stage, in the concert, or in feats of the circus.

Resolved, that woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her.

130 Resolved, that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.

Resolved, that the equality of human rights results necessarily from the fact of the identity of the race in capabilities and responsibilities.

Resolved, that the speedy success of our cause depends upon the
135 zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to woman an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions, and commerce.

Passage

Resolved, therefore, that, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities and same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise,
140 it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means; and especially in regard to the great subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and by speaking, by any instrumentalities proper
145 to be used, and in any assemblies proper to be held; and this being a self-evident truth growing out of the divinely implanted principles of human nature, any custom or authority adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind.

Multiple-Choice Questions: Seneca Falls Convention



Questions 1 and 2 refer to the excerpt below.

“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. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

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Seneca Falls Convention, *The Declaration of Sentiments*, 1848

1. The declaration excerpted most directly reflects a popular movement in the middle of the nineteenth century to
 - (A) establish women in the domestic sphere
 - (B) grant women the right to petition for divorces
 - (C) seek voting opportunities for women
 - (D) establish the right of women to own property
2. The ideas about gender equality expressed in the excerpt are most consistent with which of the following?
 - (A) The ideas of the Enlightenment
 - (B) The principles of republican motherhood
 - (C) The concepts governing the cult of domesticity
 - (D) Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House”

Multiple-Choice Questions with Explanations: Seneca Falls Convention



Questions 1 and 2 refer to the excerpt below.

“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. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

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Seneca Falls Convention, *The Declaration of Sentiments*, 1848

- The declaration excerpted most directly reflects a popular movement in the middle of the nineteenth century to
 - establish women in the domestic sphere
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 - establish the right of women to own property
- The ideas about gender equality expressed in the excerpt are most consistent with which of the following?
 - The ideas of the Enlightenment
 - The principles of republican motherhood
 - The concepts governing the cult of domesticity
 - Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House”

The correct answer is (C).

In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention issued *The Declaration of Sentiments*, which is excerpted here. This declaration was considered a very radical statement of women’s rights because it advocated greater gender equality and opportunities for women in a time when women had very few legal rights. It explicitly wrote against the idea that women should only be in the domestic sphere, (A), in order to argue that women should have the right to vote, (C). Although there were also smaller social movements in the nineteenth century to expand the property rights, (D), and divorce rights of women, (B), ideas about these movements are not expressed in the passage.

The correct answer is (A).

In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention issued *The Declaration of Sentiments*, which is excerpted here. This declaration was considered a very radical statement of women’s rights because it advocated greater gender equality and opportunities for women in a time when women had very few legal rights. It was explicitly patterned on early American documents such as the Declaration of Independence, that used Enlightenment ideas to argue for natural rights and personal rights, (A). On its foundational level, *The Declaration of Sentiments* argued that women should have political and civil rights. In doing so, it contradicted both the ideas of Republican Motherhood, (B), and the cult of domesticity, (C), both of which argued that women’s influence and authority should be limited to the home. Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” was the most popular literary representation of the ideas of the cult of domesticity, (D).



Short-Answer Question 1

“I know that the elevation of the female mind, by means of moral, physical, and religious truth, is considered by some men as unfriendly to the domestic character of a woman. But this is the prejudice of little minds and springs from the same spirit which opposes the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of our republics. If men believe that ignorance is favorable to the government of the female sex, they are certainly deceived...”

Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female Education*, 1787

“Thus, then, whilst they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to subsist, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man; and in this respect they appear to me to have excellently understood the true principle of democratic improvement. As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that, although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close of this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply—to the superiority of their women.”

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

1. Using the excerpts above, answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - a) Briefly describe ONE major difference between Rush’s and Tocqueville’s historical interpretations of women’s roles in early America.
 - b) Briefly explain how ONE specific historical event or development during the period 1754 to 1800 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Rush’s interpretation.
 - c) Briefly explain how ONE specific historical event or development during the period 1754 to 1800 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Tocqueville’s interpretation.