

## Maria W. Stewart Lecture

Maria W. Stewart, a free-born African-American feminist and abolitionist, often blended the spiritual and secular in her political speeches, giving them a religious quality. This worksheet will guide you through understanding Stewart's scriptural style and how it was effective by asking you to closely read an excerpt of Stewart's lecture given at the Franklin Hall in Boston on September 21, 1832:

*. . . the whites have so long and so loudly proclaimed the theme of equal rights and privileges, that our souls have caught the flame also, ragged as we are. As far as our merit deserves, we feel a common desire to rise above the condition of servants and drudges. I have learnt, by bitter experience, that continual hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind; the ideas become confined, the mind barren, and, like the scorching sands of Arabia, produces nothing; or, like the uncultivated soil, brings forth thorns and thistles. Again, continual hard labor irritates our tempers and sours our dispositions; the whole system becomes worn out with toil and failure; nature herself becomes almost exhausted, and we care but little whether we live or die. It is true, that the free people of color throughout these United States are neither bought nor sold, nor under the lash of the cruel driver; many obtain a comfortable support; but few, if any, have an opportunity of becoming rich and independent; and the employments we most pursue are as unprofitable to us as the spider's web or the floating bubbles that vanish into air.\**

\* Quoted in *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer, Essays and Speeches*, edited and introduced by Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 47.

### Directions

1. Analyze the **rhetorical situation** of the speech.
  - a. What do you already know, or what can you figure out, about the speaker, Maria W. Stewart?

Answers will vary but might include:

- African American
- abolitionist
- living in the North (Boston)
- feminist
- religious (or at least influenced by religious rhetoric)
- feels oppressed even though she is technically free

b. Who does she seem to be speaking to and how do you know?

Her use of “the whites” (which is distancing) and her use of the inclusive “we” suggests that she is primarily addressing other free people of color.

c. What is Stewart’s purpose, or what is she trying to achieve, with this speech?

Stewart is drawing her audience’s attention to the inequities that exist even in the North where African-Americans are technically free. She is highlighting the negative effects of the kind of work that many African-Americans must continue to do to urge them to fight for more.

2. Analyze Stewart’s **language choices** and style.

a. Fill out the following chart with contrasting pairs of words or phrases.

<b>Negative effect</b>	<b>Positive quality</b>
<i>deadens</i>	<i>energies</i>
<i>benumbs</i>	<i>faculties</i>
<i>confine</i>	<i>ideas</i>
<i>barren</i>	<i>mind</i>
<i>irritates</i>	<i>tempers</i>
<i>sours</i>	<i>dispositions</i>

(Students or instructor might identify other contrasts that Stewart sets up, too.)

b. What language or concepts in the speech remind you of the Declaration of Independence?

There are explicit mentions of “equal” and “rights,” words that are foregrounded in the Declaration of Independence. Although the speech doesn’t use the words “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the situations described suggest that life and liberty are available for freed blacks, but happiness is not.

c. How would you describe the tone of the excerpt?

Answers might include:

- preachy
- emphatic
- admonishing
- bitter
- urgent

3. Think about how Stewart’s **language choices** are effective for her **rhetorical situation**. Why are these language choices effective, both in general, and for her specific audience and purpose?

This speech feels like a sermon with its contrasts between good and bad, religious and moral language, figurative language, and inciting tone. This, along with the allusions to the Declaration of Independence — a revered document — would have been effective for stirring up dissatisfaction with the status quo and inspiring people to take action. This particular brand of religious rhetoric might have resonated especially well with African American audiences who were accustomed to being moved by this type of language, and call-and-response rhythms, in church settings.