

Close Reading of  
Sarah Grimké's Letter VII  
On the Condition of Women in the United States

Sarah Grimké's usage of the third person perspective to state facts sharply contrasts with her usage of the first person perspective to describe her personal beliefs and experiences. This distinction between narrative voices humanizes the argument while making it harder for an antagonistic reader to dismiss the piece as simply "written in the heat of passion or prejudice" (Angelina Grimké 194). By deliberately dissociating herself from the women she talks about and being inherently unassociated with the men that stifle them, Grimké rises above society to objectively and honestly criticize it.

The Grimké sisters lived in a time when women were viewed on the same mental plane as children. As is still the case with women today, they constantly had to fight to be taken seriously, but be careful to not fight too aggressively lest they perpetuate the stereotype of women-can't-control-their-emotions. The way the sisters toed this line is most obvious in Sarah's sister's *Appeal to Christian Women*. In one breath she reassures the reader "be not afraid then to read my appeal; it is not written in the heat of passion or prejudice" and in the next she is forced to justify "why appeal to women" at all (Angelina Grimké 194). Thus, by 1837 – when Sarah wrote *Letter VII on the Condition of Women in the United States* – she would be very accustomed to pioneering unpopular but ultimately just opinions.

To effectively posit these unpopular opinions Sarah was forced to address two audiences. The first was obviously the group of people she was trying to educate and

convince. The second was “a body of readers unaccustomed to criticism from a woman, particularly from a woman unauthorized to assume the role she assigned herself” (Carlacio 248). To address the former audience her arguments needed to be authentic and come from the heart. To protect against the latter audience the arguments needed to be rooted in facts that were indisputable. In order to strike this balance Grimké adopted a tone that reminded me of a passionate but removed observer, almost like an anthropologist studying a long forgotten culture. She emphasizes the invariant facts in the third person: “A woman goes out to wash, works as hard in proportion as a wood sawyer, or a coal heaver, but she is not generally able to make more than half as much by a day’s work” (196). However, these facts are occasionally interlaced with personal commentary in first person: “There is another class of women in this country, to whom I cannot refer, without feeling the deepest shame and sorrow” (196). By switching narrative voices, Sarah is able to clearly delineate the objective parts of her argument that cannot be disputed without denying reality and the subjective parts of her argument that represent her own personal conclusions and must be weighed on their merits.

She could not achieve the same effect by writing entirely from a first person perspective because it would come across as the biased observations of a bitter person. Women’s opinions are generally under valued, and overly passionate writing would play into the stereotype that women have nothing to add to serious conversations. Similarly she could not achieve the same effect by writing entirely from the third person perspective because it would come across as impersonal and not convey context. By not explicitly drawing conclusions she would force the readers to draw their own

conclusions, and if history has been any indication, they would not be the conclusions she was aiming for.

The Grimké sisters came from a privileged background as Carolina-born aristocrats (Lerner 277). As Sarah was never a slave nor a washer it makes sense that she utilizes the third person to describe slave women and workingwomen. However, she also conspicuously utilizes the third person to describe “the butterflies of the fashionable world” among whom her lot was cast early in life: “I am constrained to say, both from experience and observation, that their education is miserably deficient; that they are taught to regard marriage as the one thing needful” (195). This begs the question: to what extent did Sarah consider herself a member of the society she was criticizing? Why did she not use the first-person plural and say something along the lines of “we are taught to regard marriage as the one thing needful”? I believe she utilizes third person narrative here simply because she does not consider herself a member of the aristocracy any more than she considers herself a slave, a workingwoman, or even a man upholding the patriarchy. Rather she considered herself removed from the society she saw so many faults with. She ideologically removed herself from society much how she removed herself from the Presbyterian Church to join the Quakers, and in turn even removed herself from that (Lerner 282). She held steadfastly to her convictions and would only subscribe to any predefined beliefs so long as they prescribed to hers. She was an individual fighting for the collective, not for herself, and her writing reflects that.

As we have already seen, Grimké pioneered the literature of the era advocating for women’s education and equal pay for equal work. However, any analysis of the

Grimké sister's work would be remiss to not highlight their work for abolition. In this piece in particular, she points out the hypocrisy of purportedly Christian slave-owning men who violate their female slaves. The only two instances in which she uses the first person plural point of view are referrals to the laws of "our southern cities" and "our slave states" (196). There are two explanations for this shift in perspective. Perhaps she has a personal affinity for her southern Christian background. Perhaps she feels that using possessive pronouns will enforce a sense of responsibility in her readers to enact change. Probably both.

Ultimately in this letter Grimké advocates for a few main points: women's education, the liberation of women from housework, equal pay for equal work, and the emancipation of female slaves. She usually uses third person to introduce facts, first person singular to express opinions, and very sparingly uses first person plural to emphasize collective duty. These perspectives symbolize how Grimké contextualizes herself in society: she observes others, forms opinions for herself, and (if needed) will join the collective to bring about reform.

## Works Cited

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