**Grimké Sisters**

(1792–1873) and [Angelina Emily Grimké](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelina_Emily_Grimk%C3%A9) (1805–1879), known as the **Grimké sisters**, were 19th-century [Southern American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) [Quakers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker), educators and writers who were early advocates of [abolitionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism_in_the_United_States) and [women's rights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_rights). Angelina Grimké married abolitionist[Theodore Dwight Weld](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Dwight_Weld) in May 1838, and changed her name to **Angelina Grimké** **Weld**.

They were born in [Charleston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charleston%2C_South_Carolina), [South Carolina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina), USA. Sarah Moore Grimke was born on November 26, 1792 and Angelina Emily Grimke was born on February 20, 1805. Throughout their lives, they traveled throughout the [North](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_United_States), lecturing about their first hand experiences with[slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery) on their family's [plantation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantation). Among the first American women to act publicly in [social reform movements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_reform), they received abuse and ridicule for their abolitionist activity. They both realized that women would have to create a safe space in the public arena to be effective reformers. They became early activists in the [women's rights movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_rights).

Early life and education

Judge [John Faucheraud Grimké](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Faucheraud_Grimk%C3%A9), the father of the Grimké sisters, was a strong advocate of slavery and of the subordination of women. A wealthy planter who held hundreds of slaves, Grimké fathered 14 children with his wife. He served as chief judge of the [Supreme Court of South Carolina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Court_of_South_Carolina).

Sarah was the eighth child and Angelina was the youngest. Sarah said that at age five, after she saw a slave being [whipped](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagellation), she tried to board a steamer to a place where there was no slavery. Later, in violation of the law, she taught her personal slave to read.

Sarah wanted to become a lawyer and follow in her father's footsteps. She studied constantly until her parents learned she intended to go to college with her brother[Thomas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Smith_Grimk%C3%A9); subsequently they forbade her to study her brother's books or any language. Her father supposedly remarked that if she "had not been a woman, she would have made the greatest [jurist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurist) in the land." After her studies were ended, Sarah begged her parents to allow her to become Angelina's godmother. She became part mother and part sister to her much younger sibling, and the two sisters had a close relationship all their lives.

Before the [Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War), the sisters discovered that their late brother Henry had had a relationship with Nancy Weston, an enslaved mixed-race woman, after he became a widower. They lived together and had three mixed-race sons: Archibald, Francis and John (who was born a couple of months after their father died). The sisters arranged for the oldest two to come north for education and helped support their nephews: [Archibald](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archibald_Grimk%C3%A9) and [Francis J. Grimké](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_J._Grimk%C3%A9).

Francis J. Grimké was a Presbyterian minister who graduated from [Lincoln University (Pennsylvania)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_University_%28Pennsylvania%29) and Princeton Theological Seminary. In December 1878, Francis married [Charlotte Forten](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Forten_Grimke), a noted educator and author, and had one daughter, Theodora Cornelia, who died as an infant. The daughter of Archibald, [Angelina Weld Grimké](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelina_Weld_Grimke), (named after her aunt) became a noted poet. When Sarah was nearly 80, to test the [15th Amendment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifteenth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution), the sisters attempted to vote.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

Social activism

In 1835 Angelina wrote a letter to the editor of [William Lloyd Garrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lloyd_Garrison)'s paper, [*The Liberator*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Liberator_%28anti-slavery_newspaper%29), which he published without her knowledge. Immediately both sisters were rebuked by the Quaker community and sought out by the abolitionist movement. The sisters had to choose: recant and become members in good standing in the Quaker community or actively work to oppose slavery. They chose the latter course.

Alice Rossi says that this choice "seemed to free both sisters for a rapidly escalating awareness of the many restrictions upon their lives. Their physical and intellectual energies were soon fully expanded, as though they and their ideas had been suddenly released after a long period of germination." Abolitionist Theodore Weld, later Angelina's husband, trained them to be abolition speakers. Contact with like-minded individuals for the first time in their lives enlivened the sisters.

Sarah was rebuked again in 1836 by Quakers when she tried to discuss abolition in a meeting. They were the first female public speakers in the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States). The Grimké sisters first spoke to “parlor meetings” which consisted of women only for this was considered proper. Interested men frequently sneaked into the meetings. The audiences got larger and larger and the Grimké sisters began to speak in front of a mixed audience of both men and women. The Grimké sisters challenged social grounds on two different levels. The sisters spoke for the antislavery movement, at the time there was widespread disapproval of this; many male public speakers of this issue were criticized by the press. The public speaking of the Grimké sisters was also criticized because they were women. A group of ministers composed a letter citing the Bible in reprimanding the sisters for stepping out of the “[woman’s proper sphere](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_sphere),” which was characterized by silence and subordination. They came to understand that women were oppressed and that, without power, women could not address or right the wrongs of society. Such an understanding made these women into ardent feminists.

Angelina Grimké wrote her first tract, "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South (1836)," to encourage southern women to join the abolitionist movement for the sake of white womanhood as well as black slaves. She addressed Southern women in sisterly, reasoning tones. She began with an effort to demonstrate that slavery was contrary to the Declaration of Independence and to the teachings of Christ. She discussed the damage both to slaves and to society. She advocated teaching slaves to read, and freeing any slaves her readers might own. Although legal codes of slave-holding states restricted or prohibited both of these, she urged her readers to ignore wrongful laws and do what was right. "Consequences, my friends, belong no more to you than they did to [the] apostles. Duty is ours and events are God's." She closed by exhorting her readers to "arise and gird yourselves for this great moral conflict."

The sisters created more controversy when Sarah published "Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States (1836)" and Angelina republished an "Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States" in 1837. In 1837 they went on a tour of [Congregationalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational_church) churches in the north east. In addition to denouncing slavery, an acceptable practice in radical circles, the sisters denounced race prejudice. Further, they argued that (white) women had a natural bond with female, black slaves. These last two ideas were extreme even for radical abolitionists. Their public speaking for the abolitionist cause continued to draw criticism, each attack making the Grimké sisters more determined. Responding to an attack by [Catharine Beecher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharine_Beecher) on her public speaking, Angelina wrote a series of letters to Beecher, later published with the title "Letters to Catharine Beecher." She staunchly defended the abolitionist cause and her right to publicly speak for that cause. By the end of the year, the sisters were being denounced from Congregationalist pulpits. The following year Sarah responded to the ministers' attacks by writing a series of letters addressed to the President of the abolitionist society which sponsored their speeches. These became known as "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes," in which she defended women's right to the public platform. By 1838, thousands of people flocked to hear their [Boston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston) lecture series.

In 1839 the sisters edited *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, a collection of newspaper stories from southern papers written by southern newspaper editors.

Until 1854, Theodore was often away from home, either on the lecture circuit or in Washington. After that, financial pressures forced him to take up a more lucrative profession. For a time they lived on a farm and operated a boarding school. Many abolitionists, including [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Cady_Stanton), sent their children to the school. Eventually, it grew to become a [cooperative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative), the [Raritan Bay Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raritan_Bay_Union). Although the sisters no longer spoke publicly, they remained privately active as both abolitionists and feminists.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

Neither Sarah nor Angelina initially sought to become feminists, but felt the role was forced onto them. Devoutly religious, these Quaker converts' works are predominantly religious in nature with strong biblical arguments. Indeed, both their abolitionist sentiments and their feminism sprang from deeply held religious convictions. Both Sarah, who eventually emphasized feminism over abolitionism, and Angelina, who remained primarily interested in the abolitionist movement, were powerful writers. They neatly summarized the abolitionist arguments which would eventually lead to the [Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War). Sarah's work addressed, 150 years early, many issues that are familiar to the modern feminist movement.

Selections from writings

Although Angelina's letter was published before Sarah's work, analysis of the texts and the sisters' large body of work demonstrate that much of Angelina's analysis of the creation story originally came from Sarah. Although the two sisters shared the same interpretation of the creation story, their discussions of it are very different. Angelina uses her interpretation of the creation story to bolster her position that women were not created as a gift or for possession of men but rather as unique, intelligent, capable, creatures deserving equal regard, rights, and responsibilities with men.

Sarah's discussion of the creation story is much longer, more detailed, and more sophisticated. Both stories emphasize the equality of men and women's creation but Sarah also discusses Adam's greater responsibility for the fall. To her, Eve, innocent of the ways of evil, was tempted by the crafty serpent while Adam was tempted by a mere mortal. Because of the supernatural nature of her tempter, Eve's sinfulness can be more easily forgiven. Further, Adam should have tenderly reproved his wife and led them both away from sin. Hence, Adam failed in two ways, not one. By analyzing the Hebrew text and by comparing the phrasing used here with the phrasing used in the story of Cain and Abel, Sarah found that God's "curse" is not a curse but a prophecy. Her concluding thought asserts that women are bound to God alone.

From Angelina Grimke's "Letter XII Human Rights Not Founded on Sex" (October 2, 1837):

The regulation of duty by the mere circumstance of sex, rather than by the fundamental principle of moral being, has led to all that multifarious train of evils flowing out of the anti-christian doctrine of masculine and feminine virtues. By this doctrine, man had been converted into the warrior, and clothed with sternness, and those other kindred qualities, which in common estimation belong to his character as a man; whilst woman has been taught to lean upon an arm of flesh, to sit as a doll arrayed in "gold, and pearls, and costly array," to be admired for her personal charms, and caressed and humored like a spoiled child, or converted into a mere drudge to suit the convenience of her lord and master. Thus have all the diversified relations of life been filled with "confusion and every evil work." This principle has given to man a charter for the exercise of tyranny and selfishness, pride and arrogance, lust and brutal violence. It has robbed woman of essential rights, the right to think and speak and act on all great moral questions, just as men think and speak and act; the right to share their responsibilities, perils and toils; the right to fulfill the great end of her being, as a moral, intellectual and immortal creature, and of glorifying god in her body and her spirit which are His. Hitherto, instead of being a help meet to man, in the highest, noblest sense of the term as a companion, a co-worker, an equal; she has been a mere appendage of his being, an instrument of his convenience and pleasure, the pretty toy with which he whiled away his leisure moments, or the pet animal whom he humored into playfulness and submission. Woman, instead of being regarded as the equal of man, has uniformly been looked down upon as his inferior, a mere gift to fill up the measure of his happiness. In "the poetry of romantic gallantry," it is true, she has been called "the last best gift of God to man"; but I believe I speak forth the words of truth and soberness when I affirm, that woman never was given to man. She was created, like him, in the image of God, and crowned with glory and honor; created only a little lower than the angels, - not, as is almost universally assumed, a little lower than man; on her brow, as well as on his, was placed the "diadem of beauty," and in her hand the scepter of universal dominion. Gen 1: 27, 28. "The last best gift of God to man"! Where is the scripture warrant for this "rhetorical flourish, this splendid absurdity?" Let us examine the account of the creation. "And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man." Not as a gift - for Adam immediately recognized her as part of himself - ("this is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh") - a companion and equal, not one hair's breadth beneath him in the majesty and glory of her moral being; not placed under his authority as a subject, but by his side, on the same platform of human rights, under the government of God only. This idea of woman's being "the last gift of God to man," however pretty it may sound to the ears of those who love to discourse upon. " The poetry of romantic gallantry, and the generous promptings of chivalry," has nevertheless been the means of sinking her from an end into a mere means - of turning her into an appendage to man, instead of recognizing her as a part of man - of destroying her individuality, and rights, and responsibilities, and merging her moral being in that of man. Instead of Jehovah being her king, her lawgiver, her judge, she has been taken out of the exalted scale of existence in which He placed her, and subjected to the despotic control of man.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimk%C3%A9_sisters#cite_note-1)

As an added bonus, Angelina also wrote: ". . . whatever is morally right for a man to do, it is morally right for a woman to do. I recognize no rights but human rights - I know nothing of men's rights and women's rights; for in Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female.

... I prize the purity of his character as highly as I do that of hers. As a moral being, whatever it is morally wrong for her to do, it is morally wrong for him to do.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimk%C3%A9_sisters#cite_note-2)

From Sarah Grimke's "Letter 1: The Original Equality of Woman" July 11, 1837. Sarah precedes the following quote with the comment that all translations are corrupt and the only inspired versions of the Bible are in the original languages.

We must first view woman at the period of her creation. "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them." In all this sublime description of the creation of man, (which is a difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other. Created in perfect equality, they were expected to exercise the viceregency intrusted to them by their Maker, in harmony and love.

Let us pass on now to the recapitulation of the creation of man: - "The Lord god formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone, I will make him an help meet for him." All creation swarmed with animated beings capable of natural affection, as we know they still are; it was not, therefore, merely to give man a creature susceptible of loving, obeying, and looking up to him, for all that the animals could do and did do. It was to give him a companion, in all respects his equal; one who was like himself a free agent, gifted with intellect and endowed with immortality; not a partaker merely of his animal gratifications, but able to enter into all his feelings as a moral and responsible being. If this had not been the case, how could she have been a help meet for him? I understand this as applying not only to the parties entering into the marriage contract, but to all men and women, because I believe God designed woman to be a help meet for man in every good and perfect work. She was part of himself, as if Jehovah designed to make the oneness and identity of man and woman perfect and complete; and when the glorious work of their creation was finished, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.

This blissful condition was not long enjoyed by our first parents. Eve, it would seem from history, was wandering alone amid the bowers of Paradise, when the serpent met with her. From her reply to Satan, it is evident that the command not to eat "of the tree that is in the midst of the garden," was given to both, although the term man was used when the prohibition was issued by God. "And the woman said unto the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall Ye touch it, lest Ye die." Here the woman was exposed to temptation from a being with whom she was unacquainted. She had been accustomed to associate with her beloved partner, and to hold communion with God and with angels; but of satanic intelligence, she was in all probability entirely ignorant. Through the subtlety of the serpent, she was beguiled. And "when she was that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat.

We next find Adam involved in the same sin, not through the instrumentality of a super-natural agent, but through that of his equal, a being whom he must have known was liable to transgress the divine command, because he must have felt that he was himself a free agent, and that he was restrained from disobedience only by the exercise of faith and love towards his Creator. Had Adam tenderly reproved his wife, and endeavored to lead her to repentance instead of sharing in her guilt, I should be much more ready to accord to man that superiority which he claims; but as the facts stand disclosed by the sacred historian, it appears to men that to say the least, there was as much weakness exhibited by Adam as by Eve. They both fell from innocence, and consequently from happiness, but not from equality.

Let us next examine the conduct of this fallen pair, when Jehovah interrogated them respecting their fault. They both frankly confessed their guilt. "The man said, the woman who thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat. And the woman said, the serpent beguiled men and I did eat." And the Lord God said unto the woman, "Thou wilt be subject unto they husband, and he will rule over thee." That this did not allude to the subjection of woman to man is manifest, because the same mode of expression is used in speaking to Cain of Abel. The truth is that the curse, as it is termed, which was pronounced by Jehovah upon woman, is a simple prophecy. The Hebrew, like the French language, uses the same word to express shall and will. Our translators having been accustomed to exercise their lordship over their wives, and seeing only through the medium of a perverted judgment, very naturally, though I think not very learnedly or very kindly, translated it shall instead of will, and thus converted a prediction to Eve into a command to Adam; for observe, it is addressed to the woman and not to the man. the consequence of the fall was an immediate struggle for dominion, and Jehovah foretold which would gain the ascendancy; but as he created them in his image, as that image manifestly was not lost by the fall, because it is urged in Gen 9:6, as an argument why the life of man should not be taken by his fellow man, there is no reason to suppose that sin produced any distinction between them as moral, intellectual, and responsible beings. Man might just as well have endeavored by hard labor to fulfill the prophecy, thorns and thistles will the earth bring forth to thee, as to pretend to accomplish the other, "he will rule over thee," by asserting dominion over his wife.

Authority usurped from God, not give.

He gave him only over beast, flesh, fowl,

Dominion absolute: that right he holds

By God's donation: but man o'er woman

He made not Lord, such title to himself

Reserving, human left from human free,

Here then I plant myself. God created us equal; - he created us free agents; - he is our Lawgiver, our King, and our Judge, and to him alone is woman bound to be in subjection, and to him alone is she accountable for the use of those talents with which Her Heavenly Father has entrusted her. One is her Master even Christ.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimk%C3%A9_sisters#cite_note-3)

In response to a letter from a group of ministers who cited the Bible in reprimanding the sisters for stepping out of "woman's proper sphere" of silence and subordination, Sarah Grimke' wrote *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* in 1838.

She asserts that "men and women were CREATED EQUAL.... Whatever is right for a man to do, is right for woman....I seek no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God destined us to occupy."[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimk%C3%A9_sisters#cite_note-4)