

The Defining Moment For A Feminist Figure:  
An Analysis Of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "The Solitude Of Self"

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### Introduction to “The Solitude of Self”

How does one rekindle concern in a social movement that people have grown disinterested in? How does one recapture the essence of an ideology in a single act of oratory? According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “as social movements grow and age, new rhetorical obstacles emerge” that a rhetor must overcome (*Man Cannot Speak* 1:133). The arguments that might have held such strength and power initially seem to fade away in time. In 1892, Elizabeth Cady Stanton delivered a speech that brilliantly overcomes the objections of male politicians and other obstacles to which Campbell refers. This speech was one of the last public addresses given by this important historical figure and the rhetorical strategies used were enough to make many people take notice of the significance of the women’s liberation movement once again.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech, “The Solitude of Self” redefined the way the ideology of the first wave of American feminism was viewed. In this speech, Cady Stanton presents a “philosophical statement of the principles and values underlying the struggle for woman’s rights in the United States” (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:133). After a long career of activism, Cady Stanton chose to deliver a powerful speech explaining the “humanistic underpinnings” of the feminist movement, as they had never been addressed before (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:133). The speech was greatly admired by her audience members and her peers. To many, this speech was the most impressive work Cady Stanton ever produced. Close friend and fellow activist, Susan B. Anthony, said “The Solitude of Self” was “the speech of Mrs. Stanton’s life” and the Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, another important speaker in the women’s movement, called the speech “an English classic” (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:35). Critics, such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, have praised the speech saying “It stands as a rhetorical masterpiece because it explores the values underlying natural rights philosophy...responds creatively to the

problems faced by social movements...and because it still has the capacity to speak to contemporary audiences” (*Man Cannot Speak* 2:371). Another critic, Susan Shultz Huxman, praises the piece saying “...it captured the understanding of woman’s rights that she (Stanton) first articulated in 1848, but in a more strikingly eloquent way to a much larger public more inclined to listen to a fresh, humanistic appeal to self-sovereignty” (315).

### Significance of “The Solitude of Self”

Known to many as the most important speech of Cady Stanton’s life, I think this speech has great significance. Given the fact that this speech was presented before two bodies of men, the House Committee on the Judicial and the Senate Committee for Woman Suffrage, who had the power to make Cady Stanton’s arguments come to life persuasion had to play a very important role. Cady Stanton’s speech expands upon the natural rights philosophy, a core concept of the women’s liberation movement, by arguing that each person, both men and women, faces the same solitary condition of life and in turn receives individual responsibility. Through her speech we can learn how persuasive strategies play a part in promoting a social movement and advance ideology. I think her arguments are also significant because they are still relevant today, even though they were delivered so many years ago. Women in the United States might enjoy the right to vote and access to the same education, but there are still women in other places in the world that do not have such equality. The message of this speech goes beyond gender and can be applied to any marginalized group of society. The issues of women’s rights that Cady Stanton addresses in her speech are still present in our world and resonate with many. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell said, this speech has power because “it transcends its time and place to talk of what it is to be human and of how our common humanity is the basis of all rights” (*Man Cannot Speak* 1:143).

“The Solitude of Self” proves to be an interesting piece of rhetorical history that is worthy of further exploration. As a result of this analysis I would like to argue that Elizabeth Cady Stanton advances the ideology of the feminist movement and creates persuasion by making humanistic appeals and arguing for the solitary nature of each man and woman. In this piece, I will critique the persuasive power and the use of feminist ideology in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech. I will also explore new ways to view the speech and sources of inspiration for Cady Stanton in order to gain a clearer understanding of the speech as a whole. To begin my analysis and establish the rhetorical situation, I will give detailed descriptions of the speech, the rhetor delivering the speech, the occasion on which the speech was delivered, and the audience receiving the speech.

#### Description of Speech, Rhetor, Occasion, Audience and Response

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech, “The Solitude of Self,” presented Stanton’s ideas about an issue that was fundamental to the feminist movement: self-reliance. Throughout the speech Cady Stanton makes the argument that as humans we go through life alone and it is only ourselves which we can truly rely upon. She specifically focuses on the solitude that women feel and describes the ways in which they are “handicapped and yet responsible for their lives” in each stage of progression (Stanton 376). This speech is unique because in it Cady Stanton addresses the issue of natural rights philosophy in a way that had not been done before in the context of women’s liberation. Previously, it had been argued that women deserved the same rights as men based on the idea that all individuals have certain rights as humans (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:133).

In her address, Cady Stanton argues that all humans, including women, deserve these rights because as humans they are unique, alone and individually responsible for themselves

(Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:136). Her imaginative language and references to other literary works give life to her speech and present a fresh take on her traditional message. She references a character in Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus" that has had her hands and tongue removed against her will to dramatically show how women have been stripped of their natural rights yet expected to combat the trials brought by life (Stanton 376). Cady Stanton also suggests that women should be granted the same educational rights as men so they will be well equipped to face the "fierce storms of life...for they beat on her from every point of the compass, just as they do on man, and with more fatal results, for he has been trained to protect himself" (Stanton 376). The concept of self-sovereignty is also used by Cady Stanton to justify women's rights to represent themselves in government and courts as free-thinking, individually responsible human beings. According to Elizabeth Griffith's *In Her Own Right*, Cady Stanton's speech showed that "no one could represent anyone else, nor could individuals depend on legal remedies to improve their conditions; they would still have to confront their trials alone" (204). Through these arguments Elizabeth Cady Stanton presents a solid case for granting women the same civil privileges of men and a new take on the rationale behind it.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the most significant figures associated with the earliest wave of women's liberation in the United States. This fiery advocate for women's rights devoted her life to working to grant women the right to vote, receive equal opportunities to education in a collegiate setting, use birth control and many other liberties that American women freely enjoy today (Banner 104 – 107). Cady Stanton also worked to secure civil rights for groups other than women and was known for her work for the abolition of slavery. In 1869, Cady Stanton joined with fellow activist Susan B. Anthony to form the National Woman

Suffrage Association, which later became the National American Woman Suffrage Association, in an effort to unify the movement for women's suffrage and rights (Banner 91).

In 1892, at the time Cady Stanton delivered "The Solitude of Self", she was a distinguished older woman who was described in the press as "looking as if she should be the Lord Chief Justice with her white hair puffed all over her head, and her amiable and intellectual face marked with lines of wisdom" (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:137). At the time of this address, Cady Stanton was seventy-six years old, yet despite her age she still showed signs of her impressive rhetorical skill and dedication to the cause of women's liberation.

"The Solitude of Self" is a speech that was delivered in three separate occasions in the year of 1892. After an impressive forty year career working for the advancement of women in the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton decided to deliver her last public address, "The Solitude of Self." The first presentation of Cady Stanton's speech was to the House Committee on the Judiciary in the morning of January 18, 1892 (Griffith 203). Some sources indicate that the speech was read for Cady Stanton to the House Committee on the Judiciary, but her personal diary says the speech was presented in all three situations by her (Huxman 326). In the afternoon of that same day, Cady Stanton delivered the same speech at the twenty-fourth annual national convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. In this particular setting, the speech was delivered as Cady Stanton's farewell address to the NAWSA. "The Solitude of Self" was Cady Stanton's last appearance in front of the NAWSA and marked the end of her long career with the association. The final delivery of "The Solitude of Self" was two days later to a hearing of the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage. In addition to being spoken in front of live audiences, it is interesting to note that the text of Cady Stanton's speech was also published

for public circulation in the *Woman's Journal* soon after the live speaking engagements (Griffith 204).

“The Solitude of Self” was presented in three separate speaking engagements and also distributed by the press through written publication. The audiences to which Cady Stanton was speaking were already quite familiar with the practices and beliefs of the women’s liberation movement. Through her presidential addresses and other congressional speeches, Cady Stanton had built a level of familiarity in the audiences. This level of familiarity gave Cady Stanton the ability to diverge from her usual form of speech and present a fresh perspective about the women’s liberation movement to the audiences. Just a few years earlier Cady Stanton had not been so well received in the congressional meetings. Cady Stanton remarked about a previous speech before the Senate committee in 1878 saying she had difficulty holding the attention of the men, particularly the chairman of the committee who “stretched, yawned, gazed at the ceiling...effectually preventing the establishment of the faintest magnetic current between the speakers and the committee” (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:135).

The House Committee on the Judiciary and the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage were both composed of male audience members. At that time in American history, women had not been granted the right to vote let alone hold office or be on governmental committees. Cady Stanton presented the speech to the two committees in an attempt to lobby for the NAWSA, which she did on a yearly basis. These men had the power to begin the radical social changes that Cady Stanton was seeking, specifically the passing of a federal amendment granting suffrage to women (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:134). The speech was a success with both the House and the Senate committees. The Senate committee wrote a favorable majority report about the



speech and the House committee requested 10,000 copies of the speech be made for distribution throughout the country (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 2:371 – 72).

When Cady Stanton delivered “The Solitude of Self” to the NAWSA national convention she was faced with a very receptive audience. In that setting, Cady Stanton’s audience was hundreds of fellow women’s rights and suffrage activists. Both men and women were present at the convention to hear Cady Stanton’s last address to the association. Though her radical ideas were not always accepted by her peers, in this setting the audience was prepared to temporarily set aside their differences honor the life work and contributions of this great historical figure. According to the convention records, Cady Stanton received a standing ovation for her speech and phenomenal service to the association at the end of the speech (Griffith 204).

#### Arguments for Self-Sovereignty and Devices Employed

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech, “The Solitude of Self,” is a piece that specifically argues that natural rights should be applied to all people and explores the answer to the question “Why should women be granted the same rights as men?” In her speech, Cady Stanton makes clear arguments that women should be able to participate in society in the same ways that men do. As the speech develops she begins to articulate the ideals that are at the heart of the feminist ideology. She emphasizes the idea of individual responsibility, the solitude of self and the natural rights philosophy in her speech. These major themes, which appear over and over in the speech, become the basic beliefs of feminist ideology that Cady Stanton is advocating. Her speech is a strong example of the core values of the feminist movement during the early 1900s and a philosophical statement about, what Campbell calls, the “humanistic underpinnings of feminism” (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:133).

In order to make an argument for the individual responsibility of women and the solitude of self, Cady Stanton uses imaginative language and paints vivid pictures in the minds of her audience. The idea that women have individual responsibility and face the world alone, just as men, is at the core of her entire speech. This idea, which is reflected in her thesis, is the following:

“The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition; from all the crippling influences of fear – is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life” (Stanton 373).

She argues that each person experiences the solitude of the human self, which is the idea that each person is a unique individual that faces the world alone and is solely responsible for their actions. Once this is acknowledged, Cady Stanton claims that women will be able to move forward into their ultimate goal of equal treatment. She argues that “nothing strengthens the judgment . . . like individual responsibility . . . the responsibilities of life rest equally on man and woman, that their destiny is the same, they need the same preparation for time and eternity” (Stanton 380). Recognizing your own self-sovereignty and having others recognize yourself sovereignty is an important part of being a human. These are rights that all people should be eligible for. Later in the piece, Cady Stanton dramatically characterizes different ways in which each human walks alone throughout their human journey. She also utilizes repetition to further add to the rhetorical effect of the particular section. Cady Stanton said:

“Alike amid the greatest triumphs and the darkest tragedies of life, we walk alone. On the divine heights of human attainment, eulogized and worshipped as a hero or saint, we

stand alone. In ignorance, poverty and vice, as a pauper or criminal, alone we starve or steal; alone we suffer the sneers and rebuffs of our fellows; alone we are hunted and hounded through dark courts and alleys, in by-ways and highways; alone we stand in the judgment seat; alone in the prison cell we lament our crimes and misfortunes...In hours like these we realize the awful solitude of individual life, its pains, its penalties, its responsibilities” (Campbell 376).

Through this imaginative language she paints a picture of the solitude that seems to be inevitable for humans, no matter what their sex may be. According to Cady Stanton, no matter our position in life is we must face each situation alone. For this reason, Cady Stanton makes the argument that because women face the same solitude that men face, they should be granted the same rights and privileges as citizens. They should be given the same level of individual responsibility as men. Many opponents to the feminist movement argued that women could be protected by men and in turn did not need the rights of men. To these claims Cady Stanton responded:

“Whatever the theories may be of woman’s dependence on man, in the moments of her life, he cannot bear her burdens. Alone she goes to the gates of death to give life to every man that is born into the world; no one can share her fears, no one can mitigate her pangs; and if her sorrow is greater than she can bear, alone she passes beyond the gates into the vast unknown” (Stanton 380).

Due to the fact that women must face their trials alone, it seems ridiculous to Cady Stanton to assume that men will be able to weather the storms of life for women. To her, this is an impossible action. The only solution to the solitude each soul feels is to grant individual responsibility and recognize self-sovereignty. Cady Stanton takes this argument further by saying that women should be able to represent themselves in government and cast their own

vote, as no man can accurately reflect the experiences of a woman. They must be given the chance to speak for themselves.

Also at the core of the feminist ideology and “The Solitude of Self,” lies the idea of natural rights. Natural rights philosophy asserts that humans have rights simply because they are human beings. According to this idea, certain rights are inalienable and cannot be revoked for any reason. However, at the time of Cady Stanton’s address, these natural rights did not apply to women. Cady Stanton’s “The Solitude of Self”, challenged this idea by presenting arguments for the inclusion of women in the natural rights philosophy. She argues that the reason people have these unalienable rights is because they are individually responsible, separate and alone in the world. She says, “there is a solitude which each and every one of us has always carried with him, more inaccessible than the ice-cold mountains, more profound than the midnight sea; the solitude of self” (Stanton 384). Before this speech, the feminist movement had used the natural rights philosophy as part of their ideological platform but it had not been clearly justified. Cady Stanton’s words answered why all people, including women, should have these natural rights and explained how the “personhood of each individual is of such ultimate significance” (Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak* 1:136).

“The Solitude of Self” is a shining example of the ideals that lie at the core of the feminist ideology, supported by Cady Stanton. As these passages have demonstrated, the solitude that is known to every person and the individual responsibility that corresponds to that solitude are ideas that are essential to feminist ideology. Also, the idea of natural rights is explicitly explained in this piece and directly becomes a part of the feminist ideology.

Cady Stanton delivered a compelling speech that not only articulated her thoughts about the necessary rights of women in society but also put forth a very solid philosophical foundation

for this social movement. Cady Stanton also gave persuasive arguments for why women should be granted equality in society, including the argument consistent with the natural rights philosophy and the idea that all humans pass through life in a state of solitude that cannot be borne by anyone else. This text represents a perspective that was marginalized and invites the audience to consider this new perspective as an alternative. Cady Stanton ends her speech by posing a rhetorical question to the audience to consider, “Who, I ask you, can take, dare take on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?” (Stanton 384). After presenting all of her arguments, laying out the foundation of the feminist movement, she specifically asks her audience to assess their own human capabilities, whether or not they are able to take on the responsibilities of another human being. This speech asks the audience to temporarily reject the dominant view of the time and consider an alternative. The ideas of the feminist movement were not seen as socially acceptable, but Cady Stanton’s speech asked the audience to consider something different. She presents arguments that attempt to appeal to all human beings and to the humanistic side of people. Her rhetoric puts the audience in a position to view this marginalized group of people, women, as individuals. She asks her audience to view women as people who walk through the life the same way others, or men, do and face the same triumphs and trials. In order to gain the attention of the audience she uses vivid imagery, narratives and dramatic metaphors about the human experience to argue for this new social movement. These techniques provide the support for her arguments and allow her audience to view the feminist movement as an attempt to bring the inalienable rights to women.

#### “The Solitude of Self”: Sentimental Style and Public Confessional Rhetoric

When analyzing “The Solitude of Self” it becomes important to also consider the motivations of the speaker and the purpose that the speech serves. Through my analysis, I

believe Cady Stanton is using this speech as a final capstone on her career as a feminist activist. However, I also have come to find more selfish motives behind the speech. Cady Stanton is using this speech to communicate her feelings about her life and her career. It is almost as if we have been given a peek into her soul and into her own private musings. Edwin Black describes this idea in his piece “The Sentimental Style as Escapism” where he explains the significance of what he calls the “sentimental style” that is so characteristic of nineteenth century oratory. Black says this type of speech “functions as display when, intentionally or not, promotes a disparity between its actual audience and its implied audience” (“Sentimental” 104). He goes on to say that we, as the audience, feel as if we are over-hearing the speech or eavesdropping on the inner thoughts of the orator. Black says, “We may, for various reasons, be sympathetic to the speech; we may hope for the success of the rhetorical transaction; but the difference between that condition and the condition of being the auditor to the speech is the difference between passivity and involvement” (“Sentimental” 104). This speech seems to be functioning as a speech of display more than anything else. Cady Stanton does not introduce any new ideas or offer any real challenges to the audience as she had done in many of her other addresses. This speech seems to serve a different function. I believe that Cady Stanton wanted to use these speaking opportunities as a time of personal reflection, over the things she had accomplished in her career and the essential beliefs of the feminist movement. As Black says in his article “The Sentimental Style,” audiences are less likely to feel involved in the speech if it appears to be a speech of display. Thus, they will be more apt to view it in a positive light and to appreciate it rather than offer intense criticism.

As I have previously noted, I believe Cady Stanton’s “The Solitude of Self,” was a speech of display that probably served the speaker more than the audience. When the speech is

viewed through this lens more credit can be given to its name. This speech has often perplexed rhetoricians and historians, as it does not follow the traditional rules of rhetoric, yet it has proven to stand the test of time and remain a rhetorical classic. In her essay about “The Solitude of Self,” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell points out that “Rhetorically, the address violates nearly all the traditional canons. It makes no arguments; it provides no evidence...It has no logical structure” (qtd. Tell, 174). However, this does not mean that the speech should be tossed out as it does not follow the traditional rules. I agree with Dave Tell’s estimate of the situation when he says “while Campbell is certainly correct that the speech violates the ‘traditional canons’ of rhetoric, this does not mean that it has ‘no logical structure’ (174). As critics, we have to find a new way to view the speech in order to understand it.

In “Stanton’s ‘Solitude of Self’ as Public Confession,” Tell argues for a new perspective to be used to view the speech, which I believe is a better view to have. Tell says “the entirety of the speech - and the conclusion in particular - is superintended by a confessional logic in which the end (*telos*) of rhetoric is not persuasion, but rather the disclosure of the self” (174).

According to Tell, the traditional ways of looking at rhetoric are not appropriate for this speech, as it follows a different set of rules, that of the confessional sort. It makes sense why rhetoricians have not been able to fully appreciate the speech in the past. Tell goes on to say that “if we are to understand the now – ubiquitous discourse of confession, we must be willing to situate confessional texts outside of traditional canons and traditional “modes of thought and speech” (174). It seems a mystery to many why Cady Stanton seems to ignore her audience by not directly addressing them in this speech. I believe these lingering questions can be answered when the speech is viewed in terms of a confessional. In order for one to make a confession an immediate audience is not necessary. Cady Stanton could have been talking to herself or to

anyone who cared enough to listen. The important thing to remember is Cady Stanton was using this act as a way to disclose information about her inner self not to persuade a situated audience. Taking this into account, it makes more sense why the audience does not play a big role in the development of this particular speech.

Tell suggests that two main things can be learned about the nature of the genre of public confession which apply very well to Cady Stanton's speech. The first thing that can be learned is that the public confession is a secular genre (Tell 180). Though Cady Stanton's speech is confessional in regards to her attempt to disclose information about her most intimate self, she makes no reference to actions that need to be forgiven or things that need to be corrected. Tell ventures to say "the modern public confession replaces the admission of sinfulness with the disclosure of the self as the ultimate goal of the genre" (180). Though it is tricky to make generalizations like this I believe Tell's statement holds up very well when applied to "The Solitude of Self." Cady Stanton is not trying to confess her sins publicly, but rather, she is giving the audience a window into her soul through her public confession. The second thing that can be learned from Cady Stanton's speech is that "the public confession is a decisively modern genre" (Tell 180). As I previously discussed, "The Solitude of Self" fails miserably when the traditional canons of rhetoric are applied. As Campbell notes, the speech goes against "nearly all traditional canons" through its lack of evidence and true arguments (qtd. Tell 180). It is through this realization that we are able to call those traditional views into question and usher in new ways of thinking about rhetoric. Once we realize that public confession is a modern phenomenon, which cannot be explained in terms of "persuasion, argument, and evidence," we can gain a greater appreciation for it and understand how it achieved canonical status and popularity in the study of rhetoric. I believe Tell encapsulates the ideas of this new genre perfectly in the conclusion of his



essay when he writes “the power of the public confession lies not in the arguments advanced or the evidence provided. Rather, the power of the public confession resides in its performative capacity to evoke an ‘encounter’ with the self” (181).

In her article, “With Great Sympathy: Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Innovative Appeals to Emotion,” Susanna Kelly Engbers says Cady Stanton’s speech is better suited for a newer view of rhetoric “which claims as its end communication” instead of the traditional persuasion (318). I wholly agree with Engber’s observations. I would argue that through her confessional speech, Cady Stanton was trying to communicate with her audience, either her direct or indirect audience, more than she was trying to persuade them. I believe “The Solitude of Self” is a speech in which the rhetor was trying to communicate exactly what solitude looks like, through her use of vivid imagery and carefully-crafted narratives.

I believe something can be learned of Cady Stanton, the person, through the analysis of her work. Edwin Black expresses this idea saying, “Discourses contain tokens of their authors. Discourses are, directly or in a transmuted form, the external signs of internal state . . . certain features of a linguistic act entail certain characteristics of the language user” (“The Second Persona” 110). At that point she had resigned from her work with the NAWSA and was coping with the loss of her husband of many years. Much of the life Cady Stanton had known had suddenly been stripped away from her and the sorrow she felt manifests itself in “The Solitude of Self.” It suddenly seems appropriate for life to be described as a lonely quest when one considers the rhetor’s stage of life.

Cady Stanton also gives us a peak into her own history as she weaves pieces of her own life into the speech through her use of stories and examples. At one point she describes “the young wife and mother, at the head of some establishment, with a kind husband to shield her

from the adverse winds of life, with wealth, fortune and position” who has to “manage a household, have a desirable influence in society . . . train her children and servants well” (Stanton 377). This picture of the wealthy, wedded, society woman clearly corresponds to the life Cady Stanton had known in her own youth and gives the audience another peek into her life. She goes on to describes another period of life “when the pleasures of youth are passed, children grown up, married and gone, the hurry and bustle of life in a measure over, when the hands are weary of active service” and a woman who exercises “life-long participation in public affairs”, which more closely resembles the stage of life she was at when the speech was delivered (378). This depiction of the older self, shows another picture of solitude as the woman is left to face the world with no children, no active responsibilities and feeble hands. I believe these portions of the speech give a better understanding of Cady Stanton’s mindset when she was delivering the speech, as well as brief personal history, which ultimately helps gain a more complete understanding of her motivations.

### The Influence of American Transcendentalism

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech condenses the basic philosophy of the feminist movement into a solitary speech, an act that previously had not been done. Through my research, I have come to find another important source that had an influence on the development of this speech. The work of the American Transcendentalists had a great effect on the philosophy behind Cady Stanton’s speech. Transcendentalism, a philosophical movement that existed in the United States from 1830 to 1850, can be described as “a movement for religious renewal, literary innovation, and social transformation” (Grodzins, “Transcendentalism” 179). The movement branched out from Unitarianism, or “liberal Christianity,” and “took a concern for self-culture, a sense of moral seriousness, a neo-Platonic concept of piety, a tendency towards individualism, a

belief in the importance of nature, and an interest in moral reform” (Grodzins, “Transcendentalism” 179).

Rejecting the ideas of materialism, Transcendentalists believed that divine truth came from intuition, rather than the things seen and experienced in the material world (Grodzins, “Transcendentalism” 179). Embracing the philosophies of German idealists, with a special emphasis on Immanuel Kant, Transcendentalists believed that it was the mind, not matter, that exercised ultimate control over human experience (Grodzins, “Transcendentalism” 180).

Goodman recalls three Kantian claims that the Transcendentalists held to: “that the human mind ‘forms’ experience; that the existence of such mental operations is a counter to skepticism; and that ‘transcendental’ does not mean ‘transcendent’ or beyond human experience all together, but something through which human experience is made possible” (“Transcendentalism” 4). Charles Mayo Ellis, an active contributor to the Transcendentalist movement, tried to explain the basic tenets of the movement saying “man has ideas, that come not through the five senses, or the powers of reasoning; but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world” (qtd. Gura 10). The views of Transcendentalism stretched beyond the individual and into social institutions, education, and the arts. They believed that laws should be disobeyed if they violated moral convictions or appeared to be unjust, to prevent personal participation in evil (Grodzins, “Transcendentalism” 180). These views provided the grounds for Transcendentalist activity in social movements against slavery and other institutions, such as marriage, that were seen to inhibit spiritual development.

The Transcendentalists believed in things that existed beyond what we can physically sense, much like the “self” that Cady Stanton describes in her speech which “no eye nor touch of man or angel has ever pierced” (Stanton 384). I argue that Stanton’s speech was profoundly

influenced by the ideas of the Transcendentalists, which happened to be quite popular in the days of her writing and speech giving. In her speech, Cady Stanton argues that there are individual rights of equality that belong to all people. She says these rights that are natural and transcend all individuals, which are ideas that are reminiscent of the ideals of Transcendentalism. These rights that she describes transcend the traditional reasoning and they certainly cannot be grasped by the physical senses. In Philip Gura's book, *American Transcendentalism*, he discusses an idea that Ralph Waldo Emerson presents, that is also closely related to Cady Stanton's views. He says, "here is the heart of Emerson's belief about reform: only after an individual experiences the paradise within can he join others. . . to restore the outer paradise" (Gura 211). Emerson believed that for change to occur in institutions and government, change had to take place on an individual level first. One cannot expect to rely on another for change to occur, but rather, one must focus on one's own self and make necessary adjustments. Cady Stanton's speech reflects very similar ideas. She suggests that each person must be responsible for their own actions, as an individual, and must accept the solitude of self as an important part of being human. Cady Stanton's speech brings to light those aspects of life, human rights and the solitary self, that go beyond the physical realm and into the philosophical beliefs of the Transcendentalists.

Most people identify this intellectual movement with its most prominent writers and thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson is known for his large body of work, including his famous rejection of the Unitarian form of Christianity in his famous "Divinity School Address," to members of Harvard University. Thoreau is known for his interesting views on nature and his amazing realizations that surfaced from his time spent at Walden Pond. As Philip Gura says in his book, *American Transcendentalism*, "the more sophisticated know as well that the Transcendentalists comprised one of the nation's first

coherent intellectual groups: movers and shakers in the forefront of educational reform. . . rights of women, laborers and prisoners. . . and agitators for the abolition of slavery” (xi).

Another famous Transcendentalist that had an influence on the writing of Cady Stanton, was Margaret Fuller. Fuller presented a new voice to the Transcendentalist movement – a woman’s voice. In July of 1843, Fuller published one of her greatest, and most well-noted, contributions to Transcendentalism and feminism. The article was entitled “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men, Woman versus Women” appeared in the July issue of Transcendentalists’ publication, *The Dial*. In her essay, she argues that women should be able to take responsibility for their own actions and given the ability to discover their own identity as women. She says “what woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home” (Fuller 459). This idea sounds very similar to the argument Cady Stanton makes in “The Solitude of Self” for women to be able to make their own decisions and rule themselves. Fuller also argues that women do not want to take the place of men, but rather they want to “find out what is fit for themselves,” which men commonly prevent them from doing (459). She continues to say, “Were they [women] free, were they wise fully to develop the strength and beauty of woman, they would never wish to be men, or man like” and they would never “seize on the glories of her partner” (Fuller 459 – 460). Fuller wants women to be recognized as unique individuals, not as people who are seeking to take over men’s place in society. Later in the essay, Fuller draws attention to the idea that men and women are more closely related than people think. She writes: “Male and female represent two sides of the great radical dualism” (Fuller 460). In this, she is implying that there is a portion of the feminine in every man and a portion of the masculine in every woman. She explains the point further

saying, “There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (Fuller 460). I believe this statement legitimizes characteristics known as “feminine.” Socially, women were seen as the lesser and the weaker of the two sexes. However, this idea Fuller presents explains a certain sense of equality at a more basic level between men and women.

As Philip Gura explains in *American Transcendentalism*, “all around her Fuller saw women content as objects of ‘masculine’ desire and confined to a domestic sphere in marriages that provided no opportunity for the independence in which she herself had been nurtured” (228). According to my research, Cady Stanton had a very similar way of looking at the world. In Cady Stanton’s book, *History of Women’s Suffrage*, she praises Fuller’s ideas and expresses similar thinking patterns saying,

“I read, with intense interest, everything that indicated an awakening of public or private thought to the idea that woman did not occupy her rightful position in the organization of society; and, when I read the lectures of Ernestine L. Rose and the writings of Margaret Fuller, and found that other women entertained the same thoughts that had been seething in my own brain, and realized that I stood not alone, how my heart abounded with joy!” (89).

In “The Solitude of Self” she argues that women should be given the same opportunities, economically, politically, educationally and socially as men. Cady Stanton spoke against the confinement of women into domestic spheres and advocated for their emergence into the rest of the world. Cady Stanton not only expressed many ideas that were similar to Fuller but she also had a great admiration for her and her work. In *History of Women’s Suffrage*, Cady Stanton writes, “Margaret Fuller possessed more influence upon the thought of America, than any other woman previous to her time. Men of diverse interests and habits of thought, alike recognized her

power and acknowledged the quickening influence of her mind upon their own” (800). Cady Stanton greatly respected Margaret Fuller and the contributions she made to the feminist community saying, “in calling forth the opinions of her sex upon Life, Literature, Mythology, Art, Culture, and Religion, Miss Fuller was the precursor of the Women’s Rights agitation of the last thirty-three years” (Anthony, Gage, Stanton, *History of Women’s* 801). My analysis has led me to find many similarities in thought between the Transcendentalist ideas that Fuller presents in her essay and that which Cady Stanton expresses in “The Solitude of Self.” These similarities, paired with the distinct reverence Cady Stanton had for Fuller and her work, lead me to believe that Fuller and the Transcendentalists played an instrumental role in the development of the philosophical ideas communicated by Cady Stanton in her speech, “The Solitude of Self.”

### Conclusion

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speech, “The Solitude of Self,” is a monumental piece of oratory that is extremely important to the entire feminist movement. Though this speech was delivered at the end of this tremendously influential leader’s life, it was known as one the most critical and significant speeches of her sixty-plus year career. In his article “Stanton’s ‘Solitude of Self’ as Public Confession,” Dave Tell says “Stanton uses the ‘Solitude of Self’ as an opportunity to wax philosophical, to momentarily set aside the demands for workable proposals and practical solutions, and to focus her audience on the ontological individuality of the self” (173). Her speech not only signified the end of her public career as a women’s rights advocate, but it also represented the philosophical views behind the movement as a whole. It was a representation of not only what the women had been fighting for, but also why they had been fighting and why they would continue to fight.

My analysis has led me to understand the basic tenants of feminist ideology, which was clearly presented in “The Solitude of Self.” Cady Stanton argued on behalf of women’s rights based on the tenants of the natural rights philosophy. According to this philosophy, people should be granted certain rights and freedoms based on the fact that they are human, and nothing more. However, these rights were not extended to women, as they were seen as the weaker and less capable sex. Cady Stanton’s piece clearly discusses how women should be able to exercise the same rights as men because they deal with the same sorts of issues in their lives. Also, men should not be able to speak for women as they have not completely experienced life the way women do. Cady Stanton’s speech argues that each human being should be able to speak for themselves in a society. These ideas become part of the ideology of the feminist movement and continue to carry over to modern-day feminism. My analysis also explored the idea of the solitude of self more thoroughly, as I demonstrated numerous examples of Cady Stanton’s idea throughout her speech. The ideas of self-sovereignty and solitude also contribute to the basic ideology of feminism and the creation of self-reliant and self-sufficient women.

This speech is a very useful object of analysis for both students and scholars of rhetoric and communication. Through my own study I have come to understand this piece of rhetoric as one that not only demonstrates the ideology of a massive social movement but also one that has withstood the test of time. A brief survey of WorldCat, a database that houses the bibliographical records for over 30 million items from libraries all over the world, reinforces the significance of this speech in the academic community. The 973 references to “The Solitude of Self” listed, including 573 book references and 255 Internet references, are testaments to how important this speech is and how widely it has been studied and written about. This number is quite impressive considering Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” has 3,234 entries. Students of



rhetorical criticism and other forms of communication can learn how to successfully articulate the ideology of a movement by looking at Cady Stanton's "The Solitude of Self." It is not an easy task to boil down all of the essential elements of a movement into one speech, but Cady Stanton has been able to accomplish this goal. Students can learn from her techniques of using imaginative language and stirring examples to persuade an audience. Cady Stanton's persuasive power also comes from her attempt to address what Susan Shultz Huxman refers to as a "universal audience" (326). Although this speech was delivered to three separate audiences it seems to transcend the immediate audience and speak to humankind as a whole. It asks her audience to view women as individuals, as human beings, not as a less capable version of men.

This speech can teach students and scholars how to clearly present the basic ideology of a movement and provide the persuasive power to allow people to legitimately consider an idea that runs counter to the dominant way of life. Though this rhetorical masterpiece was delivered over 100 years ago it still holds persuasive power and seems incredibly relevant. While the story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's rhetoric seems to end with "The Solitude of Self," we now know it was only the beginning for the feminist movement.

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