

Eleanor Roosevelt Written Primary Source Activity

In the following letter, Eleanor Roosevelt replies to a woman who had written to her when she was the First Lady to complain about having to share washrooms and toilet facilities with African Americans at her place of work. Read it and then answer the questions on the other side.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

May 13, 1944

Dear Miss Frizelle:

I have not advocated social equality between colored and white people. That is a personal thing which nobody can advocate. Nobody can tell me whom I shall have inside my house, any more than I can tell others.

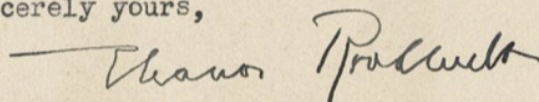
The only things which I have advocated are four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot.

Questions beyond that are personal things and people must decide them for themselves.

I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights.

If you have to use the same toilets and wash basins where you work, then all of you must have to take physical examinations, in which case I think you are safe as you would be in any place where a great many people are coming and going. If you are nervous, there are certain precautions which you can always take.

Sincerely yours,



1. Notice that this letter is written on White House stationary and on a date when the United States was still engaged in the Second World War. Why do you think Eleanor Roosevelt took the time to write to Miss Frizelle during a time of great peril for the nation as a whole?
2. Are you surprised by Mrs. Roosevelt's statement that she does not advocate social equality between races? Do you think a First Lady could write this today? What does this indicate about how perceptions of race have changed from the 1940s to today?
3. Eleanor Roosevelt lists four basic rights that "every citizen in a democracy must enjoy." Do you think she left anything out? What could you add to this list?
4. What are other words that mean "discourteous"? Why do you think Eleanor Roosevelt used this word rather than something more straightforward like "rude"?
5. What does Eleanor Roosevelt imply that Miss Frizelle should say to black people in order to pave the way for smoother interactions?
6. In the final paragraph, what is Eleanor Roosevelt's suggestion to Miss Frizelle? Do you think Miss Frizelle was satisfied with this solution? Why/why not?