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The Elements of Language in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and *Ain't I a Woman* by Sojourner Truth

“Now women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly” (Hurston, 1937, pg. 1). In Zora Neale Hurston's bildungsroman about Janie Crawford, the protagonist, captioned *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as in Sojourner Truth's extemporaneously delivered speech in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, remembered as *Ain't I a Woman*, both authors manifest a clear passion for expressing the multifaceted capabilities of African-American women, as they promulgate their interests against their provincial adversaries, such as the porch-sitters in Eatonville, Florida and the anti-feminist men at the Women's Convention. By incorporating motley linguistic elements and rhetorical devices, including characterization, biblical allusions, and climactic structures, both Hurston and Truth manage to convey an effective portrayal of their backgrounds and experiences to impress upon their audiences. While the purposes of both stories maintain differing stances, Hurston and Truth include specific details that emphasize the importance of women's rights and independence in two eclectically distinct eras of American history, from the 19th to 20th centuries in particular.

Primarily, one of the most distinct aspects of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is its classification as a bildungsroman, which can be defined as a novel highlighting the moral and psychological journey to self-enlightenment of the protagonist. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the afterword, “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is primarily concerned with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment.” Janie Crawford was constantly pressured by society to uphold her feminine dignity, while conceding the judgments and expectations of her fellow townspeople, which justifies her invariable employment of colloquial language. Eventually, she transitioned from being ordered around by her grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Jody Starks, when she met Tea Cake, who helped her realize a deeper meaning of life's promises. During the Harlem Renaissance, which was when Hurston composed the novel, literature was viewed as a method of expressing sentiments of freedom and substantiate accordances with the social ideologies of the time. On the other hand, Sojourner Truth expressed her advocacy for African-American female rights in her impromptu speech, *Ain't I a Woman*. She speaks in a colloquial tone, which enables her to identify with the “plain folk,” while employing a variety of rhetorical devices such as pathos and logos to garner sympathy for her strenuous labors in bearing thirteen children who were sold off to slavery, and her upbringing as a slave. Concurrently, by alluding to Eve of Genesis, Truth manages to equate women with divinity, as exemplified by, “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to

turn it back and get it right side up again” (Truth, 1851, Line 9). Comparatively, in TEWWG, Janie’s confinement to social standards, gossiping, and orders from men deemed her an unjust victim of society’s pressures; however, in AIAW, women were also treated unrighteously, as Truth claimed that men belittle women, quite similar to how Jody minimized Janie’s participation in communal activities, despite apparent social strata discrepancies between Janie and the common people.

Furthermore, both Truth and Hurston’s utilization of biblical allusions effectively sways the religious demographics. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the employment of biblical allusions embody Janie’s struggle and her reach for self-actualization. In the first chapter, Hurston mentions that “they sat in judgment.” God judges the people, as the men in the book attempt to personify God, castigating Janie herself. Hurston was referring to Judgment Day, when God would judge the people based off of their actions. Similar to Janie, the townsfolk also judged Janie based off of her physical appearance and tough attitude. In addition to the towns people judging Janie, by eluding the pear tree to the Adam and Eve’s apple tree, it was symbolic of Janie’s self discovery of her sexuality, and her needs in life. Finally, Hurston alludes to the scrubbing of the feet when Janie scrubs her feet after coming back to the town, which symbolizes a heroine coming back after a quest or trip after reaching enlightenment. Concurrently, Truth’s use of religious references contributes depth to her speech. She responded to a male speaker by referring to the story of Eve eating the forbidden fruit, conferring the power to woman to change the world. Her use of this allusion not only is effective to her audience, assuming a Christian worldview; however, it contradicts what most people would say about Eve. The story of Eve is one capable of demonstrating the subordinate position of women, while Truth employs an adverse interpretation, changing the mindsets of male speakers at the Women’s Convention. In addition, Truth states, “Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.” The use of biblical references moves the audience in a way that hits home to something that matters close to them. It enforces the idea that Truth advocates gender equality, and this establishes a memorable and impactful speech. Truth connects to Christianity to emphasize the importance of women in the world and their competency with men.

Subsequently, Hurston’s structure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* encompasses a frame narrative, in which Janie Crawford relays the entire story to her best friend Pheoby Watson in the course of a single evening, yet the majority of the novel isn’t written in the first-person perspective. As Hurston compiled a series of chronological events, she wrote in the third-person point of view, which enabled her to assume control of the story, having her readers encounter Janie’s experiences as she dealt them. Hurston’s third-person colloquial stance achieves an emphasis on climax and different argumentative levels to the novel, adding objectivity and authenticity to her work. Furthermore, a pattern of successive enlightenment emerged after each time Janie met a new man. Considering the novel’s designation as a bildungsroman, from Logan Killicks, she realized her desire for a passionate relationship; from Jody Stark, she yearned for a voice and opinion; and, from Tea Cake, she discovered a channel for her voice, as well as comfort in independence. Conversely, in *Ain’t I a Woman*, Truth reiterates the question, “Ain’t I a woman?,” which reinforces her abutment for equal women’s rights. This use of repetition allows for a more effective and prominent speech that captivates the audiences and hones on her advocacy towards

women's rights. She stated, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851, Line 1) Hurston and Truth convey conflicting interests, because Hurston emphasizes Janie's desire for independence and self-worth, while Truth desired to be respected by men and treated on a higher level with the white women. While Janie lived the lifestyle of a free woman, she didn't enjoy it being restrained by Logan and Jody. Since Truth lived as a slave for 30 years and wasn't free until 1827, a whole century prior to the period when Hurston composed her novel, she didn't get to experience what Janie had, therefore comparisons regarding circumstances cannot be made.

In conclusion, Hurston and Truth's stories encompass a wide range of comparisons and differences in their methods of emotionally impacting the respective audiences. While Hurston employed characterization and biblical allusions to describe the inferiority of Janie and her development, both morally and psychologically, Truth utilized characterization and biblical allusions to represent the people for whom she dedicates her speech, which particularly refer to African-American women, despite her support for gender equality. Next, Hurston wrote in the form of a frame narrative, which aimed to describe the story in two different perspectives, both first and third-person, allowing the audience to relate to the writing more personally. Truth's use of pathos and logos identified the plain folk and managed to sympathize with the audience, as well as justify her struggles as a mother and former slave. Finally, with these rhetorical devices and the demonstration of enlightenment, Truth and Hurston's stories are regarded as some of the most famous pieces of American literature.