

SOJOURNER TRUTH: THE DISPUTE OVER VOICE

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Sojourner Truth, a former northern slave named Isabella, is an iconic figure of our society. Her claim to fame was not her struggle and life story of oppression but her dignified speech given to the Women's Right Convention at Akron, Ohio. Her impressive choice of words and implicit meaning of her speech, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, was re-presented ten years later in two significantly different variations that emphasized the use of pathos, logos, and ethos.

The first translation of the speech was written in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, a newspaper aimed to end the oppression of slavery, on June 21, 1851. The other interpretation of Sojourner Truth's speech was written in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* by Frances Gage, the president of the Women's Rights Convention. Both articles provide a unique written depiction of the oral speech. The authors apply their own creative choice of language and use rhetorical devices to publicize the author's personal purpose and aim. Gates states that, "[b]y comparing both versions of this classic oral text of African American literature, we can usefully reconsider Sojourner Truth's message from two perspectives and thereby appreciate its complex impact on those in her own time who tried, with varying success, to convey the power of her verbal artistry" (246).

The use of dialect is a classical rhetorical device that aims to influence the style and structure of the speech. It increases the beneficial use of logos and creates contextual differences among the two variations of the speech. Furthermore, dialect employs a significant meaning and portrayal of African American Slaves who stand alone to symbolize the cruelty of slavery, the march towards anti-slavery and women's rights, and the progressive encouragement of individuals to make a difference despite opposition. The use of language in both depictions of Sojourner Truth's speech "function[s] to transform Truth into the kind of character that fits the

storyteller's purpose and resonates with audience expectations formed by knowledge of similar portrayals" (Mandziuk 124) and slave narratives.

The first portrayal of Sojourner Truth's speech in *the Anti-Slavery Bugle* misrepresents Truth as "having perfect English, which is difficult to accept in light of her language history" (Mandziuk 128). Sojourner Truth spoke Dutch early in life and later learned what Arthur Fauset claims to be a learned "brand of English which for its grammar would have shamed a cockney, and for its homely vulgarity would have identified her with a boat's crew" (Mandziuk 128). She learned a version of English that was crude and discovered through her experience with the Scriver family, the household of her prior owner.

It is ironic how the representation of her speech is quoted in good English when in reality she lacked such use of the English language. Truth's message, rendered in Standard English, portrays a "more direct and less dialectical Sojourner Truth... [that] now sounds more authentic to many analysts" (Gates 246). She opens her speech by addressing the President and asking "May I say a few words?"-a simple statement that renders a respectful attitude instead of a her profound and witty attitude against others in opposition.

In this representation, her voice is short, direct, precise, and sweet. She does not say too much yet remains to leave a lasting impact on those who have heard her speech. This variation seems more focused on logos and the context that is written rather than the speech itself. It does not venture towards an alternative goal but merely reports the implied meaning and ideas represented by Truth. This variation states the reported message gathered by spectators rather than the explicit meaning offered by the emotions. Many statements start with "I want", "I have", and "I am". These simple statements get directly to the point and create a clear depiction of the speech as a firm statement against oppression of both slaves and women, black and white.

On the other hand, Frances Gage's interpretation of the profound speech, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, represents Sojourner Truth with the dialect of a black vernacular and a twang associated with southern slaves. Gage quotes Truth to speak with an enormous credibility as speaker who is a woman who has experienced the harshness of slavery. However, Mandzuik and Fitch report in their article, *The Rhetorical Structure of Sojourner Truth*, that "no one knows what she sounded like [which] has led to two variant views on how her language" should and could be used for dramatic effects. The particular choices of dialect instigates the usage of pathos that engage the audience to feel sympathy and create emotions that otherwise would be void without such representation of language. The dialect entangles logos since the use of language creates a different context and meaning.

The greatest difference in logos used in these two reports of the same speech is present in the account of the number of children that Sojourner Truth has bared. In the speech from the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* there is no report of the number of children she has given birth too. On the other hand, Gage's report entails that Truth "borne thirteen children and seen 'em mos' all solf off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard" (Gage 248). One account of the speech fails to render any motherly attitude while the other relies wholly on the idea of her motherly position and cry for her children from the harshness that surrounds the slave life of a woman. The slave woman's children do not belong to her but to others and therefore are stripped away from her in agony. This account of logos is not only dramatic in context but also relies on the use of pathos to employ the audiences' gain of a sense of sympathy.

Furthermore, the distinction in the two versions of the speech is presented with the use of ethos. The opening paragraph of the article addresses the author's credibility and uses ethos to imply that "it is impossible to transfer [the speech] to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the

effect it produced upon the audience” (A’rn’t I a Woman). After concluding that the speech’s profound message and appreciation that could only be gathered by being present for the speech, the article dives in to report what had been spoken. It is the voice of this speech that supports many literary analyst by concluding the omission of such dialect supports the idea that the speech “more than likely w[as] taken down by reporters in their own language because it is easier and faster, thus reflecting that they valued the ideas more than the pronunciation” (Mandzuik 130).

Gage’s interpretation of the speech is introduced with commentary and visual cues that lead one to believe that another agenda is present besides reporting. This version of the speech opens with commentary that instills emotions in the audience and creates a setting and atmosphere. Although both speeches try to describe the speech and its “magical influence” (Gage 249), Gage’s interpretation aims to show the effects the speech has on the audience with the intent to gain popular opinion and approval of women’s rights advocates. Gage also hopes to gain self-reorganization.

Gage’s report of the speech is dramatized and embellished in language. It evokes the personal emotions of the audience in order to create a connection and understanding of the message presented. For instance, Gage describes Sojourner Truth as “a tall, gaunt black woman, in a gray dress and white turban” (Gage 249). This short excerpt from the interpretation shows the use of imagery and a strong depiction of a scene presented by Gage, something that is unlikely to be found with such great emphasis in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*’s interpretation of the candid speech. Gage states that she “cannot follow her through it all. It was pointed, and witty, and solemn, eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause” (Gage 249). These lines of ethos create credibility and appreciation gathered by the audience about Sojourner Truth.

Each role Truth represents in these two variations uses different language that forms a persona characterized by established ethos, pathos, and logos that the audience can recognize and apply. The uses of the three rhetorical elements create a triangle that contains a distinct set of expressions in each representation of the speech and enables active communication. Although the speeches represent the same event and speech they are very different in meaning, purpose, and representation. The rhetorical differences analyzed create the vast diversion and presents two different Sojourner Truths, one that is humble, soft spoken, and direct and another who is a comical character who is bold, vivacious, and witty.

As the audience, it is important to take both of these representations into account to gather a precise picture of the infamous speech, *Ar'n't I a Woman*. It is imperative to acknowledge the use of pathos, ethos, and logos in order to separate the rhetorical euphemisms and gather the truth about Sojourner Truth in her candid moment at the pulpit at the Woman's Rights Convention of 1851.

Works Cited

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